

ABORTION 25P

LIBERATION &

REVOLUTION



INTERNATIONAL

MARXIST GROUP

Introduction

As we go into the 1980s women's right to control their own fertility is under attack worldwide. In 1978 New Zealand adopted one of the most restrictive laws in the world, outlawing abortions even for rape victims. In Ireland contraception was restricted to married couples only in 1979. Women of the Asian sub-continent and Latin America continue to be treated as guinea pigs for new forms of contraception without having any knowledge of the dangers they face. In Britain yet another attack was made on the 1967 Abortion Act, by a Tory MP, John Corrie.

These worldwide attacks have been met by developing campaigns in many countries and the first beginnings of an international campaign. These campaigns have been spearheaded by the women's movement that has developed internationally in the last ten years. This movement has drawn its initial strength from many young, college educated women who, despite their relatively greater freedom of choice, still found their ability to decide the course of their own lives blocked by the laws, customs and assumptions that exist in society about women's role.

This short pamphlet attempts to explain why the struggle for the right to control our fertility has been such a great focus for action for women worldwide.

The International Marxist Group (IMG), and the Fourth International, of which the IMG is the British Section, has consistently supported and worked within these campaigns. In Britain we have consistently directed ourselves to working with and supporting the women and men who work with the National Abortion Campaign. We fully support NAC's demands and campaigns for a woman's right to choose with no legal or medical restrictions and for free safe NHS abortion on demand.

This pamphlet also sets out why we see this as a crucial and integral part of the struggle to overthrow capitalism and create a new society.

Some useful addresses

**National Abortion Campaign [Britain]
374 Grays Inn Road, London WC1**

**International Contraception Abortion and Sterilisation Campaign
c/o NAC, 374 Grays Inn Road, London WC1**

**Labour Abortion Rights Campaign
Flat 1, 160 Rosendal Road, London SE21**

Published by The Other Press (Relgocrest Ltd) 328 Upper Street London N1 2XQ
for the International Marxist Group
Distributed by The Other Bookshop 328 Upper Street London N1 2XQ

Typesetting and Design by FI Litho 328 Upper Street London N1 2XQ
Printed by East End (offset) Ltd PO Box 82, London E2

October 1979
ISBN 0-85612-312-9

How was control of their own fertility taken away from women?

Before the rise of class society, women had the right to regulate the number of children they had, even if that meant erecting a whole series of taboos to prevent constant childbirth.

The right of women to control their reproduction ended with the development of classes in society. The class which expropriated property, wealth and power, also took control of the female body.

Previously, all property, all the sources of wealth, because they were sufficient for subsistence were shared by the whole community. But humans began to produce and cultivate a surplus over and above their needs, it became possible for one group to appropriate wealth and power.

This group maintained its position by insisting that only a limited number of people could belong to that class. Membership of the ruling class was restricted by keeping property within the family. Property passed to the children. Wealth and power were directly handed down from one generation to another.

If women had complete freedom — the freedom not to reproduce or the freedom to reproduce with any man they desire — then there would be no way in which the male of the ruling class could be sure that his property will be passed to his children.

Control over women's bodies is therefore essential for the ruling class in order that it may keep the wealth to itself. To achieve such a tight control over women, the family system was and remains necessary. It operates on the notion that one man can claim a woman as his own; that his legitimate children are born by this particular woman; that she has no one else's children, and that those children inherit the man's wealth.

This family system also established that even the poor and dispossessed have heirs who inherit the 'nothing' that their parents have. Thus it comes to be regarded as 'natural' that some people have everything and some have nothing at all.

Women did not lose control of fertility overnight. Women experienced a long and bloody struggle with the combined weight of the church and state. Witch hunts were conducted against women, whose 'crimes' included practising abortion, giving advice on contraception, using drugs to aid delivery and other practices related to female reproduction. It took many years for the state to stamp out women's control.

Since then the state has exercised its control over women through a combination of coercion and ideological conditioning. The issue of control is central, because state control is the cornerstone of class rule.

On the surface the state appears to derive its existence from the community. It seems to delineate how best human beings can live together, how they should behave to one another — what is expected, what is demanded from, and what is given to, each individual in that society.

But in class society the state has been erected by the ruling class and therefore it functions in the interests of the powerful and wealthy. The state, for example, makes it a criminal offence for the poor to take from the rich. It sets down narrow 'guidelines' for how workers might try to get some of the wealth back from the employers, all of which has been produced by the workers.

