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# The World's Largest Workplace

**Social Reproduction and Wages for Housework**

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2004

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# Contents

Wages For Houswork? . . . . .	10
Bibliography . . . . .	15



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One of the all time great swindles of history is the massive free labor subsidy that capital has scored in working class homes. So much of our time, energy, interests, resources and money goes into the home-based work to re-produce our class...

This article creates a background on the international Wages for Housework campaigns carried on since the seventies as well as our future hopes for the abolition of marriage and all wage slavery. Reproduction, whether in the services, child care, hospitality, health care or sex work, is also carried on outside the home and still primarily done by women. Look for upcoming issues of The Northeastern Anarchist for more articles on reproductive rights — from the struggle for affordable, accessible abortion, to the fights against forced sterilization. We will also examine the situation of migrant domestic workers, the globalized sex trade, and other sites of struggle where women's bodies clash with capitalism.

One of the all time great swindles of history is the massive free labor subsidy that capital has scored in working class homes. So much of our time, energy, interests, resources and money goes into the home-based work to re-produce our class. Depending on your view, subsistence, caring, nurturing, teaching and sheltering is either the "daily grind" or the "lubrication" needed to keep it all going. This re-productive work is primarily, even overwhelming, done by women, the majority of the world's population.

Lately, anarchist-communists in North America have done a better job of addressing working class issues and workplace organizing, but we really have not paid enough attention to the part of the re-productive cycle that has always been done without pay.

Women's demand of pay for housework is a strategic demand for the whole class. It's not that getting wages for housework is our end goal and solution; instead it is a crucially important area of struggle and mobilization, which can help to over-

come the divisions between the employed and un-employed members of our class, and between men and women. We want to smash the capitalist patriarchy, but we need, as Lorenzo Kombo'a Erwin puts it, 'survival pending revolution.'

March 8, 2004 marked the fifth annual Global Women's Strike. Women in Uganda, England, Argentina, Peru, Guyana, southern India, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, and several U.S. cities took part in the global strike. Overall the movement saw participation by women involved in grassroots organizations in sixty countries. Yet this passed with barely a mention in radical or anarchist circles, with the notable exception of a fine report by Mumia Abu Jamal (reprinted in the latest edition of *Kick It Over*). Women had taken strike action prior to the Global Strike, in Iceland in 1975, Switzerland in 1991 and Mexico in 1999.

Participants in the Global Women's Strike are fighting for payment for housework, clean, safe and accessible water resources, accessible and safe housing, education, gender justice and an end to wars. They have been active opponents of war and occupation, including the too often overlooked tragedies in the Congo and Uganda. The slogan they put forward is "Resources for Caring not Killing."

Right now, global expenditures on military spending exceed \$956 billion per year. This is an even more disgusting figure when you compare it with spending for essentials of living at \$20 billion. Yet it is caring work that produces all of the world's labor power. Validating this kind of work is a crucial step in radically transforming the division of labor and the structure of the economy.

Most of the work that women do is unwaged, unvalued and unrecognized, without guaranteed benefits, health and safety protections or organized hours. This lack of social and economic recognition devalues all of women's work and, where wages are received, contributes to keeping women's wages 25-50% below the wages of men.

and hold waged work where desired. A real work-life balance must mean that all of us are working less.

But emphasis on waged work at the expense of caring and nurturing (families, communities, ourselves) is the key tension of capitalist economies — the struggle between our own desires and needs, care for ourselves, and the pressure to take on waged jobs as the mediated means to survival.

Yet, it's not enough to end sexual and reproductive "slavery," the extraction of labor from women through the state institution of marriage. In seeking to be free individuals, we know that we endanger our health and emotional well-being by sacrificing our own care for the production of capitalist exchange values. So as anarchists, the struggle continues until there is an end to all wage slavery.

The wages for housework campaigns raised some important debates in the 1970s and '80s that remain lively international questions today. There are problems with its inherent reformism as a demand, but it's a good tactical goal that has galvanized women in struggle. As anarchists, we support welfare, unemployment insurance, subsidized housing, not as solutions to our problems but as resources. Wages for housework is a defensive technique like other subsidies or assistance.

