

Feminism at Work - Socialist-feminism and organizing in the workplace

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AS FEMINISTS WE often focus our attention on the effects gender inequality has on women. And while this inequality still exists and requires our unwavering attention, as socialist feminists we also focus on the effect this inequality has on our ability to organize a class conscious movement, where our differences do not impede our ability to act collectively against capital.

Contents

- [Gender As Health Risk](#)
- [Gender, Social Organization](#)
- [Becoming Organizers](#)

I have been a committed feminist since early in life, but these politics were reinvigorated when I began working as a technician in a predominantly male workplace. Being a feminist in theory is much different than being a feminist when some guy is shaking the 18-foot extension ladder you are working on; it requires a different relationship to your goals.

In my early years, though I did face real material struggles, my feminism was largely ideological, for me it took place in arguments and was often about being right. In my work as a rank-and-file activist, my socialist feminism has become more defined and concrete. It is about building solidarity among my coworkers which is not only “right” but also actively builds the kind of solidarity it takes to enforce and reproduce socialist-feminist politics.

It means, for example, confronting the ladder shaker but also building a network of fellow activists who simultaneously confront the ladder shaker and make it impossible for other ladder shakers to do their thing without answering to the collective.

Approaching organizing in the workplace this way is an essentially socialist-feminist strategy: 1) understanding that gender does not only happen when sexism or heterosexism happens but in every moment that adherence to gender roles trumps class solidarity; 2) understanding gender and the ways it is used to organize society and the work we do; 3) understanding that gender is not only about liberal demands for individual equality but also about radically redefining the potential for individuals to be fully liberated; 4) understanding the centrality of our gender roles to developing radical class consciousness, leadership and movement; 5) finally, it is about including the tradition of socialist feminists’ insights and politics into our strategies as organizers.

1. Gender does not only happen when sexism or heterosexism happens.

Gender is not only an issue at work for queers and women. We need to be explicit about this in order to keep every discussion from being only about individual people’s struggles (which are real and

deserve attention) to also include the politics and culture of the workplace as a whole.

Gender As Health Risk

One way that gender affects all workers explicitly at my job is around workplace safety issues. In an almost entirely male workplace, organizing around workplace safety involves having a complicated understanding of gender politics and a specific set of skills for navigating them.

Specifically, the guys I work with will often not work safe unless there is another issue at stake. We will do job actions which rely on enforcing safety regulations only if somebody is suspended for something else, being off the job for example. Safety issues on their own, and not as a strategy for slowing productivity, are ignored. Working safe is essentially for “wimps.”

This “macho” attitude persists while safety issues at work are huge. I work in manholes, where the safety issues range from risk of immediate injury to longterm health risks from exposure to dusts and gases. My co-workers essentially police each others’ masculinity and effectively enforce management’s approach to on the job injuries, claiming they are always the employees’ fault.

Management actively denies what union activists know, that the hazards exist at work because of how work is organized, that workers themselves do not create these hazards. Nonetheless management successfully claims that we’re not careful enough while climbing rusty ladders, lifting 300-pound manhole covers, or driving trucks without working turn signals. Hyper- masculine workplace culture affirms management’s claims.

My co-workers say injured workers aren’t strong enough or smart enough to navigate these hazards. Consequently the union membership has no active demands or positions around safety. All of the union’s gains regarding safety equipment and procedures have basically become a nuisance or seen as compromising masculinity.

Management makes safety equipment available for liability reasons and uses safety violations as a way to discipline workers. In my workplace safety, previously a union victory, has become a tool of management.

Because of this dominant workplace culture, organizing for more effective and widespread safety measures at work is also organizing against some of this staunchly hetero-normative masculine behavior. Convincing people that “unsafe for one is unsafe for all” does not compromise their individual worth, only management’s increasing productivity demands.

Organizing with the goal of redefining what is valued on the shop floor, not hypermasculinity but collective engagement in class struggle, is essentially a socialist-feminist project: a project that strengthens the collective power of all workers, regardless of gender identity, by undoing the centrality of those individual gender identities to how we work, how we relate to the union, how we define the union, and ultimately to what we think is possible in the world.

What we as socialist feminists believe is that it is possible, necessary, to live a life in which you are not constantly struggling to meet the standards of oppressive gender roles, and that individual struggle must not interfere with our collective project of building working class power.

Gender, Social Organization and Liberation

2. Gender is used to organize society.

Understanding gender roles plays such a central role to organizing in my workplace because hypermasculinity is such a big part of the dominant culture there. In reality, there is actually extreme variety in gender and sexuality, and every worker's relationship to those identities gets lost in this dominant culture.