It restricts the places where people can meet to discuss their grievances, in what numbers they can meet, and what they may do to rectify their grievances. And it imposes the most brutal punishments on women if they try to control the number of children they have. The state achieves that by outlawing abortion or by making it available only under certain conditions, so that women have to risk abortions that

are carried out in unsanitary and dangerous conditions and therefore face the ultimate punishment — death.

How is the state able to control women in this way? Only efficient means of punishment keep people from demanding their rights. Under the state, the ruling class erects a system of laws, to punish us; an army to shoot us; a police force to arrest us; a government that passes more laws to control us; a prison system to confine us, and an organised system of religion that threatens us with 'eternal damnation' if we don't do as we're told.

Under the direction of the ruling class, the state takes away the right to control our own bodies, and becomes the most clear expression of the power structure which we have to fight.

Sometimes, the state actively intervenes to regulate pregnancy and childbirth, when it is in the interests of the ruling class to do so. Puerto Rico, for instance, 'encouraged' population programmes linked with government plans to expand tourism and develop petrochemical industries. US aid to Bolivia was promised in return for population control. In India enforced sterilisation campaigns have been used to cover up the failure of the capitalist system to prevent malnutrition and starvation.

Needless to say, such manoeuvres have nothing in common with the demand for the right of women to control their own fertility, even though facilities for women's use may have been made available by the state.

What has happened in Britain?

The struggle for women's control of fertility is a key issue in fighting for the freedom of women. No capitalist country gives women the rights to regulate their reproduction as they wish, free contraception, abortion and sterilisation on demand for example.

Demands for fertility control are not made in thin air — they are directed against those responsible for the economic and social conditions and ideologies which underlie women's oppression — that is to say the ruling class, its government and its agencies.

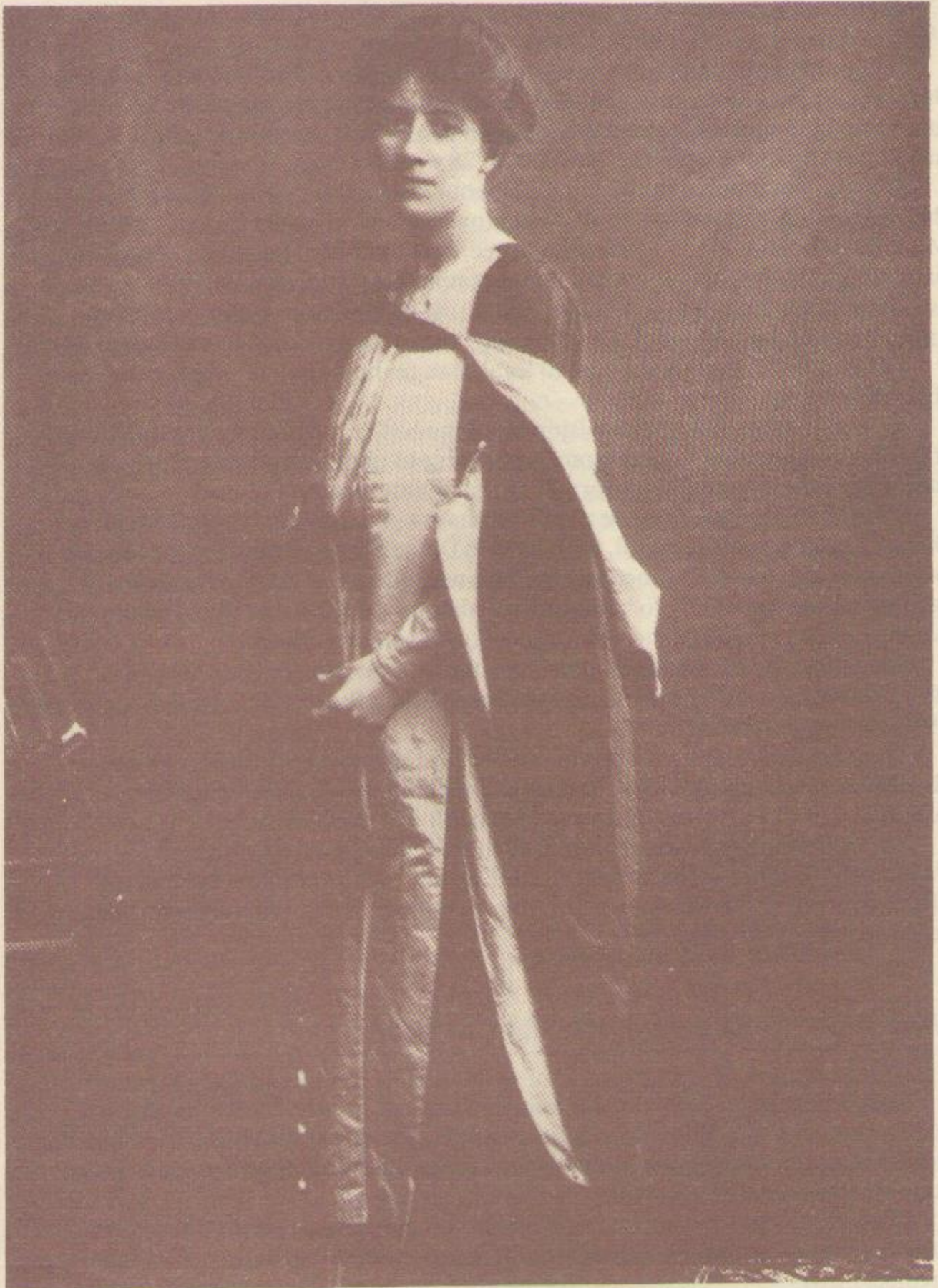
In Britain there has been a long struggle for women to win the right to control their own fertility. As far back as the 14th century, women who performed abortions were burnt at the stake as witches. Legislation was introduced in 1801 to make abortion a statutory offence. Another law passed in 1861 went further and made attempting to procure an abortion 'unlawful' and punishable by life imprisonment.

