

EXCERPTS FROM AN UNPUBLISHED ROUGH DRAFT OF AN ESSAY,
"OUR ORGANIZATION", written by Raya Dunayevskaya, 1951

...ON WOMEN IN THE POST-WAR WORLD, and the OLD RADICALS

During the war, women by the millions left the kitchen for the factory. The physiognomy of the labor force changed very considerably, and with it, the relationships in the home. But this is by no means a completed battle. The revolt of the women, which began during the war, did not end with the end of the war. Quite the contrary, it has intensified. It is a daily, an hourly struggle in which the woman wants to establish *new* relations with her husband, with the children, with other women, and other men.

From all this, the radical parties were as isolated as they are from the mass movement in general. But the new imprint that the women were making in society as a whole, could not leave the parties unaffected, and the struggle burst out there when the men began to return from the war and resume their old posts, even as it did in bourgeois society. But it was so wrapped up in Marxist jargon that it was not always easy to see that between the party and bourgeois society there was no basic distinction on this very basic question.

To get a concept of the smaller battle in the party, it is best to see it in society as a whole first. The mass movement into the factories was looked upon with suspicion by men in the same manner as the first movement of the Negroes into industry, before the CIO: would they bring their working conditions and standards down? And just as the Negroes proved to be loyal fellow workers, so did the women. Only the women looked at the men with suspicion, too: will these try to dominate them in the factory as their husbands, fathers, brothers do in the home? They were determined that no such thing should happen.

When the women as human beings proved to have a *class* loyalty, the men loosened up sufficiently in their relations to note that in fact something new had happened on the American scene: not only the women in factories, but even white collar women, telephone workers and such, took to the picket line and mass worker approach. They said of the awakening of these new strata in the population: "I didn't know they had it in them."

They also didn't know that the women workers would "have it in them" to come home and wish to establish new relations there, too. There the men stopped. The woman was still expected to do all the housework and take care of the children, and stay at home while the men went out to play poker. The women, however, took their new role in production seriously; they gained a new dignity and a new concept of what their relations to their fellowmen and fellowwomen should be, and they refused to submit to the subordinate role in which they had been placed in the home before they got their factory jobs. So where they could not work out the new relations, they took to breaking up the homes, even where it meant the woman would become the sole support also of her children.

The politicians thought all that was needed to reestablish the stability of the home was to give the women a few posts in the government, business, the army, and point with pride to the expanding American economy and all the gadgets for the kitchen to make life easier for "the little woman."

Not so the women. They categorically refused to remain an appendage to the men. They wished to have not only sexual but human relations with them. They were out searching for a **total reorganization of society**. In that search, some women also came to the radical parties. These radical parties failed to recognize this new concrete revolutionary force in society, but that force recognized them, for it had set up new standards by which to judge this so-called revolutionary movement.

In that same period, at the end of the war, a fight broke out in the Workers Party, over their failure to grow. They looked, not to the type of propaganda they had put out which was governed by their view that the American masses were "backward". No, they looked only at the people who had carried out the line and, since these happened to have been women who had replaced the men in all posts where needed, it was against them that the fight had started.

For the first time our tendency, which had never paid any attention to struggles between members for posts, began to pay attention to this one. For it was clear that this was not an **individual** question, but here a social problem was involved.

We came to the defense of the women who had occupied the post of city organizer which was now being contested: "What is this bourgeois nonsense of the men returning to their posts as if the women who had done all the work during the war years were not genuine political leaders, but just substitutes? But this new element was buried in the old political terms: it is your political line, not the person executing it, which brought about this mess, and stultified the party's growth."

Our own use of old political terms, instead of seeing the entirely new element — that the Woman Question, in and of itself, was playing a new role, not alone outside, but inside the organization — left us unaware of the significance that women, in increasing numbers were workers. One woman in particular had a special problem, since she had a 12 year old child and no husband. But we paid no special attention to this problem as if, to the extent that it was not just a personal but a social problem, it was in any case unsolvable under capitalism. That is the monstrous trap that awaits all who do not see the new in a situation, and we ourselves almost fell into it.

What prevented us from so doing in this case was our ranks, and especially the women. First, one thing was clear. There was a new type of response to certain historic incidents which would stress "the affinity of the struggle of Negroes and women in America." The new women members in our tendency would listen, for example, to the relationship between the Women's Rights Movement and the Abolitionists, to the fact that Frederick Douglass was the only one, even among the Abolitionists, who was willing to chair the women's meeting, as if this was something that occurred not in the '30s of the last century, but something that in one form or another they were encountering right now daily, at the bench, and in the home.

These historic questions assumed that contemporary coloration because of the urgency of their present revolt. What was pushing itself outward was the intensity and totality of the approach. By continuing her revolt daily at her home, the women were giving a new dimension to politics. She was by-passing the specialized organization of women and looking for a new, a total way out. This our own women were sensing by their association with their shopmates and the proletarian housewives in their neighborhoods.

It was from these new social types among the masses outside that our women were getting new impulses. They were finding their best friends, moreover, not among the so-called revolutionaries on the inside, but amongst their shopmates on the outside. If this had brought them into conflict with the petty-bourgeois women in the Workers Party, it reached even a greater intensity when they began talking to the women in the Socialist Workers Party, which our tendency rejoined in 1947, when it looked as if they were at least retaining their revolutionary perspective on the American scene.

Our rank and file women first came into conflict with the women in the SWP because some occupied the same subordinate position that women did in bourgeois society: they worked to support their men, who were "leaders" in the party. They were equally hostile, however, to the women leaders in the party who looked to them like the career women in the bourgeois world. These weren't the new social types they were meeting on the outside, who added a new dimension to the American character by their present revolt. Not at all. They were women with a "mission" — to lead other women. The struggle was one of the rank and file against the leaders, male and female.

The first incident came about as follows. Our ranks had been talking to their shopmates and to the neighborhood women and from them they began to get tales of revolt, described rather broadly above, but very vividly and concretely by these women from the outside. One young woman of our tendency stated that the Woman Question was not something merely historic, and she for one was not interested in the development of matriarchal societies, but instead would like very much to talk about the women of today; the revolt that is still going on.

When she was permitted to present her little talk, the male intellectuals listened, amused, while their outstanding woman leader stated that the only real solution was for women not to be women. This was the very woman who, in electioneering, wore tight skirts, with a slit on the side, and advised our woman comrade, who was her junior in campaigning: "You've got to use sex."

The mannishness of these SWP women, on the one hand, and their mawkishness, on the other hand, was too much, not only for the women in our tendency, but the rank and file women in the SWP also began to rebel. It was impossible, they said, to bring around proletarian women and have their leaders appear as nothing but "exceptional women." There was nowhere a concept of the question being a *social* question. These women leaders had merely reduced the whole fight to fighting for positions in the party itself, and accusing all and sundry who opposed them of "male chauvinism."