FEMINISM AND SOCIALISM CLASS GUIDE

## CLASS 1. THE ORIGIN AND NATURE OF WOMEN’S OPPRESSION

### READING [12 PAGES]

a. DSP, Feminism and Socialism, pp. 15-26

b. Brewer, The Dispossession of Women

### DISCUSSION POINTS

1. “Sexual difference is a biological reality but oppression and discrimination have not always been attached to such a difference.” (a, 18) Discuss.

2. What were the fundamental lines along which the oppression of women as a sex emerged?

3. How does the origin of the family institution relate to the development of private property, classes and the state?

4. “In class society, the family is the only institution to which most people can turn for the satisfaction of some basic human needs, including love and companionship… Nevertheless, the main purpose of the family is not to provide for such basicneeds.” (a, 21) What is the family institution? What functions does it perform in class society?

5. “Capitalism has refined and modified the oppression of women to suit its own needs …Yet the emergence of capitalist industrialisation contains many contradictory features for the maintenance of women’s oppression …” (a, 23) Discuss.

6. “It is thus the capitalist class — not men in general, and certainly not male wage earners — which profits from women’s unpaid labour in the household.” (a, 24) Why is this? Do men in general derive any benefits from the oppression of women?

7. “Under capitalism, the family system also provides the mechanism for the superexploitation of women as wage workers …” (a, 25) How does it do this?

8. “The struggle for women’s liberation poses the problem of the total reorganisation of society from its smallest repressive unit — the family — to its largest — the state.” (a, 17) Why is this?

9. Why is it absurd to speak of abolishing the family within class society?

## CLASS 2. THE SECOND WAVE OF FEMINISM

### READING [24 PAGES]

DSP, Feminism and Socialism, pp. 27-50

### DISCUSSION POINTS

1. What were the gains of the first wave of feminist struggles in the 19th and early 20th centuries?

2. “The basis of the second wave of feminism lies in the economic and social changes of the post-World War II years …” (pp. 28-29) What were these changes?

3. “Greater democratic rights and broader social opportunities have not ‘satisfied’ women, or inclined them to a passive acceptance of their inferior social status and economic independence. On the contrary, each achievement towards equality exposes even further ways, often in quite subtle forms, that sexist barriers operate in capitalist society.” (p. 33) Discuss.

4. “While the feminist radicalisation has an independent dynamic of its own … it is not isolated from the more general upsurge of struggles and the emergence of other social movements.” (p. 35) What were the other social movements that impacted on the second wave of feminism?

5 “Under the pressure of women’s mobilisation and organisation most governments have introduced a series of legal reforms on women’s rights …” (pp. 40-41)

What has been the practical impact of these reforms on the daily lives of the majority of women?

6. What response has the ALP and the trade union bureaucracy adopted toward the feminist movement?

7. “… the rise of the women’s movement … compelled the Communist parties to modify and adjust their line.” (p. 47) What was the attitude of most of the Communist parties toward women’s liberation from the 1930s until the new rise of feminism in the early 1970s? How did they modify and adjust their line in response to the second wave of feminism?

## CLASS 3. WOMEN’S LIBERATION IN THE SECOND AND THIRD WORLDS

### READING [26 PAGES]

DSP, Feminism and Socialism, pp. 51-76

### DISCUSSION POINTS

1. “The Russian Revolution and each subsequent socialist revolution brought significant gains for women, including democratic rights and integration into social production.” (p. 51) What were the gains for women that were brought by the Russian Revolution? What subsequently happened to these gains?

2. “For women, the Stalinist counter-revolution led to a policy of reviving and fortifying the family system.” (p. 53) Why did the Stalinist bureaucracy revive and fortify the family system?

3. “… the liberation of women cannot be achieved simply by abolishing the capitalist economic system. This is necessary, but by itself it is not sufficient.” (p. 60)

Why is the abolition of the capitalist economic system a necessary but insufficient condition for the liberation of women? What other measures are required?

4. “For women in the Third World, the penetration of the capitalist market has a contradictory impact …” (p. 63) Discuss.

5. “Economically and socially [women in the Third World] are under personal pressure to produce more, not fewer children.” (p. 69) Why is this?

6. “The struggle for women’s liberation has always been intertwined with the national liberation struggle.” (p. 71) Discuss.

7. “The Cuban Revolution has more consciously taken up the struggle against women’s oppression than any other since the early days of the Russian Revolution.” (p. 73) Discuss.

## CLASS 4. IDEOLOGICAL TRENDS WITHIN FEMINISM

### READING [21 PAGES]

DSP, Feminism and Socialism, pp. 77-87, 5-14

### DISCUSSION POINTS

1. “At the beginning of the 1980s there was a significant decline and a fragmentation  
of the feminist movement.” (p. 78) Why did this occur, and what consequences has it had for the women’s liberation movement?

2. “The materialist analysis of the historical origin and economic roots of women’s oppression is essential to developing a program and perspective capable of winning women’s liberation.” (p. 81) What are the two major errors that result from the rejection of a materialist analysis of women’s oppression?