The only contraceptive methods available were abstinence, withdrawal, or expedients like the injection of alum and water.

At the same time, birth control was feared both by moralists and sections of the labour movement, who associated birth control with the reactionaries who were arguing that in order to control the population and avoid famine and poverty the poor should exercise 'moral restraint'.

A breakthrough occurred in 1882 when a Dutch doctor developed the Mensinga diaphragm. But working class women found this hard to obtain and evidence from the women's organisations of the time indicates that back street abortions reached epidemic proportions.

In 1887 Annie Besant, a socialist, wrote a sixpenny pamphlet for working class women containing information about contraception. She was charged with producing obscene literature, although the same information was freely available in another, more expensive, publication.



Marie Stopes

In the early 20th century the work of Marie Stopes began to make safe and reliable contraceptives available to working class women. By this time the sheath was also widely sold.

However, in 1923 the Ministry of Health refused to allow maternity centres to give advice on birth control. The Labour Party women's conference passed a motion of protest by the overwhelming majority of 1,000 to eight.

In 1926, a similar resolution was passed by the Labour Party Annual

Conference. Unfortunately this was reversed the following year. However, in 1930, the Ministry of Health was forced to give way and lifted the ban.

Debate began to switch to abortion. In 1929, an Act of Parliament protected those performing abortions when the life of a woman was in danger. It also introduced the concept of 'viability' (the point at which the foetus could live independently of the woman). It was set at 28 weeks.

Women's organisations within the Labour movement continued to press for the legalisation of abortion. In 1937 the Government set up the Birkett Committee. Much evidence was given to this committee, particularly of the high number of back street abortions performed and the deaths that resulted from them. It was estimated that between 110,000 and 150,000 illegal abortions were performed annually. Four hundred and ten women are known to have died from them in 1937.

The Birkett Committee proposed legal changes but these were not introduced 'because of the advent of war'.

After the war, with the establishment of the NHS, and the growing practice of 'therapeutic abortions', more women were able to obtain abortions. The vast majority of these were still performed in the private sector.

Several attempts were made to reform the laws by means of Private Members Bills. These were unsuccessful, until in 1966 David Steele introduced the bill that was to become the 1967 Abortion Act. This was at a time when the medical profession was beginning to be concerned about the effects that thalidomide was having on the foetuses of the women to whom it was prescribed.

Since 1967 the Bill has been under constant attack from Private Members' Bills, the best known of which were the James White Bill in 1975, the Benyon Bill in 1977 and the Corrie Bill in 1979.

