

Divided and Ruled - Racism and Sexism

"Even though discrimination against women predates capitalism, the economic exploitation of women has become an integral part of our economic system. Women are still much more likely to have part time or casual jobs than men. But even more far reaching than this is the huge amount of work that women do which is unpaid, such as housework, cooking, child care etc (often even when they have jobs as well). This unpaid work rears the next generation of workers for the capitalist entirely free of charge. You don't have to be a genius to see why this is a good deal for the capitalist class. This situation is the economic basis of sexism. Needless to say the capitalist will never pay more than a pittance for this work. The idea of "wages for housework" is an illusion. We believe the only real solution to low pay and no pay for women is removing capitalism. "

With women's jobs tending to be less permanent and worse paid, their situation in the economy is similar to that of unemployed people. They both have a below average status in the job market and are a source of cheap labour. Bosses can use and discard them at will when they are no longer required. This part of the workforce were called the 'reserve army of labour' by Marx, for pretty obvious reasons. The existence and use of this 'reserve army' by the capitalists has the effect of reducing the wages of the whole working class and sapping our militancy and unity. Workers from this reserve can be brought in to replace workers who have been sacked. For those of us actually in this section of the workforce it can mean a life of permanent poverty with little hope of getting out of that situation.

People from a lot of ethnic groups (whether immigrants or people who were born here) are often also in a similar situation. Immigrants often find themselves forced into low paid, semi-skilled or unskilled work, even if they have the skills to do better paid jobs. A good example is 'outworkers', people who make clothes at home, who are very concentrated in Asian communities. I know of one restaurant in Sydney which pays its Asian staff half as much as its white staff. This restaurant has an Asian owner, which shows that this division doesn't just benefit white capitalists, it benefits capitalists of all races.

Splitting people up on the basis of their skin colour or culture is very useful to keep the working class divided. In Australia racism has been very successful at doing this right from the start. White workers bought the lie so well, that one of the first things the union movement demanded was a White Australia. Racism is so ingrained in our society that people will often honestly think they're not racist, but still, for example, think that doing an Indian accent is funny or OK.

But racism and nationalism aren't just there to divide the working class. They also help to make the working class support and collaborate with the ruling class. Racism creates the illusion that there is some sort of natural unity between people in the same ethnic group - 'we've got to stand up against the Asians' for example. One Nation is of course the most obvious example of a group which does this. But most political parties don't use racism so much as nationalism.

Nationalism is sort of a 'soft' version of racism. It doesn't require that you be white, only that you be 'Australian'. And it doesn't require that you actively hate other people, only that you identify with Australia. The problem with this is that 'Australia' doesn't mean just the people in Australia. We get our ideas of

'Australia' from the mass media, and they define it in the interests of the capitalists. In effect, they define 'Australia' to be the government and bosses of Australia.

Nationalism might be 'softer' than racism, but it can still cause terrible harm to people. An example of this is the treatment of refugees who try to come to Australia, who are locked up and abused in detention centres. This is justified much more in terms of nationalism than racism, although of course both are used.

Racism and nationalism make the working class think they have more in common with their bosses, than they do with workers of other races or from other countries. The media and the government use this feeling to scapegoat people for causing problems like unemployment, which are really caused by the economic system and the capitalists.

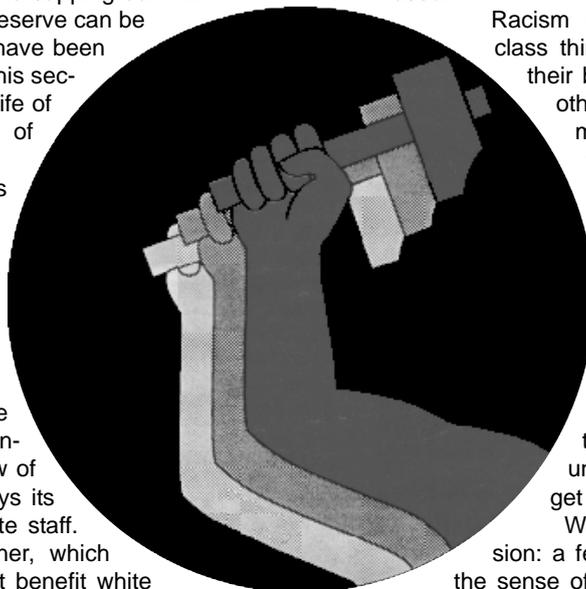
The government of Australia has needed and promoted racism and nationalism from the very start. White workers wouldn't have shot, enslaved, and stolen land from the Aboriginals, unless they believed that the Aboriginals were subhuman, and unless they thought they were going to get something out of it.

What workers get out of this is an illusion: a feeling of superiority and identity, and the sense of being better treated by the bosses.

While it's an illusion it's a powerful illusion. The only sense of power allowed to working class people in this society is when they shit on someone else. I remember two people at a place I used to work talking about how they ought to bomb all the boat people. One of them was from a German family and the other one was Croatian. This illusion of being powerful and on top of things is also very relevant to sexism.

All women experience sexism to some degree. What degree depends on different factors, especially on what class you're in. Sexism started before capitalism (and was largely 'justified' by religion). But it's been taken in to the capitalist system and used by the capitalists for their own ends. Once again, when we say capitalists we mean capitalists, not just capitalists who are men. This sexual division lets the next generation of workers be raised and to some extent 'socialised' (given the 'right' attitudes) without the capitalists having to pay for it.