In our homes and communities, in 'private' and in public, we must organize, raise up our just demands, march, demonstrate and strike to win where we can.

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— public and private domestic workers — as well as the isolation of women as housewives. Solidarity in this regard means directly contesting power relations between men and women, and the ideological basis, especially around “the family”, that sustains this inequality.

Selma James called it again when she said, “The only other choice [to capitalist employment]: to scrimp on benefits or depend on a man, with no money of your own — a major source of domestic violence, including rape in marriage. I don’t think most jobs men do are more important than raising children. Nor do I think women should be institutionalized as carers or men deprived of their kids. Time for a change!”

Domestic work must be recognized in a way that allows for and supports the refusal of marriage. The fight against the patriarchal middle class family is crucial for the liberation of women and society.

Many anarchists have ripped at the contractual implications of marriage, the oppressive social relationship implicit in the state-sanctioned property relationship between men and women. As Emma Goldman said, “Marriage and love have nothing in common.” The spontaneous critique of the nuclear family, which blossomed when women began mobilization for the legalization of abortion and for divorce laws, led many to a total questioning of the broader organization of society. The whole of capitalist social organization is dictated by the sexual division of work. A redefinition of “work” and re-ordering of how it is valued would go a long way to destroying the patriarchal order.

“We’ve got to stop glorifying the work men do and invite them to take part in caring for other life. If we’re not segregated, demeaned, discriminated and impoverished by it, as is true with women now, it’s the most civilizing work of all” (James, 2004). What is required is a fundamental shift in the structures of work in order to allow all caregivers to both care

Recent neoliberal cuts have weakened or eliminated pay equity and employment equity schemes, further penalizing working class women. In addition, extreme welfare cuts and ideological attacks on single mothers receiving welfare have further punished working class women.

The Wages for Housework campaigns and the Global Women’s Strike have developed and expressed an important internationalist perspective on class struggles. Among their demands the Strike calls for the abolition of all “Third World debt” on the basis that the work women do, which has been massively increased under structural adjustment programs imposed by the IMF, and has more than repaid the debt. For instance, in many countries girls and women have to walk hours every day to get firewood and water in order to cook the family meals when they get home. As Selma James put it earlier this year, “Women grow 80% of food consumed in Africa and over 60% in Asia, yet are officially ‘economically inactive.’ Despite slogging all day every day, no work record and no wage. Any wonder that we women are 70% of the world’s poor.” James also notes how this labor is essential for continuing capital’s exploitation, when she said back in 1973, that women “service those who are daily destroyed by working for wages and who need to be daily renewed and they care for and discipline those who are being prepared to work when they grow up.”

The United Nations has estimated the value of this work to be worth more than \$11 trillion worldwide. A Statistics Canada survey in 1992 calculated the value of unpaid work in Canada to be as much as \$198 billion at that time. Certainly, without the unpaid work of women, the capitalist economy would be seriously jeopardized.

But how did we get into an economic system of evaluation that refuses to account for, and truly recognize the real value of women’s unpaid work? Basically, the system of accounting for value was defined by bourgeois men who wished to evalu-

ate the growth of wealth in the nation state. Economists like Adam Smith started out by separating moral, aesthetic and use “value” from “market” value. As Marilyn Waring points out in her detailed book of feminist economics, *If Women Counted*, “If Adam Smith was fed daily by Mrs. Smith, he omitted to notice or to mention it. He did not, of course, pay her. What her interest was in feeding him, we can only guess, for Adam Smith saw no ‘value’ in what she did.” From the banks to the United Nations, economists ever since have evaded admitting their own self-interest, and continued to judge the market as the source of value.

Even Marx himself said little about women and their work (outside of some specific factory references), and particularly little of domestic work. Let’s not forget he too had a wife and a female servant. In places Marx approaches the problem but cannot put his finger on it. “The worker...gives himself means of subsistence to keep up his working strength, just as a steam engine is given water and coal, and a wheel is given oil. So the workers’ means of consumption are pure and simple means of consumption of a means of production, and the individual consumption of the worker is a directly productive consumption” (Marx in *Lotta Feminista*, p.261).