These Bills represent a determined effort by the anti-abortionists to turn the clock back to a situation where abortions are performed but under unsafe conditions, and with grave danger to the health and lives of women.

The anti-abortionists are epitomised by their strongest supporters in Parliament — religious extremists like the Roman Catholic Leo Abse and the Ulster Protestant Ian Paisley, or Jill Knight, one of the most rabidly right wing reactionaries of the Tory Party.

Why must women have the right to choose?

Even when the laws concerning abortion are made more 'humanitarian' the state retains control. The 1967 Act for example, was an extremely 'liberal' law. But there was never any doubt over who would make the decision on abortion — the state and the medical profession.

If it were to be proposed that doctors should only practice if they had been interviewed and approved by a panel of women, there would be an outcry from the medical profession. Yet, women seeking abortion have to be 'approved' by two doctors before abortion is permitted.

Women can't afford to allow any person or any institution to decide what happens to them. Some doctors are opposed to abortion. Their opinions are therefore given more weight than women's rights, and they are given the power to stop women from controlling their own bodies. Once we give in to the idea that doctors, church, government and state have a right to decide what happens to our bodies, then we have lost control over our lives.

'Free abortion on demand — a woman's right to choose' means women deciding about their own fertility, their sexuality and their life. It means **women**

being able to challenge all the notions about women's roles — that fulfillment for all women is through being a mother, that for women sexuality is only important for reproduction, and so on. It means claiming the right for **women** to decide how to order their own lives, using every benefit of modern technology and medicine, without any control from the state, church, medical profession, or any other, largely male dominated, agency.

It rejects population control schemes, which are tools of racism, class prejudice or imperialism, and are used to put the blame for the evils of class society on to the masses of working people.

We also demand no governmental restrictions on abortion, contraception and sterilisation, for **all** women — including minors, immigrants and non citizens.

Upon what principle are the demands based? It is the right of a human being to control her or his own destiny.

Why can't the state allow this? Because it shakes to the very foundations the system of class society in which we live. Because it frees women from unwanted pregnancy and removes all the justifications for paying women badly and depriving them of their rights at work. Because it weakens the hold of the family system, for without unwanted pregnancy women would be able more easily to support themselves without the financial aid of a man. And finally, because it challenges the notion that the state has the right to interfere in our lives, and this is a serious threat to the ideological norms of our society.

How should we fight for women's abortion rights?

The National Abortion Campaign is a single issue campaign that relies on mass extra-parliamentary activities to win its demands.

A single issue campaign unites many people quickly and easily. It can draw people who agree on the question of abortion and who are willing to be active in the struggle for abortion rights but who may not call themselves feminists or socialists.

Even within the pro abortion movement there are differences. Some people, for example, support the idea that abortion should be available but they don't agree that the right of women to choose should be absolute. They argue that if a woman wants a late abortion the right of the foetus to life should be taken into consideration.

Thus when fighting to defend existing abortion rights we are faced with two choices. Either to refuse to work with pro abortionists who do not share our belief in the need for unconditional abortion rights or to agree to work together on specific demands and in specific areas. At a time when there are attacks on existing abortion rights a lot of political energy must be directed against these attacks. In this situation it is important to form a united campaign around demands all pro abortion forces can agree on. Clearly the anti-abortion forces are strong. We are fighting government, church and state, together with the moral code of a society that condemns abortion. Strength of numbers is therefore crucial.

The struggle against legal restrictions cannot ignore Parliament, where many laws are made. But the objection is often raised: 'how do we campaign on a parliamentary issue without becoming reformist'? The answer is by proposing demands which extend beyond those of Parliament and by taking up certain forms of struggle.

We try to get the largest number of people active in a struggle. We want to produce a situation where people recognise that they can rely on the power that springs from unity.

Demonstrations reveal the strength of popular opinion. They are not an 'appeal' to the democratic conscience of the state. They are a show of the strength that the state will have to contend with if the demands are not met. Mass actions provide the experience required for the future capture of state power by the working class. They threaten the existing norms, occupations and work-ins for example challenge the presupposition that work places are only run if they have bosses. Pickets of MPs, doctors, hospitals raise the notion of accountability.

