

Are identity politics the answer?

Sean Carroll

‘Know your enemy’

The adage ‘know your enemy’ rings true for many different groups and organisations that need to develop a strategy whether it is capitalists needing to wipe out their opposition, or activists fighting systems of oppression. Along with knowing who your enemy is, it stands to reason that we must also be clear on who the enemy is not.

For socialists wishing to fight oppression the enemy is not identity politics and those on the left who espouse them or organise using with identity politics, the enemy is clearly sexism, racism, homophobia and indeed any form of oppression.

The fact that debates around the issue of identity politics has been so much more frequent and prominent today is a good thing. The debate around identity politics hinges on how to organise in order to fight oppression. Movements such as the Repeal the 8th Campaign, the growing anti-racism movement, the marriage equality campaign of 2015 have meant that there is a huge increase in the number of people interested in organising to fight oppression. When people become active in movements, inevitably debates and arguments around strategy and tactics will emerge. What would be far more worrying for socialists would be if there were no debates going on about how to fight oppression, as that would suggest that the same old faces who were fighting oppression 20 or 30 years ago are left on their own to fight it today.

The fundamental points which we can agree on when it comes to those on the left who espouse or organise with identity politics is that a) a particular group is oppressed b) that oppression is vile and destructive c) we want that oppression to end. Given that we agree on such important points, would it not make more sense to forget about the arguments of identity politics and how to or-

ganise - surely if all of us in the debate are opposed to oppression that is all that matters? The point is that where you see the root of oppression also influences methods of fighting and ways of eliminating it. That is where a critique of identity politics comes into play.

What is identity?

Most people will have multiple identities and by this I do not mean we are spies or are donning fake beards to defraud the social welfare (whatever Leo Varadkar may think!)

You may have an identity as an Irish person, as a Dubliner, as a Northsider, as a woman, a Traveller, gay, straight, a Boho supporter or a United supporter. Sometimes an identity might be something you give to yourself such as that of a United supporter when you proudly put on your jersey or join in the chanting on the terraces. Other times an identity may be something which is given to you, something you are born with such as your nationality, your ethnicity, or your gender.

An identity can be something which gives us a sense of belonging of being part of something. When, maybe, we are bored to tears by our job, where we don't feel valued, we can't express ourselves freely; we have no say in how things are done, then having an identity, something to belong to can help relieve your sense of alienation. It can help us to feel like a human being in a society which often views us as consumers, as taxpayers or, for many of the most marginalised in society, as mere expenses.

For people who come from an oppressed group recognition of your own identity can feel like a form of resistance. For example, flying a rainbow flag and taking part in an LGBT Pride parade can be an exhilarating and empowering experience.

While identity can provide an outlet for

resistance to oppression, it is the lived experience of oppression which leads to the creation of identities. A system which needs to divide people in order to survive needs to assign markers in order to define that division. At the same time, when we are being oppressed, being singled out as a group that deserves lesser treatment from society also forges solidarity and belonging through our expression of that identity.

Where does identity politics come from?

One of the difficulties about discussing identity politics is that it can often mean different things to different people. For the purpose of this article I will start by looking at the historical background to the politics of identity which was prevalent on the left in the 1980s and 1990s and then discuss intersectionality and privilege theory which are much more popular today. I think it is fair to say that a lot of the separatism associated with the identity politics of the 80s has fallen out of favour today in place of a more intersectional approach. While this may be true, and certainly should be welcomed, it is important to start here to get an idea of where the ideas behind the identity politics of the past and present came from.

The late 1960s in the U.S. saw huge numbers of people being brought into activism through the anti-war movement, much of it centred on the campuses. Around this time the material conditions for women were beginning to change rapidly and this change to the aspirations and expectations of many women. The post-war boom meant that capitalism needed to bring more women into the workforce. The number of women completing degrees increased by 57% in the first half of the 1960s¹. The availability of the contraceptive pill gave women greater and safer control over reproduction than they had ever had before. All of this raised the expectations of many women and brought into

question the dominant idea that women's expectations should go no further than working in the home and raising a family.

The experience of many women who got involved in the movements on campus at this time was however one of rampant sexism. At a 1965 conference of Students for Democratic Society (SDS) women who raised issues of women's oppression were heckled and laughed at, with one speaker being told she 'just needs a good screw'. At the same conference the following year women had tomatoes pelted at them. While SDS did adopt a position supporting women's liberation in 1968, women in the movement still reported two years later that they were relegated to menial work while men occupied the leadership positions.