Women are pushed out of public life in many different ways. Firstly sexism is promoted by the media (as are the other forms of bigotry). It is also done in less obvious ways. For example if you have children, and you want to take part in any kind of public life, you really need childcare. Childcare is often just ignored, or treated as a minor side issue. This means that 'someone' has



to stay home and look after the children, and that someone is usually the woman. It's actually fairly rare for sexism to be obvious - for someone to say 'women ought to stay home and have babies'. It's more a matter of women's specific concerns being ignored (and men's specific concerns being talked about), and women being made to feel like ratbags or whingers if they bring women's issues up.

Similarly, men's interests and ways of doing things are often treated as the 'normal' way of doing things which everyone ought to fall into. For example, 'everyone' likes going to the pub and 'no one' gets upset by drunk arseholes trying to come on to women there don't they? As you can see this isn't openly sexist. It's even treating men and women the same. But it's just as obviously a way of excluding women. Another big problem is that men and women are 'socialised' differently - men are trained to talk a lot and put their ideas forward, and women are trained to sit back and listen. Even when you have a group which is set up to be totally democratic (for example a political group), you can still get your 'alpha males', men who dominate the conversation and the ideas. Again this isn't obviously sexist - the men probably won't be saying anything against women. But again, it has a sexist effect - that men's concerns and ideas get talked about and women's don't. When women do speak up they can seem to be aggressive or harsh. This is because we all expect different things from men and from women. If a man spoke in that way, they'd probably be considered a bit boring or loudmouthed at worst, whereas a woman would be considered truly fucked up and arrogant (by both men and women).

As you can see these effects are on all levels of society, from the big economic picture to the small picture of how people interact. All these effects add up to women being pushed out of public life, unless they're very lucky, very determined, or rich. Women are seen and valued, still, in terms of their body and attractiveness. A multi-million dollar industry caters to this. This is making many women's and girls' lives a misery, in some cases it is literally killing them, for example anorexia.

It can't be emphasised enough that this sexism doesn't just benefit men, it benefits capitalists of both sexes. Nor is it carried on just by men. The editors of women's magazines, for example, would be mostly women. Women are convinced to spend money on diets (almost all cons, and almost all done for appearance and not health), exercise classes, make up, and so on. Women are presented with a series of images to live up to, which are impossible - not least because they contradict each other. The 'good Mum', virgin, sex symbol, career woman and so on.

Sexism has certainly gotten a bit less over the last few decades, due to the efforts of many people. But this isn't an inevitable thing. Because it's in the interests of the capitalists, they will always want to bring it back. The latest thing that could bring back sexism is books like 'Men are from Mars, Women are From Venus' - books which try and explain social differences between men and women in terms of biology or nature. This is also a common topic in the media, especially comedy: 'now a man will...but a woman will...'. These books and TV shows don't say that women are inferior to men. But they do make out that men and women can't help the way they act - it's all nature. This means that the sexism women put up with must be natural as well, and therefore OK, or at least not something that's anyone's fault or could be changed.

The women's movement has had most success in the area of letting women control their own fertility. The development of effective contraception and legalised abortion have made a big difference to women's lives. This is the basic issue: you can have all the equal rights you want, but it means very little if you have ten kids to look after. This has meant, for example, that more women can work outside of the home. In the capitalist system, if you don't have your own income you have almost no power, as anyone who's been on the dole for a long time will tell you. These changes are, however, nothing like enough, as almost any woman will tell you.

The sexual division of labour also puts pressure on men, mainly to 'get a job'. They need to compete, to be ambitious, and to win. This is especially damaging as jobs get less and less secure and unemployment gets higher and higher. This is the economic basis of mainstream 'male identity'. Men are encouraged to justify themselves in terms of the job they do. It's almost a stereotype - the man talking about how important and complicated his work is to a woman who is sitting there wondering why this boring wanker thinks she's interested in hearing about it. Men aren't encouraged to value themselves in terms of home-based activities such as housework or raising kids, or in having good relationships with other people. This distorts the relationships between men and women and both lose out. There is a lot of unhappiness, broken marriages, and so on.

In practice women can find themselves doing a 'double shift' - working during the day, and coming home for round two, cleaning up, getting dinner ready, looking after children etc. Men are in a lot better position to go and unwind with their friends, firstly because of the way men behave to women who are out without any men, and secondly because of the need to look after children.

Sexual relations between men and women are a constant source of tension and conflict. The media talks about 'sexuality' as almost completely meaning 'heterosexual male sexuality', and specifically 'heterosexual male fantasies of having power and being in control' - men are encouraged to let out their feelings of powerlessness in their sexuality, for example by fantasising about someone they could control and dominate (someone younger for example). Women's sexuality, as shown in the media, is almost all a distorted version defined by and for men - look at the depiction of lesbians. Sex, like everything else, is treated as a product to be used to make money for the capitalists. For example people are encouraged to have better relationships, not by looking honestly at the way they've been trained to act with each other, but by buying a sex toy.

The main things to remember, then, are these:

- ★ Racism and sexism aren't separate issues, they come from the same source - the capitalists - and they are used for the same reason - to divide the working class.
- ★ Racism and sexism are not a simple matter of white people hurting black people or men hurting women. They benefit the capitalists, of whatever race or gender. And they hurt workers, of whatever race or gender.
- ★ Though they come from the capitalists, they aren't obviously outside forces, in the way that for example the GST is. They effect the way everyone thinks and acts (not just men or white people). This means that racism and sexism aren't just something to be fought as something 'out there' pushed by the government. They are also something that has to be fought in the way we interact with each other every day. This is perhaps especially true for anarchist groups; you can't overlook something because someone is a good activist in other ways or because their theory is good. Or because they write really shit hot articles about the capitalist basis of racism and sexism!

based on sections of 'Unfinished Business' by Class War
www.classwaruk.org/

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