3. “The fragmentation of the women’s liberation movement in the imperialist countries over the last decade has been accompanied, and to some degree caused, by the proliferation of theories about ‘patriarchy’.” (p. 83) What do these theories have in common? How have they promoted the fragmentation of the women’s liberation movement?

4. “Of course these ideological developments within the women’s movement in the imperialist countries haven’t taken place in isolation from broader political and social developments. They are a reflection … of the bourgeoisie’s ideological offensive during the 1980s against the socialist movement, and even against the ideas espoused by Keynesian liberalism.” (p. 85) How did the ideological developments within feminist movement, in particular the rise of “patriarchy”

theories which celebrate differences between the sexes, reflect the bourgeoisie’s “free market” ideological offensive of the 1980s?

5. “The shifts in the women’s movement, both ideological, political and organisational, are part of the developing class struggle. The movement is polarising around just whose interests it should defend.” (p. 86) How has this been manifested in the ideological divisions among feminists in the 1990s?

## CLASS 5. THE SOCIALIST ALLIANCE AND THE WOMEN’S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

### READING [12 PAGES]

DSP, Feminism and Socialism, pp. 88-99

Socialist Alliance, Charter for Women's Rights, at: <http://www.socialist-alliance.org/policy/women's-rights-gender-equality/charter-women's-rights>

Socialist Alliance, "For Women's Liberation", in Programmatic Document of the Socialist Alliance (2015), at: <http://www.socialist-alliance.org/alliance-voices/programmatic-document-socialist-alliance-adopted-11th-national-conference-socialist>

### DISCUSSION POINTS

1. The radical restructuring of society is not a solution “that can be imposed from above. Freedom from oppression can only be forged by the oppressed themselves consciously struggling together to overthrow their oppressors. Such a struggle takes many forms and will require a complex system of alliances in order to overcome the divisions fostered by class society among the oppressed and weld

them into a powerful, united movement. It will be only through the establishment of such alliances and the experience of joint actions that the oppressed majority can, by democratic means, map out and implement a common strategy to achieve a society free from oppression and exploitation.” (pp. 88-89) Discuss in relation to the struggle for women’s liberation.

2. “The oppression of women as a sex constitutes the objective basis for the mobilisation of women in struggle through their own organisations. We support and help build the independent women’s movement.” (p. 89) What do we mean by the term independent women’s movement?

3. “The dominant organisational form of the women’s movement has been all-female groups.” (p. 90) Why should socialists support such an organisational form within the women’s liberation movement? Does this mean that socialists should always support the formation of all-women groups to fight for women’s liberation?

4 Why does the Socialist Alliance support struggles for the liberation of women?

5 "Socialists support the construction of a mass women's liberation movement organised and led by women, and whose first priority is the fight to win and defend women's rights. However, if the women's liberation movement is to be successful, it must take up the demands of working-class women and involve them in the leadership of the movement. Only by fusing the objectives and demands of the women's liberation movement with the struggle of the working class and other progressive movements will the necessary forces be assembled to achieve the liberation of women." Discuss.

6. "Making progress towards an Australia in which there is full economic, social and political equality for women requires, in the first instance, collective opposition to each and every attack on women's rights - as workers, mothers, students, patients and welfare recipients.  
Collective struggle, not enlightened government, has been the driving force behind some formal, although limited, rights for women. The formal rights women have today have been won through long struggles - in workplaces, communities, schools and homes - by women and supportive men." (Socialist Alliance Women's Rights Charter) What are the main themes of the demands the Socialist Alliance advocates in order to develop the struggle for women’s liberation?

## CLASS 6. WOMEN’S LIBERATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS OF LESBIANS AND GAY MEN

### READING [43 PAGES]

Socialism and the Struggle for the Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men, pp. 4-46

Socialist Alliance, "For the free expression of gender and sexuality" in Programmatic Document of the Socialist Alliance (2015) at: <http://www.socialist-alliance.org/alliance-voices/programmatic-document-socialist-alliance-adopted-11th-national-conference-socialist>

### DISCUSSION POINTS

1. “The oppression of lesbians and gay men is … a by-product of the oppression of women.” (p. 43) Why is this?

2. Why is it in the interests of the working class to oppose the oppression of gay men and lesbians?

3 “Being oppressed isn’t a radical political act. Recognising that oppression and joining in common action with others to fight such oppression is.” (p. 34) Discuss

in relation to the perspectives of “identity” politics and lifestylism as strategies to end the oppression of lesbians and gay men.

4. “… queer politics does not offer an effective way forward for those seeking to end homophobia and the institutionalised oppression of gay men and lesbians under capitalism.” (p. 40) Why is this?

5. “The Socialist Alliance supports politically independent and self-organizing social movements that fight the oppression of women, lesbians and gay men, trans and intersex people, people with HIV and sex workers through independent mass action." Discuss.

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