Though I want to recognize and understand this workplace culture, I do not want to essentialize any aspect of gender or sexuality. Some of the people I work with are not as macho; there are some women, there are macho women, there are serious union activists who derive their macho pride from yelling at the boss and not from working unsafely, and there are much more passive characters, etc.

I am trying to say that the diversity of the working class, which is truly infinite, is not made apparent by the dominant cultures in our workplaces and our unions. These cultures are often a response to how work is organized, which is not by the class, or to how union life is organized, which is not often enough by the class. Therefore, gradually chipping away at the homogenous and destructive force of patriarchy and homophobia in these places makes the way for real and lasting change.

The more and more we organize together and have each others' backs at work around safety issues, the more the very terms of how to be a successful "guy" at work change. This strategy also makes more space for people who are not "guys." The more successes we have as a shop, the more solidarity there is.

After months of organizing with this socialist-feminist understanding at the core, my whole shop is getting closer to working safely for our own sake. Increasingly, there is not as much to prove as before, and what was perceived as a defense of gender is not as necessary.

What we are now defending is our collective rights to a safe workplace, reclaiming that tool from management. We have had only some success with this at my shop, but the amount of convincing it takes to get people on board has decreased drastically, which is a sign that solidarity has increased.

3. Gender is about radically redefining the potential for liberation.

Some of the success of the feminist movement has been the creation of rules for behavior and legal recourse for people who encounter discrimination and hostility on the job. These rules are valuable and are the consequence of a very real and brave fight by people of color, queers and women on the job.

Without a politicized union membership, however, these rules do not get integrated into the core of what solidarity looks like. And without anti-racist, feminist and queer organizing in the workplace, there is not the collective commitment to confront these violations of union solidarity. Management, afraid of lawsuits, essentially enforces these rules around sexism, homophobia and racism.

It is our job as activists, especially in the workplace, not to allow these victories of the movement to be turned into the very things that undo our movement. We need to redefine the terms of what it means to be union, what it means to be human. It is our job to intervene effectively in all of these manifestations of racism, sexism and homophobia on the job. It is also our job to do this in a way that builds solidarity and doesn't simply scold offending union members, which is precisely how management undoes our solidarity.

This is the difference between a socialist-feminist approach to building a collective that can demand and enforce the rights of all union members, and a liberal approach to simply safeguarding individual rights.

A socialist-feminist approach is not only more effective in terms of building lasting structures and relationships to preserve the essence of feminist, queer and anti-racist demands, but it makes more sense. It creates situations where we are asking people to step up and have each others' backs, not to step down and get out of the way because they just don't get it. It demands that people be their best for the sake of their coworkers, for the sake of the union. It builds relationships and responsibility to the collective.

When building one-on-one relationships, which are the building blocks of bigger organizing, socialist-feminist politics is decidedly different from liberal politics and it makes a difference when you're talking with people on the job.

People hate "liberals" — partly due to racism and sexism and homophobia and seeing liberals as representing minorities only — but I think all of that masks the fact that people really hate liberalism because it has failed to change the world in ways that make a difference for the class.

Liberal politics depend on the class for support but work in opposition to the class, privileging individual mobility and individual citizenship. Radicalism places all of these individual struggles in the context of how capitalism alienates us from each other and ourselves. People "get" radicalism because radicalism accounts for all of people's struggles under capitalism. They want to support each other and be supported — "an injury to one is an injury to all" — and if we don't support each other we're all more vulnerable.

Placing workplace struggles in this context is a radical project. Understanding how gender plays a role in alienating people from each other and themselves is a socialist-feminist project. Socialist feminism is also an approach to organizing because it understands the role gender plays in developing the class conscious of workers as well as understanding the personal as political. And this is radical.

There's a personal and emotional connection that people have to feel to trust each other, to take risks on the job, to undo the privileges of whiteness, maleness, heteronormativity, being a productive worker — organizing is fundamentally building trust, about caring for and about each other, about creating a place where the class takes care of each other for common struggles against all of the effects of capitalism.

These personal politics play out while organizing around workplace issues and in informal social interactions away from work. Occasionally people go out, drink, open up to each other, and we as human beings who struggle with the ways capitalism organizes our lives on and off the job share our stories with each other about our needs for respect and care, our needs to respect and care.

We don't necessarily build on these conversations upon returning to work the next day. But we share an understanding that we are in this together because of our struggles, not in spite of them, and challenging each other to be fuller people is part of our project as a class.