A rise in prosperity and living conditions for workers as a result of the post-war boom meant that class struggle in workplaces was low. This, coupled with the predominantly middle class make-up of student movements, meant that socialist or Marxist ideas were not popular among the 'new left' of this time. The ideas which were more popular and more influential were the ideas of anti-imperialism and national liberation coming through the anti-war movement. Added to this was also the damage that had been done to the reputation of Marxism by Stalinism. Stalinism rolled back on the importance of women's liberation to working class emancipation. While Karl Marx said 'Anyone who knows anything about history knows also that great social upheavals are impossible without the feminine ferment' the distortion of Marxism by the Stalinist regime saw medals awarded to women who raised large children and the re-criminalisation of abortion which had been legalised after the October revolution.

Faced with sexism in the movements and the perceived failure of Marxism to liberate women after the Stalinist counter-revolution, it seemed logical that women needed to organise separately from men and

¹Judith Orr *Marxism & Women's Liberation* 2015 London:Bookmarks

that a socialist revolution would not bring about women's liberation. These two arguments fit very neatly into the ideas of 'patriarchy theory' which gained popularity in the 1970s.

Patriarchy theory rests on the idea that the oppression of women developed and exists separately to class society. It argues that the oppression of women is rooted in a system of male control and domination which often predates class society. This idea is very popular today among many activists, and this is perhaps not surprising as it does appear at first glance to fit reality. In everyday life, a woman does not appear to experience sexism at the hands of the capitalist system or class society but at the hands of men, and women of all classes **do** experience sexism. The problems with this theory however are that it makes the essential division in society that of men and women and can place the root of oppression in some innate quality within men. This can lead to the conclusion that the barrier for women seeking liberation is men and not the system. Patriarchy theory can also lead to a strategic dead end for if men have always oppressed women due to some innate quality then how can sexism be overcome?

Many of the same problems which faced the women's liberation movement also faced the movement for LGBT liberation. The movement in its early days through the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) had a revolutionary outlook and did reach out to other movements, successfully persuading the Black Panthers to adopt a position in full support of gay rights for example². However many in the gay rights movement, like in the women's liberation movement, were suspicious of socialists and socialist ideas. As in the women's movement, the Stalinist distortion of Marxism played a role here. The October Revolution produced a sexual revolution in which Tsarist anti-sodomy laws were torn up and not replaced; in some regions same sex marriages were reportedly

carried out and rudimentary gender reassignment surgeries were performed. After the Stalinist counter-revolution homosexuality was denounced as a 'bourgeois deviation' and anti-sodomy laws were reintroduced and viciously enforced. While it would be a gross exaggeration to say that the October Revolution eliminated homophobia in Russia or that Stalin turned every socialist into a homophobe, the effect of the Stalinist line on the international left meant that socialists were less likely to take up the call for LGBT liberation or see it as a priority. Stalinism also meant that LGBT people could point to the abuses of LGBT people in Russia as a way of discrediting Marxism as being useful in the cause for liberation. For many lesbians the experience of the gay liberation movement was that it was male-focused and slow or unwilling to listen to the specific demands of lesbians. This experience was mirrored for many lesbians in the women's movement which was felt to be too focused on the relationships between men and women and did not deal with issues faced by lesbians. This led to some lesbian women splitting from the gay liberation movement and from the women's liberation movement to form separate lesbian groups.

Key to the theory behind a lot of groups which practiced a separatist approach to organisation is the idea of autonomy. In autonomy is the idea that the oppressed group themselves must lead the fight against their own oppression. Taken to extremes this can mean that *only* those affected by a form of oppression can take up that fight. Autonomism borrows some of its ideas from post-Marxism and post-modernism, which I will not go into in too much detail, as explanations of post-marxism and post-modernism can often run into volumes of run-on sentences and unintelligible jargon. To be brief, I would say that these ideas see the spheres of politics, economics and ideology as being separate from one another. While Marxists would see a society based on

²Sharon Smith. 'Mistaken Identity', *International Socialism* 2 (62) 1994

an economic foundation of the exploitation of one class by another, and a superstructure which includes the dominant ideas of society (those of the ruling class) and the political system needed to maintain the system of exploitation.