Though Marx doesn’t see it or can’t bring himself to speak it, this consumption is based on work of some specific kind. As *Lotta Feminista*, a class struggle group out of Italy in the 70’s, said “This work [Marx misses] is housework. Housework is done by women. This work has never been seen, precisely because it is not paid” (p.261).

Housework re/produces the commodity of labor power. It is transformed into the wages of the current or future worker and as such is commodified, produces an exchange value rather than simply the utility or use value of labor.

Yet the exchange value is cashed not by the houseworker but by the bearer of the labor power that the houseworker has re-produced. There is an assumption that the wage, the price paid

workers organize and unionize, the state tries to cut back on day care subsidies. Clearly, it is important to link the struggles of low-income and welfare mothers, with those fighting for decent pay and benefits in equivalent public sector jobs. (Their mutual aid in coming together there has formed a group called the Day Care Justice Co-op.) And at any time, it is a bad idea to rely too comfortably on state “charity” concessions, especially when they can lead to further neoliberal justifications for cuts in service funding.

There are other criticisms that the demand for salaries for housewives would be akin to social security, when a subsidy is a charity concession on the part of the government. *Movimento Femminista Romano* suggests that this is based in the fact that, given the character of housework, housewives do not hold any contractual power.

How would they obtain their raise? By leaving children, elderly and sick relatives in order to take part in demonstrations, the critics ask? “Would they fold their arms and refuse to do the housework, knowing that, afterwards, they would have to slave twice as hard in order to regain lost time? (MFR, p.262).

The main concern with the wages for housework campaigns is really how to press for equality of work, without sex discrimination. For instance, the state may link a subsidy to oppressive patriarchal, bourgeois family arrangements — pay to housewives but not to non-married women or non-mothers. We do not want to re-affirm a sexual division of labor, but instead think of ways to collectivize social services, ways that would include equal participation by men. Some interesting anarchist communist projects in this area have been canteens, laundries, collective nurseries and free schools.

Instead of reinforcing these common social functions as private, and thereby limiting them to the home, and usually to women in traditional roles, we must envision and implement ways of making these functions public, and collective. That is a step toward ending the alienation of work, paid and unpaid



“This would have been interesting, because the whole sphere of reproduction, in its private and public aspects, would have come into the discussion; and, consequently, into the discussion of the position of women. Perhaps some ideas concerning the possible organization of these services and needs would also have emerged. In the absence of this contact, women stay isolated in their roles as ‘housewives,’ and they speak of making a salary contract” (Casalini, p.265).

The compensation can appear only as a subsidy because the housewives’ activities cannot be easily broken down into discrete tasks. Employer contributions similar to CPP or EI could pay for it. Especially since these contributions in Canada are already lower than for most other industrialized nations.

Of course, there is bound to be a lack of correspondence between service and compensation, and a subsidy is typically only a survival income. Some have suggested that a guaranteed annual income and a shorter work week would contribute towards a solution.

There are other problems with the wages for housework demand, beyond the obvious reformism. Obviously, we do not want the state to be a mediator in the complex relationship that characterizes women’s daily tasks. The surveillance, harassment and intrusions on women receiving welfare provide a warning about this. It would bring bureaucratic attention to women as the state attempts to quantify the often fluid and overlapping domestic roles that are performed each day. Certainly, the state should never be assigned the task of giving houseworkers an identity.

There is also the concern that women would pay for the salary increase (and the social cost of the salary itself) themselves through price increases and salary cuts elsewhere in the workforce. In Rhode Island right now, as low-income day care

by the boss for labor power, includes a payment for the costs of reproduction. If the worker is to bring their labor power to work everyday then they must be able to renew that labor power, with food clothing and shelter, at an acceptable level to allow them to keep working at an adequate capacity.

