Solidarity Federation
Political Parenting
Autumn 1998

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Labour is in tune with modern capitalist thinking. Though we may find the ranting of the American new right obnoxious, in the long term it may be Labour's ideas that prove to be the more dangerous

Contents

poor…with far fewer of them in unions." Part of the survey had a section entitled "Our Flexible Friends", which dispels any illusions about the free market attitude to women.

new patriarchy

While the dangers of the pro-family movement in America are reviled by many in Britain, there is little discussion of the dangers and implications of Labour's policies on the family and the role of women. This is understandable, given the Labour smooth talk about empowering women and women's equality. Hardly a word is mentioned of how, having 'empowered' women into the workplace, they intend to tackle the greater exploitation and inequality women face when they get there. Nor do we hear much from Labour about the social inequality women suffer, which means many have to accept low paid temporary work in the growing service sector. Such structural sexism can only worsen as more women are forced into the (still) male-dominated world of paid work. Meanwhile, unpaid work in the home is still done by women — despite talk of 'new men'. Research repeatedly shows that the burden of raising children and running the household remains overwhelmingly the task of women.

The current reality is that the only way women can gain even the very limited economic independence gained from paid employment is by finding ways of combining housework with paid work. Little wonder then that the only way this can be achieved is by accepting 'flexible' hours and part-time working.

Patriarchy and capitalism combining to exploit women is hardly new. What is new is that this is being dressed in the language of feminism. No one should be fooled by this ploy. Labour's policy towards the family differs from the Tories only in that Labour is tailoring the family to meet capitalist needs for an increase in the number of women workers. In this respect, as in many others,

vive, it must become a democratic institution, with women having an equal say and the opportunity to pursue a career. This differs clearly with the American New Right, that argues for the woman's place in the home as a child raiser (and by implication, against any other role for women).

However, the fact that Labour's attitude is couched in feminist language should not lull women into a false sense of security. Labour's thinking is completely in tune with free market orthodoxy, and modern capitalism has no intention of driving women back into the home. On the contrary, a modern service-based economy requires increasing numbers of women to join the workforce. But capitalism's requirement for more women workers has little to do with women's rights and everything to do with the greater exploitation of women.

new slavery

Just how in tune the Labour's approach is with market capitalism can be gauged from the pages of 'The Economist'. In a recent in-depth special survey on working women, the magazine stressed its feminist commitment by welcoming the growing number of women workers and rallying against workplace inequality. In distancing themselves from new right thinking, the authors made it clear that, even if the increased number of women workers is undermining the 'traditional family', this is no reason to "drive women back to the stove". They also proposed avoiding the problem of falling birth rates leading to a future shortage of (cheap) labour, by increasing state support for working mothers and liberalising immigration laws.

The Economist's free market feminists went on to point out that *"women workers have been a godsend to the booming US economy...they usually cost less to employ, are more prepared to be flexible and less inclined to kick up a fuss if working conditions are*

A woman's right to choose? New Labour plays happy families...The nuclear family is in decline. Social change is rapid throughout the 'developed' world. The signs are clear; rising divorce rates, falling birth rates, more women entering the workplace, more lone parents, gay couples living open lives, and so on. While many people have good reason for huge sighs of relief at the passing of the nuclear family, New Labour is planning the next move...

The post-war ideal of the family in which the father goes out to work while the dependent mother stays at home to mind the children no longer matches social reality.

In America, this social change has led to a right wing backlash, with the steady growth of a highly-organised pro-family movement which is socially conservative, overtly anti-feminist and anti-homosexual. To get their reactionary message over, this pro-family movement has focused in on the growing number of fatherless families, claiming that they are the cause of much of society's woes, from rising crime to lower educational aspirations, to increasing incidents of child abuse. They see the 'solution' in a host of regressive legislation, including stricter divorce laws and savage welfare cuts. They even advocate laws to make sperm banks and fertility services strictly only available to heterosexual married couples. Mothers attempting to raise children without the presence of a man are the cause of the downfall of civilisation as the conservative right knows it.

In Britain, the pro-family lobby remains in its infancy compared to the US. The strongest indication of its influence occurred in the early 1990's, when an ideological onslaught by the Tories was launched against lone parents. This reached a peak in 1993, with Tory ministers lining up to castigate lone parent mothers as welfare scroungers, the cause of moral decline, rising crime and Britain's growing "dependency culture." The 'popular' press supported these attacks, with numerous articles attacking lone mothers — the headlines "Single Parents Cripple Lives", in the

Telegraph, and "Wedded to Welfare" and "Do They Want to Marry a Man or the State", in the Express, are typical examples.

Unfortunately for the Tories, these attacks did not go down too well with voters in general and women in particular. As the election approached, with their support among women plunging alarmingly, the Tories panicked and began to stress their commitment to lone parents and working mothers. However, this dramatic policy shift came too late, only serving to portray the Tories as confused on the issue of the family.

new saviours

New Labour sought to cash in on the Tory's lone parent fiasco, portraying the Tories as a sexist, backward-looking and male-dominated party, while portraying themselves as the party of women's equality and cultural diversity. Central to this theme was the idea that work empowered women, so it must be encouraged by the Labour Party, through the introduction of greater state provision of child care. Great play was also made of the fact that they had acted to ensure a greater number of women MPs entered Parliament. These new women MPs were going to end the culture of confrontation that had characterised the male-dominated British political scene for so long. New Labour would govern based on 'women's' values of care and co-operation.

Behind all this gloss, New Labour's commitment to the two-parent family was little different to that of the Tories. They too saw lone parent families, not as a different yet equally valid way of raising children, but as a problem to be solved. A pre-election document produced by Labour on parenting is full of the same bigoted stereotypes that had typified the Tory attacks on lone parents. The section entitled "Children living with lone parents" demonstrated its contempt with such 'positive' sections as "Parenting Problem Areas", "Children in Public Care" and "Children with 'Attention-Deficit' Disorders".

the new reality

One real difference between New Labour and the old Tories' approach, was that they recognised that lone mothers could not be driven into marriage. They accepted that lone-parent families were a social reality, and they have now brought forward policies designed to mitigate the 'problems' that lone parenting supposedly created.

The centrepiece of New Labour's new policy is the idea of forcing lone-parents, particularly women, into paid employment. This has a number of attractions. Firstly, it will save money by cutting welfare payments. Secondly, the plan is that lone-parent women and their children can be weaned off their current 'dependency' on welfare. The main mechanism to be used is the stick of cutting benefit and introducing a harsher welfare regime for lone parents. If there is a carrot involved, it is in encouraging lone parents into work by providing tax breaks and more childcare.

Accompanying the general economic blackmail of single parents, Labour plans to introduce some form of direct state control over 'wayward' children and 'bad' parents. The notion of 'problem families' is to be taken seriously, and these families are to be forced into line. As yet, they appear unsure of just how state intervention can be made to work in this area. Watch this space.

new families?

Labour's approach to lone parenting forms part of its wider approach to women and the family, which is based on vague words about equality within the household and women's right to paid employment. Labour argues that, in order for the family to sur-