In the post-Marxist view of the world with separated spheres of politics ideology and economics the relations in society are based on a field of criss-crossing antagonisms where relationships of power and subordination are played out. Following this view, it is necessary to autonomise oppressed groups who lie at the end of one of these criss-crossing antagonisms. This means that the working class do not play a central role in the fight against oppression; the class struggle is just one of these many criss-crossing antagonisms. One of the problems with fighting on this basis is that it seeks to unite people on the basis of whether they suffer from a form of oppression, or based on their identity. This can present difficulties when deciding who you align with in struggle, for example should a working a working class gay man stand shoulder to shoulder with Leo Varadkar, or should a working-class woman stand shoulder to shoulder with Joan Burton? While I have no doubt that Leo Varadkar does suffer from homophobia and Joan Burton does suffer from sexism contradictions are bound to arise because of their class positions.

LGBT teenagers in Ireland are twice as likely to self-harm; three times as likely to attempt suicide and four times as likely to suffer from anxiety or depression ³. While I have no doubt that the alienation experienced from being a young LGBT person in a homophobic society does affect people like Varadkar, his wealth allows him access to the booming private medical industry in Ireland to seek treatment should it be needed. On the other hand, a young working class person from Ballyfermot (LGBT or other-

wise) is faced with half of the beds in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service ward being closed due to short staffing. Some of the very budget cuts which impact so negatively on the mental health of young LGBT people in Ireland were implemented by Leo Varadkar himself as Minister for Health, he is also completely aligned to the ideology of neo-liberalism which pushes more and more of the health service into the private market and holds down public sector wages which according to the Psychiatric Nurses Association means public mental health facilities cannot recruit nurses who are tempted away (understandably) by the private sector.

Joan Burton does, as a woman, experience sexism. Of course this is true. Some of us, I am sure, have seen the commentary on social media often from working class men who may be genuinely angry at the effects of austerity but who use awful misogynist language towards her. All socialists, whatever their feelings towards Joan Burton should stand against this kind of abuse. However, can a working class mother who faces losing her lone parent allowance because her child is turning 7, stand with the very women who as minister for social protection implemented this cruel cut which predominantly affects women? Equally how can a retired woman who is being punished for leaving the workforce to raise a family, through the loss of expected pension entitlements, stand with the same former minister who brought in this discriminatory change in legislation.

In the cases of Leo Varadkar and Joan Burton they both face oppression in their lives, but at the same time, due to their position in the ruling class, they are forced by the system to also inflict the same oppression that they face. Their material wellbeing that is their very means of survival is linked to the system. No matter how much Joan Burton may wish for an end to women's oppression her position which commits her to

³Carl O'Brien 'Rates of LGBT self harm, suicide are horrific, says McAleese' *The Irish Times* <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/rates-of-lgbt-self-harm-suicide-are-horrific-says-mcaleese-1.2583054>

the logic of the capitalist system means that making cuts to lone parent allowances and women's pensions is to her completely necessary and justified because without those cuts she would argue we cannot pay off the bank debt.

It is that tie to the system which makes cross class alliances of women or LGBT people or Black people ineffective at truly challenging oppression. While autonomist campaigns built on a cross class alliance can be effective at winning reforms, and socialists should always fight for any reform which benefits the oppressed, the tie to the system ensures that reform is where the fight will end.

Separating the spheres of political, economic and ideological and opting for a perspective of criss-crossing antagonisms with their own origins has the effect of separating the cause of oppression from the roots of oppression. A danger in doing so is that if we take the ideological sphere as being completely separate from the political and economic sphere it can become easy to fall into an idealist view of oppression. By this we mean that the solution to overcome oppression is first and foremost to change the ideas in people's heads through changing discourse in society. This can take the form of prioritising language and media over challenging the material conditions that drive oppression so for example putting a priority on challenging racist language. While this is very worthy and is part of the fight it is not going to eradicate racism without challenging the material inequalities in society. The reality is that some people hold racist views, many of them that do are working class. It is also the reality that working class people compete for jobs, compete for housing and compete for services. While the roots of racism lie in the justification for slavery centuries ago, capitalism has a way of adapting oppression to suit the needs of a developing system. Today capitalism uses racism to fuel fear in workers of migrants arriving in their country and increasing the compe-

tion for resources. As long as we have a system whereby workers must compete for resources despite vast wealth being accumulated by the ruling class racist ideas will exist in our society. While we cannot assume that addressing these inequalities will automatically wipe out racist ideas, we recognise that inequality and the fight for resources creates the conditions which perpetuate racist ideas. Ending inequality will not eliminate racism of its own, but the existence of inequality makes eliminating racism impossible.