Collecting together the largest number of people who will campaign over specific aspects of the abortion question becomes a central tactic if we are to make headway. When the 1967 Abortion Act is threatened by anti-abortion legislation, then NAC enters into action with other pro-abortion forces to rebuff the attack even though it differs with those forces over the need to demand unconditional abortion rights. This united front tactic is of crucial importance. NAC is not required to abandon its own programme of no restrictions on abortions.

The duty of any NAC member who works in such a united front is to work for the limited aims of the united front, but to explain why NAC's demands are correct. At the same time as defending the '67 Act, NAC members still produce NAC propaganda and hold NAC meetings on the importance of unconditional abortion rights. In this way, it is hoped that all pro-abortionists will come to realise that accepting any type of limit on abortion opens the door for the state to remove abortion rights at will.

Until they do, NAC will fight alone for no restriction of a woman's right to choose.

Why should women lead the abortion movement?

Abortion is not exclusively a 'woman's issue'. The struggle for a woman's right to choose raises broader social questions that concern the working class as a whole; such as the right of the state to take personal decision-making out of the hands of the individual; separation of church and state; imperialist population control programmes and so on. The struggle for abortion rights challenges state control of women and their role as reproducer plus servicer of the workforce.

But it is women whose lives are forced into certain, narrow moulds if they do not have the right to decide when and whether to have children. They have the most to gain and the most to lose from the struggle.

Because of this it is vital that women themselves determine the strategy and tactics of this fight. Women experience directly all the ways in which the lack of the right to control their own fertility and sexuality restricts their lives and so must decide the direction and the demands which the struggle takes.

The individualised role into which women have been forced has deprived them of the opportunity to develop and recognise their own ability to lead the struggle for their own interests.

Every struggle has to have a leadership and a programme. Only the test of real life will determine whether these are adequate to meet their tasks. Even if the programme for the struggle for women's right to choose, and all aspects of women's liberation, is drawn from the experience of all women, and the leadership of the struggle is composed of women, with real experience of what they are fighting against, there are no **guarantees** of success.

But women's leadership will help to ensure that the struggle shows absolutely clearly how things must be changed to give women the rights they are demanding and that women recognise how society is organised against them and therefore the direction that must be given to their fight.



Why must the working class take up the struggle for women's liberation and abortion rights?

At present the whole of human society is organised around the need for one small group to produce profit from the great majority of the population. This form of social organisation is supported not only through the state and its agencies; there are ideological, political, social, cultural and religious forces which explain and justify this sort of society or try to distract attention from its underlying purpose. The family is a crucial part of this system and therefore a crucial target in the battle to change it.

To transform society completely, so that it is organised to meet the needs of the whole of society, all those fighting to change society will have to participate in the struggle against women's role in the family.

While the organisation of women plays a crucial role in initiating this struggle all the organisations of the working class will have to begin to take it up. Only the working class has the strength to organise the largest number of people whose interests are clearly counterposed to the present organisation of society. The working class is organised in a variety of ways, in trade unions, political parties and organisations which claim to stand for the rights of the working class.

As more and more women enter the labour market the unpaid domestic labour for which women are responsible becomes a problem for the state, and forces the state to take on some of this responsibility. However, in a period of economic recession, of cut-backs in education, childcare and health, the state is no longer



willing to take this responsibility. This puts enormous pressures on men and women to stay tied together in the family, because the family as an economic unit cannot survive in today's world on one wage. More and more the double wage becomes a necessity. Soaring unemployment threatens women's right to work but out of economic necessity the working class as a whole has to defend the right of women to be in the labour force, and force the state to take responsibility for all aspects of domestic labour.

Women join and begin to have an effect on working class organisations. In the last ten years the number of women in unions has gone up from one and a half million to three and a half million. Economic necessity impels women into the workforce and then into the organisations of the labour movement. The combination of the need to earn a wage together with an awakening consciousness of the role of women drives the working class to take up the struggle against women's oppression.

The growth of an autonomous Women's Movement affects the way this struggle is taken up by the class. The specific importance of the abortion issue becomes evident; women cannot work if they are subjected to unwanted pregnancies. When governments attack the right to abortion, depriving women of the control of their bodies, they are trying to force women out the labour market and back into the home, and are tightening their control over male workers by making them **solely** responsible for the family unit. The ruling class hope this can become an inhibiting influence on men's willingness to involve themselves in strikes.