The problem with this assumption of course is that the payment is made to the worker, the bearer of the labor power commodity, rather than to the people, usually women, who have done the bulk of the work necessary to re/produce the commodity labor power.

Marxist economics have tended to focus on the exchange value of commodities, including labor power. This is why the labor involved in producing use values, or utility, because it is not the primary focus of capitalist economies, is often overlooked or relegated to a secondary status. Because women’s work in the home is not openly sold on the capitalist labor market has generally been excluded from Marxist analyses, or relegated to the realm of non-commodity production. The aim of Marxist critique of political economy has been explicitly to analyze capitalist commodity production and exchange, so women’s work, and the various realms of non-commodity production more generally, have been obscured.

But obsession with productive work can eclipse the central issue of the productivity of housework or domestic labor. Workers must give themselves means of subsistence to keep up their working strength (material, psychological, emotional, intellectual).

For Lotta Femminista it was no accident “that theoretical obsession with productive work has never touched on the productivity of housework” (p.261). Workers’ struggles over pay at the moment of production in the factory/workplace have regularly “failed to include the reproduction of working strength and the absence of pay which mystified that reproduction” (Lotta Feminista, p.262). Unfortunately, workers’

movements responded to Lotta Femminista with accusations of class splitting, “interclassism” and “corporativism.”

“One part of the class with a salary, the other without. This discrimination has been the basis of a stratification of power between the paid and the non-paid, the root of the class weakness which movements of the left have only increased” (Lotta Femminista, p.262). This has led to calls for “wages for housework.” Pay for housework, or domestic work, is a revolutionary and strategic demand for the working class as a whole.

## Wages For Housework?

Basically, the demands are for less work, more time and more financial recognition for women’s contributions. But the simplicity of these basics has caused women around the world to recognize their fundamental conflict with state patriarchy. As the Italian feminist movement realized, “A massive request for jobs for all women who are currently housewives would go against the system, which cannot renounce gratuitous housework.” So the vision was expanded — “The right to manage our own bodies, the collectivization by the state of all the social services (canteens, local laundries and so on) currently provided for free by housewives, collective education of small children, equality of work with no sex discrimination these are our objectives” (MFR, p.264).

The International Wages for Housework is a socialist feminist coalition that was also initiated in the 1970s, but in England. Since then the movement has developed important insights into global linkages among wages, reserve armies of labor, misogyny and racism (Berlant). Around the world, the Wages for Housework movements have fought against the workfare ethic of neoliberal governments pushing single mothers off of benefits and “into work.” The vast majority of women do unwaged work, whether on a full-time or a

part-time basis, so the issue should not be framed as a struggle between stay-at-home mothers and employed women (Rebick).

Money from homework wages can be used as caregivers see fit to arrange their lives in more satisfactory ways. “This gives women bargaining power, to accept or reject what employers offer in wages and conditions. Power at home too: men either share the work or move on. For lesbian women, and in fact all women, the money makes it easier to be sexually independent and be mothers too” (James, 2004).

Wages for Housework also addresses the horrible problem of women pensioner poverty, which is usually the result of a lifetime of caring for others. “Why deny that caring for people is the very stuff of life? Basic to relationships. Basic to human survival. Yet treated as worthless. Women give their all but it’s not mutual and its not paid” (James, 2004).

In Italy, Lotta Femminista and Autonomia Femminista made salaried housework a key demand from 1975. This was a denunciation of the state’s swindling of women by basing its budgets “on the gratuitous labor exploited in the name of the allegedly ‘primary natural’ function of women” (Casalini, p.264). “The issue is how to value unpaid work without going back to the days when women were valued only for their mothering” (Rebick).

It’s not only about mothers and housewives. Nor is it a strictly home based issue. With the expansion of the service economy much of the work of re/reproduction has been outsourced. “Perhaps it would have been more interesting if the discussion about housework now revived had originated not only among housewives, but rather between them and the thousands of women who do the same jobs in public places; namely in service in bringing up children, in health assistance” (Casalini, p.265). To this we might add non-status women who do so much of housework for wealthier families yet have few rights or social support.