Likewise the need for capitalism to hold up an idea image of the nuclear family to push the burden of care onto individuals rather than society and capitalism's growing need to commodify sexual relationships and in particular women's bodies in order to make profits perpetuates sexist and homophobic ideas. It would again be absurd to think that overthrowing capitalism would automatically eliminate sexism and homophobia but eliminating sexism and homophobia in a system which needs to privatise care and needs to commodify our sexual lives is impossible.

Intersectionality: a step forward?

As mentioned earlier there does now seem to be a rejection of the old separatist approach to identity politics in favour of an 'intersectional' approach. When we hear about an intersectional approach what is being referred to is the theory of intersectionality. I would argue that intersectionality is a step forward in terms of analysis and represents for many people a desire for more inclusive activism. Intersectionality has its roots in the experience of black feminists who experienced racism in the women's movements and sexism in the civil rights movements.

Black feminists felt that the women's movement, which at this time owing to low struggle was often led by middle class women, concentrated on the experiences of white middle class women while ignoring is-

sues of race. The theory of intersectionality which was formed identifies the face that people can suffer from multiple forms of oppression at the same time. So while someone can experience islamaphobia as a Muslim and also experience sexism as a women. But the theory is not as some critics have unfairly judged it to be, a game of top trumps where different oppressions are added together like a score. The theory is more sophisticated than that and recognises that oppressions do not simply add together but they interact with and shape each other. The islamaphobia is shaped by the sexism, so Muslim women are often viewed as being meek, conservative or in the words of David Cameron 'naturally submissive'.

While intersectionality is certainly a move forward from the identity politics of the 1980s, and does serve as a useful tool for understanding the experience of oppression it has limitations as guide to action for fighting oppression. Intersectionality describes the experience of oppression rather than the root of oppression. Describing the experience can be useful in that fight, in areas like developing policy or education to take account of different experiences and needs. While this is a benefit to society it is tackling symptoms rather than causes. Intersectionality often places class as just another antagonism or oppression that a person can exist at the intersection of- for example a person may exist at the intersection of being working class and black or working class and gay. This can lead to the same problems of cross-class alliances highlighted earlier in this article, as well as problems over where the agency for change comes from. I will return to the agency for change further down.

⁴ Esme Choonara and Yuri Prasad 'What's wrong with privilege theory' *International Socialism* 142. 2014.

⁵ Esme Choonara and Yuri Prasad 'What's wrong with privilege theory' *International Socialism* 142. 2014.

Privilege: who benefits from oppression?

One of the other more current elements of identity politics which people are likely to encounter on the left today is privilege theory. Privilege theory is based on the idea that oppression works on a series of unearned advantages. These may include being white, being male, being heterosexual, being educated on so on. One of the leading figures behind privilege theory, Peggy Macintosh described privilege as 'an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was *meant* to remain oblivious'.⁴

In many ways this description certainly does match reality, I, for example, as a white settled Irish man living in Ireland certainly do have advantages over migrants, people of colour, women or Travellers. But this is a description of oppression; as a strategy to fight oppression privilege theory does have problems.

It has some of the same basic theoretical problems of separating ideas in society from their material roots. Privilege theory builds on the idea that power is not something held by a ruling class but which exists in all social and interpersonal relationships. Patricia Collins says of power that 'each one of us derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple forms of oppression which frames our lives'⁵. Although some privilege theorists such as Collins' do acknowledge structural inequalities arguments, others like Foucault root the source of oppression as being in individual relationships. When these arguments are combined with arguments of power and penalty it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that those who have a privilege, whether they are aware of it or not, are somehow complicit in the oppression of those who do not. This type of argument has been put

forward by privilege theorists. For example Frances Kendall argues that ‘any of us who have race privilege, which all white people do, and therefore the power to put our prejudices into law, is racist by definition because we benefit from a racist system’⁶

The problem with this argument is that it assumes that because white people do not experience racism they are benefiting from racism. First off, not experiencing something terrible that is happening to somebody else does not mean that you are benefiting from it. You are merely not experiencing it. If my neighbour’s house was burgled and mine was not, I would certainly be in that situation better off than my neighbour, I still have my possessions he does not, I have not however benefited in anyway from my neighbour’s loss. Similarly, if my neighbour suffers racist abuse because of the colour of his skin, I am arguably better off than my neighbour, my white skin meant I avoided that unpleasant experience, however I did not gain any benefit from it. Some people will experience different forms of oppression such as racism or sexism, and others will be fortunate enough not to. That does not mean to say that all of those who do not suffer racism and sexism benefit from it. Sexism and racism do benefit some people in society but primarily the ruling class. Workers, although they may have advantages over other workers do not benefit from racism or sexism or any form of oppression.

