

THE BERKELEY-OAKLAND WOMEN'S UNION

Principles of Unity (1974)

The Berkeley-Oakland Women's Union was a socialist-feminist organization active in the San Francisco Bay Area between 1973 and 1976. Its archives are part of the Bancroft Library, Social Change Collection, University of California, Berkeley, California.

Part 1: Why We Form a Women's Union

We come together now to form a women's union to develop a position of increasing strength and to transform our society into one that will meet our needs and the needs of all people as full human beings. We form a women's union in recognition that sexism shapes our lives. By sexism we mean a system which takes a physical characteristic, sex, and builds on it divisions of labor, ability, responsibility, and power which are then called "natural." Historically, these divisions have benefited men and oppressed women, preventing women from developing themselves to their full potential. Sexism directly upholds the capitalist system and benefits individual men within it.

With the awareness of our oppression we have developed over the last several years, particularly in our small groups, we have reached a deeper understanding of the society we want to create. We have also realized, however, the limitations of small groups for moving to create that society. We are now forming an organization, a women's union, in order to overcome the fragmentation of the women's movement and to build a structure within which we can most effectively carry on the struggle of the women's movement. Through this organization we will be able to share what we have learned, further develop a common analysis, and organize direct political action as we work toward the revolutionary transformation of society.

Over a century ago, women came together to fight their oppression. We can learn from them both what they were able to accomplish and what they failed to do. Third World, immigrant, and working women had needs and priorities different from those of the predominantly upper-class and white feminists of the nineteenth century. Though their movement started with progressive social and political goals, these feminists, fighting for the one goal of suffrage, ended up pursuing their own interests in opposition to the interests of working and Third World women. Thus, ultimately, they did not challenge the basis of capitalist society. We in the women's union have learned that those who run the capitalist system will try to divide us, by absorbing our energy and by granting specific reforms which benefit some women at the expense of other women but which in the end benefit none of us.

Many women worked in the civil rights, antiwar, and student movements of the middle sixties. As they became increasingly aware of their oppression as women, within society and within the male-dominated radical movements, they joined with

other women, many of whom had never related to radical politics, to form the growing women's liberation movement. Although we feel connected to the struggles of the left, our experience and our history teach us that a male-dominated revolutionary movement can ignore our oppression in the name of its own priorities and expediency. Not defining ourselves in reaction to the left, we assume the legitimacy of our movement. We are an autonomous women's union which will embody and struggle for the new forms of organization and relations between people which we define as socialism.

Part 2: How We See Our Struggle

Our priorities for struggle are determined not only by our own immediate needs but by our evolving analysis of society as a whole. As women, we seek liberation in conjunction, not in competition, with others who are oppressed.

We recognize that our liberation and that of other oppressed groups cannot be achieved within the existing system. Therefore, our struggle against sexism necessarily involves us in the struggle against capitalism, racism, imperialism, and all other forms of oppression, and must be waged simultaneously with these struggles if we are to achieve our vision of socialism.

We stand united against the capitalist system, which is based on a division of labor that separates and alienates people, exploits their labor for the profit of a few, and creates false needs without meeting the real needs of the people. We will struggle to achieve redistribution of wealth and of control of the resources that produce wealth in this society. We will struggle for people to gain control of the conditions and the product of their work—all unpaid labor, including work in the home, as well as work in the traditional sense. We will struggle to combat in ourselves and around us the values—such as individualism, possessiveness, and competitiveness—that sustain capitalism.

We stand united against racism, in society and within our movement. We will resist all attempts by those in control of this country's resources to pit us, as women, against other oppressed groups for an inadequate share of those resources. In formulating and implementing our programs and policies, we will work toward a greater awareness of the needs of women oppressed by racism. We recognize that racism, like sexism, has oppressive cultural and psychological manifestations which we must combat.

We stand united against imperialism, which we understand to be integral to advanced capitalism and not a separate system of oppression. Imperialism is the system by which the ruling class in the dominant capitalist nations extracts the resources and wealth of Third World and other peoples, and imposes on them an oppressive economic, social, and political system. We too are oppressed by this international system of advanced capitalism that wages war against revolutionary struggles for liberation and destroys the culture and resources of Third World countries. We cannot achieve our goals without a just division of wealth worldwide and self-determination for all peoples.

Recognizing that our own liberation is contingent on the liberation of all, and that such liberation requires the elimination of the causes of oppression, we seek to work with other organizations also committed to achieving these goals. We realize that this can be done only on a basis of mutual respect.

Part 3: How We See What We Want

Our vision of the future rests upon the recognition that the separation of the public and the private spheres of our lives is used by the capitalist class to further alienate people not only from the means of production but from themselves, from what they need and want, and from each other. The public aspects of people's lives—for example, jobs or participation in government—have become separated from the private or personal aspects of people's lives, such as one's self-image or relationships. Those whose lives are now restricted to the private sphere—children, older people, and women in the home—are disrespected and considered marginal to the public life of the society. The split between the public and the private also leads to a distorted view of human energy which has-to be either work or leisure. Our recognition that the split between the public and the private is functional to capitalist domination makes our vision of a transformation of the whole of women's lives a historical possibility.