The role of the male worker and the male leadership of the working class

Women as individuals confront men everyday of their lives in a battle over the division of labour within the home. It is small comfort to the woman worker with her job at work and her job at home to be told that her husband is ideologically backward — she needs a programme of **action** which will lead to her freedom.

The importance of the struggle for abortion rights is that it concentrates on the achievement of real goals, defence and extension of laws, provision of facilities and so on. As part of the struggle for rights and provisions which will materially benefit all women, an ideological struggle is necessary to explain and motivate the goals. A clear example of how this process changes people's consciousness and their willingness to fight can be shown in the development of the TUC between 1975 and 1979.

In 1975 the TUC refused any mention of contraception and abortion in its Charter for Working Women. In 1979, it called a mass national demonstration against attempts to amend restrictively the 1967 Abortion Act. Winning the support of the trade union movement for the right of women to fertility control is an historic achievement.

But this has not happened because the trades union leadership has been convinced of the need to fight for women's liberation as a central way of opposing the right of the bosses and the state to control workers lives. In fact the trades union leadership will play off the workers against the government and employers to keep their own power, and in the end will side against the workers, to preserve their own position.

But the trades unions such as NUPE which have a large female membership



recognise that the attacks on the Abortion Act will affect their own members, taking them out of the workforce and thus out of union membership. So it is in the unions' own interest to fight to preserve their own membership and it will help them to recruit if they are seen as defenders of women's rights. The working class organisations cannot avoid taking up the defence of women's rights, the survival of the class as a whole depends on it. Male workers and male trade union leaders cannot throw off the consciousness which this society has imposed upon them easily, which is why it is necessary to have women in the leadership of campaigns like NAC and in the women's committees and formal structures of the unions.

Women have to challenge the stereotyped assumptions of how women should think and act and provide clear directions as to how to struggle against these.

Part of this process will be to challenge trade union leaders who try to restrict trade union activity to directly economic questions. While trade union leaders are aware that women workers are affected by questions which affect all members of the working class, inflation, unemployment, wage controls, there is often a limited consciousness of the specific nature of female oppression.

A class struggle perspective and the need for a revolutionary party

Women coming into political action are confronted with a variety of strategies to fight for their liberation. The Labour Party offers a programme of reforms, some of which have been implemented, ie. the Sex Discrimination Act — with obvious limitations. On the abortion issue the LP strongly assisted by their TU bloc vote refuse to commit the Parliamentary Labour Party to defence of a party policy. The aim of the Labour Party is to remove the worst excesses of capitalism without challenging its economic and social institutions.

While the majority of the working class adhere to the Labour Party it is important for feminist activists to work with the Labour Party, to fight for socialist policies and to develop a tendency which does not seek to preserve capitalism but to organise a fight against it.

The Communist Party makes much of its exposure of women's role in capitalist society, but its essential strategy is demonstrated clearly when we look at the Soviet Union or the actions of its co-thinkers internationally. In Britain, the CP has at most a token relationship with NAC, and gives its full support to ALRA, a parliamentary lobbying group.

Transformation of society can only be achieved through a united onslaught on the power and privileges of capitalist society. All the movements of the oppressed, women, racial minorities, youth must join with the organised working class. The axiom of capitalist control is divide and rule — worker against worker, white against black, man against woman. They allow us only one slice of the cake and force us to fight over the crumbs — thus preserving for themselves the biggest share. This is why the formation of a mass revolutionary party which can **unite** all the oppressed against their common enemy is so vital a task.

This is the objective of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution of which the International Marxist Group is the British Section. Just as capitalist rule is international so must revolutionaries organise themselves on an international basis and on a programme which is derived from the international experiences of the class struggle.

The women's movement, the black movement, the trade unions are all able to

defend and extend political rights, they can throw up new forms of struggle, can challenge old ideas and structures — but by themselves they cannot smash capitalist state power with its police and army, they cannot by themselves re-organise society and liberate all humanity from class rule. Only the working class and its allies among the movement of women, young people, immigrants, racial minorities has the power to challenge and defeat the power of the ruling class.

The fight for liberation is a total fight. It doesn't finish at the front gate of the town limits, it isn't won by winning the right to vote or to have equal pay; it isn't won in our own heads. Liberation is only a reality when the actual foundations of our world have been taken from one class and grasped firmly by our class.