Take for example workers in Northern Ireland during most of the 20th century. Protestant workers in Belfast had better pay and conditions than catholic workers and so had a distinct advantage over catholics. It is not true however to say that protestant workers benefited from the discrimination against catholics: a protestant worker still earned less than another protestant worker in Manchester. The fear of catholics un-

dercutting protestant workers helped bosses to keep wage demands down. At the same time, the perception of privilege felt by protestant workers who enjoyed better housing and better access to services than catholics (although still behind mainland UK) created a sense of loyalty within the protestant working class towards the reactionary unionist party. Because catholics were so badly discriminated against protestant workers felt they were being looked after by the unionist establishment which was actually holding their standard of living down. The only people who benefited from this oppression were the bosses. A testament to how important this strategy was to the Northern ruling class was the Belfast dockers’ strike of 1907. Catholic and protestant workers in Belfast went on strike together to demand union recognition. Sectarian divisions were broken down to a point where on the twelfth of July protestant and catholic flute bands marched down the Falls Road together. This terrified the Northern ruling class who used the press to stir up sectarian divisions including fictitious stories of catholics receiving more strike pay than protestants. The ruling class needed to step in and restore sectarian divides because it benefits from them; conversely the working class in both communities understood for a brief time while engaged in struggle that it needed to forget sectarian division in order to win.

This experience is mirrored in the U.S.A. where white workers in states where the pay differential between black and white was larger earned less than other white workers in states where the differential was lower.

Even today after all of the gains won by the women’s movement and despite claims from some such as Sir Stewart Rose the former chairman of Marks & Spenser’s who says ‘girls have never had it so good’⁷ women

⁶ Esme Choonara and Yuri Prasad ‘What’s wrong with privilege theory’ *International Socialism* 142. 2014.

⁷ Judith Orr ‘Marxism and feminism today’ *International Socialism* 127 2010

⁸ Judith Orr *Marxism & Women’s Liberation* 2015 London:Bookmarks

today still earn on average 18% less than men⁸. Does this mean that men are benefitting from the lower wages of women? On the surface it may appear so, as it may appear that men are earning their higher wages at the expense of women. The reality, however, is that women earn lower wages not so that more money can be paid to their male counterparts, but so that more money can remain in the bosses' hands. This inequality means that a working class man and women living together in the same household have a combined income that is not enough to pay the mortgage, hardly a cause for celebration for man in this case. The double burden often landed on to women of working outside the home to earn a wage and working inside the home to maintain a family may appear on the surface to benefit men. However, is a man really better off in a society which places the burden of care onto the women, or is he better off in a society which socialises care with free communal childcare, cooking and laundry or care of the elderly? Another question to ask is do all women suffer as a result of the lower wages of women and the privatisation of care? Does Margaret Heffernan the multi-millionaire CEO of Dunnes Stores suffer from these inequalities? The answer is no Margaret Heffernan employs low paid women to work in her supermarket, her supermarket business enjoys low rates of tax, having to pay better wages for women and having to pay a fair share of tax to fund socialised care would eat into her profits.

The nature of who benefits from oppression was recognised by Marx in the 19th century. Marx recognised that anti-Irish racism was damaging to the English working class' ability to challenge the system and win gains for itself. He said of anti-Irish racism 'This antagonism is the secret impotence of the English working class, despite its organisation. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.'⁹

⁹ Esme Choonara and Yuri Prasad 'What's wrong with privilege theory' *International Socialism* 142. 2014.

The dangers with privilege theory is that by focusing on individual relationships and on getting individuals to recognise their own privileges it takes the focus off the system as a whole and does not encourage the kind of solidarity required to fight oppression. Privilege theory where it follows the logic that all white people are inherently racist in some way can in fact be very damaging in the fight against racism. By limiting those who can fight back against racism to only those who are immediately affected by it you reduce your potential forces and this could very destructive where small minority groups are under attack. Imagine for example if we were experiencing a growing fascist movement and all Irish workers decided to step back and let immigrants fight back on their own, this would be disastrous both for the immigrants but eventually also for all workers.

Why the working class?

Why is class so important? In particular why is the working class so important?

When Marx spoke about the emancipation of the working class being an act of the working class itself, or called on workers of all land to unite, why did he concentrate on workers? Another approach, and what often is in a way the approach of identity politics, would be oppressed of all lands unite, or women of all lands unite and so on.