Most movements that have worked for the revolutionary transformation of society have confined their vision and analysis to the aspects of people's lives which are public or "political." Socialists of the nineteenth century challenged the concept of "natural" greed or competitiveness which was put forth to rationalize workers' responses to the brutally exploitative working conditions of early industrial capitalism. These socialists did not extend their critique of the concept of human nature to the "natural" division of labor between men and women. The private or personal aspects of people's lives were considered less important to analyze. They were to be considered after the transformation of the institutions of public life. Now we consider both people's subjective experience and their public lives as the focus of a socialist movement.

The people who ranked the public over the private were usually men because their identity was supposed to come from their public selves. Women's emotional reality was always supposed to have been our only reality. The division of labor between men and women was accepted and justified as "human nature." Women's capacity to bear children was misconstrued to be a biological necessity like that of each woman to eat or drink. As women we have come to know that the personal is "political" because we were isolated in the personal sphere.

Ideologies have always been created to convince people that what they see around them is inevitable, in order that they not challenge any of it. We challenge the notion of "human nature" which enforces the split between public and private spheres. We see the integration of these spheres, beginning now, as the way to struggle against our alienation and exploitation.

Our task then is to integrate the public and private spheres of our lives within the context of a revolutionary movement. We reject the idea that the personal sphere is

women's sphere, in practice, by working to transform the whole of people's lives. In capitalist society productive work is defined as labor that receives pay. Labor that does not receive a wage, especially work in the home—raising children, doing daily maintenance, and caring for people's emotional needs—is not regarded as work. We need to acknowledge this and other unpaid work as socially necessary. We now begin to build a concept of human activity which in a socialist society includes all forms of work, human interaction and creative effort necessary to maintain the whole society. All productive human activity becomes the collective responsibility of the whole society. More than this, old people and children will not have their lives segregated from those of the adults who are now seen as the work force. We will work to integrate all human beings into the common life of the society.

The people of the society can decide what needs to be produced and the people who work in a particular workplace can determine their own working conditions and can initiate and develop changes in the process of production. As workers take control of the processes of production, the process of reintegrating mental and manual work will begin. We will cease to comprehend people's time only as either work, or its opposite, leisure. As working people control their own workplaces they will make the decision about the time-rhythm of their lives and about how to reclaim the technology they have developed. The decisions about resources and technology will ultimately have to be made by the people of the earth as a whole as this country must no longer take the natural resources of other countries.

We understand that the conditions of our work determine the potential of interpersonal relations. When everyone is involved in activity that is meaningful, we will be able to meet our needs for personal relations in many different forms with many different people.

As we overcome our alienation, it will become possible for people to fully love themselves and each other. What's called homosexuality/heterosexuality will no longer be labeled and judged. We can reclaim all of our sexuality and freely express it.

In building a revolutionary movement which embodies these ideas, we begin to build a culture in which we will use our energy to achieve both collective goals and the fulfillment of our individual needs. Such experience now takes place only in isolated parts of our lives while the alienated capitalist context still distorts most human energies. We are striving toward the full integration of the private and public aspects of our lives.

It is the realization of this vision that we define as socialism.

Part 4: How We See Our Work

We are a socialist feminist organization. Our task is to confront the immediate realities of women's oppression under advanced capitalism, and this is integral to our struggle to achieve a socialist society. A socialist feminist movement will grow out of the rage and indignation we feel at the exploitation of our lives. We think that women

will move toward making a revolution through an analysis of the oppression we experience—not through a moral or abstract intellectual commitment to socialism. Because we seek to integrate the public and private aspects of people’s lives, we understand ourselves to be working toward the only kind of socialist revolution that could ever involve most of the people in this country. Socialism is more than a description of a future society, as it also describes the process by which we struggle to create that society.

Our strategy is to struggle for changes that improve our lives while exposing the limitations of the capitalist system. It has been common in the past to look for the perfect revolutionary demand that capitalism or “the system” cannot coopt by adopting. The idea has been that a demand or a struggle is either reformist or revolutionary. In the absence of a coherent socialist movement, all reforms will be coopted. A reform is only revolutionary when the movement is capable of showing that more than that particular reform is needed to solve problems people face in their lives.

In our programs, we will fight for the fulfillment of women’s immediate needs. We will seek those reforms that materially improve women’s lives and give women a sense of their own power. In doing so, we will struggle to include and connect the various aspects of the present women’s movement: workplace organizing—in the home and on the job, consciousness-raising, struggles within the family, and alternative institutions. Through our struggle to formulate long-range strategy, we will all be involved in an educational process. This education is a crucial part of our work.

For a society to be socialist means that the process of reexamining people’s control of their lives will be continual. Socialism involves a radical transformation of all human relations, and we believe that this process of change must begin now. In our organization, we will work to change those attitudes in ourselves which reflect the capitalist ideology we have all internalized. We will struggle against manipulative and competitive attitudes and actions. Increasingly, our lives under capitalism are unlivable and we know this will become clear to large numbers of people. We know that people have continuing energy and ability to change, and that out of our experience we can create a revolution in this country.