Within the revolutionary party, we seek to overcome the divisions which capitalism imposes on us. We do this through our programme which comprises demands that have been developed through decades and indeed centuries of struggle by the dispossessed. We fight for democratic rights — the right to vote, to travel, religious freedom, freedom of assembly. We put forward demands which will advance workers in their control over their jobs — sliding scale of hours and wages; trade union organisation; democratic functioning of trade unions; trade union meetings on the work site and in company time. For women's liberation; abortion, a woman's right to choose, support the demands of the WLM. For black liberation; right of self-organisation, against racist immigration laws, positive discrimination in hiring. **An end to imperialism, British troops out of Ireland and much more.**

When the wealth of a society is distributed according to the will of the majority rather than being creamed off into the bank balance of the few, then the liberation of women will begin to take great strides forward. Priorities of capital investment will be determined on the basis of collective need. The masses, women and men, will be engaged in day to day decisions about production, distribution, necessary services, education, cultural activity — every aspect of life will be examined anew and retained or rejected according to the needs of the masses. This is the pattern of social revolution. This is a programme for struggle.

We weld this programme to methods of struggle which will increase the self-organisation and self-confidence of the movements who fight for their rights and liberation. It is within the framework of this programme that all the movements are united in their fights.

This is the essence of the revolutionary party, a party where all people regardless of their sex, race or class can see that their interests are the same, with a vision of a new society and the practical means of getting there.

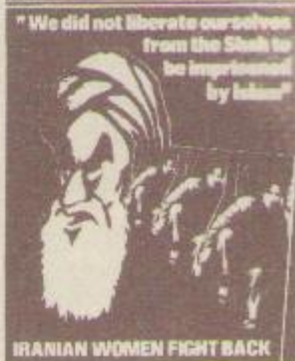
Speakers on the ideas in this pamphlet can be easily organised just contact: Penny Duggan, Woman's Commission, IMG, PO Box 50, London N1. Tel: 01 359 8371

Socialist Challenge

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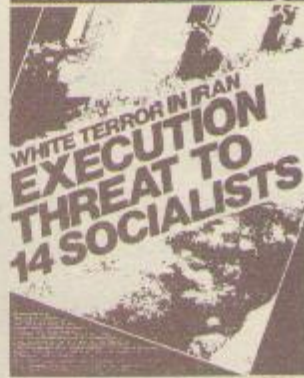
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SOCIALIST CHALLENGE is a revolutionary Marxist weekly edited by Tariq Ali. Its impact has been considerable during the two years it has appeared. This is because the policies on which the paper was founded have met with a real response amongst militants:

*For revolutionary unity, against the sectarianism which has affected socialists for too long.

*For a broad, united class-struggle opposition to lead the fightbacks against the attacks of British bosses and the betrayals of the reformist leaders.

Socialist Challenge has become known for the high quality of its investigative journalism; in-depth analysis of domestic and international politics; regular, open polemical material; and consistent coverage of a wide range of issues of vital concern to revolutionaries, including sexual polit-

ics, trade union struggles, international solidarity, racism and fascism, cultural questions, and so on.

Perhaps most appealing to many of our readers is the broad scope of guest writers. Contributors have included Robin Blackburn, Cathy Porter, Fred Halliday, Hilary Wainwright, Tamara Deutscher, John Berger, John Fowles, Tom Nairn, Sheila Rowbotham, Ernie Roberts MP, Alix Holt, Fay Weldon, Terry Eagleton, Ernest Mandel, Eric Heffer MP, Anthony Barnett, Gareth Stedman Jones, and many others.

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£12.50 per year.
International: £12.50 surface
£18.00 airmail.
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ABORTION LIBERATION & REVOLUTION

Over the last ten years the impact of the developing women's liberation movement has forced all political currents to respond to its demands and the debates it has raised. The Fourth International has continued in the tradition of revolutionary socialism by supporting the struggles and demands initiated by the independent women's movement.

This pamphlet explains why the struggle for women's liberation, led by the independent women's movement, is an essential and central part of the fight to transform society.

The Fourth International is a world wide revolutionary Marxist party with affiliated organisations in over sixty countries. Our programme is for a determined struggle against capitalism and its imperialist crimes, against sexism and racism, for a new, truly democratic society where all exploitation and oppression are ended.

The International Marxist Group is the British Section of the Fourth International. If you would like more information about our activities please contact:
PO Box 50 London N1