Two points that seem obvious about why Marx focused on the working class as the agent of change, namely a) that it is the most numerous class and b) that it is the most suffering class both fail to get to the heart of the matter. When Marx and Engels were writing the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 the working class was a tiny minority of even the European population, never mind the world. There were far more peasant farmers making a living off small holdings of land. While the working class have

suffered and continue to suffer terrible conditions, suffering in itself is not what creates agency. During the Russian Revolution for example the Putilov steel workers were some of the most militant revolutionaries. But they were not the most suffering group of people, they were paid comparatively good wages and had a far better standard of living than peasants.

To understand how the working class has agency we have to look the most basic facts about what is class and how our society functions.

Class it may be argued by some is just another form of identity but while many people may proudly identify as working class, it is in reality so much more. Class is also not about whether you live in a private house or a council house or whether you go on holidays to France every year, it even cannot be simplified by how much money get paid in your wages.

Class is about your position in the 'relations of production'. What does that mean? It sounds like a very abstract academic piece of jargon but it is absolutely crucial and very real. Every society needs 'stuff'; we need food and water and shelter clothing and so on. Without these basic necessities we have no society, all of our arguments about the nature of our society, what kind of society we want about how to change it, all of these are completely and utterly pointless if we do not have the ability to produce the things we need for that society to exist in the first place.

The system which we live under is one that is based on the exploitation of one class by another. The things that we need are produced by workers selling their labour power to capitalists who pay a wage which is less than the value of the goods or services produced, the goods and services we need are then taken from us and sold back at a profit. When we see that class is so central to way that society produces the very things it needs to exist, we see that any analysis of society which overlooks class is seriously

lacking.

Exploitation under capitalism means that the working class produces the things it needs for its own survival, but also produces the source of profits which is the ruling class means of survival.

In order to continue to grow the 'forces of production' or in other words the amount of stuff society is capable of producing, capitalism must organise workers together into large units of production and into supply chains of different units of production all dependent on each other to function.

This means that the working class is not merely a collection of people but a collective of people. Capitalism forces workers to work collectively together which gives workers strength and at the same time capitalism uses oppression to create divisions within that collective which weakens workers power.

If we imagine that tomorrow morning the board of directors and the shareholders of Dunnes Stores all decide to go on a holiday and not go to work, it is quite plausible that you or I could still walk down to Dunnes Stores and buy a loaf of bread. However, if all the shop workers go on strike, or if all the bakery workers go on strike, or the delivery drivers who bring the bread to the shop go on strike then you had better think about having something other than toast for your breakfast.

It is this collective nature that gives workers power. An individual worker often feels powerless under capitalism, especially compared to their bosses. During a strike when workers collectively withdraw their labour and shut down their entire workplace that individual worker feels confident. It is through this confidence that workers can learn to forget prejudices as the need to look down on others to get over a sense of powerlessness in one's self subsides, as the conflict between workers and bosses that previously lay under the surface is exposed and your fellow worker be they black white gay straight male female becomes 'us' and the bosses be-

come 'them'.

Talking about the ability to strike can easily be dismissed as economic reductionism, only concentrating on wages and conditions and not oppression. This is because in our experience a strike is usually about an individual set of workers striking for their wages and conditions. This does not have to be the case, when Dunnes workers struck in 1984 they did so in solidarity with black people suffering oppression in South Africa. In 1905 alone in Russia nearly two million people took part in strikes for political demands. Our experience of the strikes and of the class struggle because it is often narrowed to individual groups of workers hides the ability of general strikes to totally paralyse the ruling class. It took 5 days between a strike by women textile workers in St Petersburg until a centuries old tsarist dynasty was finished.

It is not a matter of choosing between fighting the class struggle and fighting oppression. Oppression has its roots in class

society, it sharpens exploitation, it divides and weakens the working class. Any fight against oppression must be taken up by socialists whoever it is that is being oppressed. When oppression is fought the working class becomes more unified and therefore stronger and conversely the ruling class becomes weaker. When workers fight together they get the confidence in themselves to question the reactionary ideas in their heads and the real divisions of society become clear. This means that in order to fight capitalism we must take up the fight against oppression, and to fight oppression we must fight capitalism. Any fight against capitalism must be led by the working class, for the working class has the power to overthrow the system and produce enough goods and services for society to survive without the exploitation of one class by another. The elimination of exploitation by a ruling class will not eliminate oppression automatically but is the only way to create the conditions for oppression to be eliminated.