In all of this formal and informal conversation, issues of gender, sexuality, race, the war, how we organize our personal lives, relationships and work are constant. Being a socialist feminist helps to understand what people say, and why they say it.

When people talk about stuff they want to assert the value of the choices they have made in life, the sacrifices that they've made. And people are brilliant, insightful, creative and sincerely trying to

understand this mess capitalism has made of our lives. They are interested in engaging with and arguing about all of these issues and desire for these struggles to be taken seriously.

As radicals, as socialist feminists, we do take all of these personal struggles seriously. It is at the core of what we believe. The effects of capitalism on our identities and how we organize our lives are sometimes traumatic.

We do not reduce our politics to only these personal struggles, but we incorporate them into our understanding of the world and our approach to organizing. This is appealing to people. This is socialist feminism.

Becoming Organizers

4. Our gender roles are central to developing radical class consciousness.

If this can be seen as one of our goals in the workplace, and in the world, we need to approach it as activists. We need to earn the respect and trust of our coworkers, our community. This is no small task. Our approach to being good organizers is also derived from our socialist feminist tradition. We integrate our understanding of the centrality of our gender roles in developing political consciousness with our methods for building democratic movements. Individual identities are fragmented under capitalism, there are unrealistic standards for living under this gendered order, and the wholeness of our humanity takes a backseat to surviving under capitalism.

I experienced this myself when I started at my job. I kept looking for opportunities to talk to other workers as a worker about the contract, the wages, working conditions, union, and management, but instead found people most interested in personal life — theirs and mine.

I mistakenly thought this focus on being workplace activists, focusing on what material demands we had in common, had to happen at the expense of my other identities, which were not heteronormative and therefore, I mistakenly thought, were distracting from our commonality as workers. I was struggling with how to integrate my sexuality and gender identity with my identity as a workplace activist. I was worried about making my sexuality an issue, but people seemed to be more fixated on obsessing about their own sexuality and gender than about mine.

The people I worked with were, in a funny way, more socialist feminist than I was, integrating their work and after work lives, being moved completely by both experiences. They challenged me to do the same, to be myself comfortably. Coming out ended up making me closer to people, not more alienated as I wrongly suspected. I was challenged by my coworkers and my broader politics to understand the workplace as being about more than work, as being about our whole experience in life.

One of the ways my socialist-feminist politics played a role in how I handled coming out at work is that I started out understanding that everyone has experience as a gendered and sexual person — and everyone in some way or another struggles with these identities, and with insecurities. So I didn't see myself as unique or different from the straight men I worked with in that way. It also forced me into the unfamiliar place of knowing myself to be the "one" in "an injury to one is an injury to all" and the less familiar place of allowing the "all" to be my coworkers.

When I realized that being more of who I am on the job was the key to being able to establish trust and solidarity, it brought me back to my socialist-feminist politics in a way. As an activist, I took what I perceived as a risk to let people know more about myself. Coworkers respected this honesty

and saw it as respectful, and together we effectively established a deep trust. This interpersonal politics is part of our socialist- feminist understanding of what is political, but also a socialist- feminist strategy for organizing.

Understanding that we are all in all of our struggles together, a socialist-feminist organizing approach, led me to be a more effective organizer around those workplace issues I had initially focused on and continue to work on, now with the benefit the trust and support of my coworkers. This support goes both ways and contributes to the developing of leaders and activists on the shop floor. When I intervene on somebody's behalf, they intervene on mine. We tap each other for support, and stand together on the shop floor.

Integrating a broader understanding of what moves people, a socialist-feminist strategy for organizing, leads to developing a culture where individuals are more willing to take risks as activists around shop floor issues, ranging from the way work is organized, safety issues, discrimination, the humiliation of being constantly managed, denied bathroom breaks, and the unbelievably long list of things that workers struggle around every minute of the day at work.

Building trust and developing relationships is necessary for organizing around workplace issues. But this process does not only happen because of "typical" issues. Our broader struggles under capitalism contribute to our ability and interest in fighting, to developing a consciousness that sees all of our personal struggles as connected, to see how these struggles affect all of our fights. Socialist feminism provides us with the political framework for organizing towards this goal.

5. The tradition of socialist feminism is included in our strategies as organizers.

There has been a lot of focus on socialist-feminist process in building socialist organization. And I do think it is important to be explicit about this as a political process and decision. But I also do not want to overlook the fact that socialist feminist process is good organizing: listening more than talking, caring as a task and a goal, seeing consciousness as a kind of process in which everyone is equally responsible and engaged.

Socialism has a tradition; socialist feminism is part of that tradition. In my time as a rank-and-file activist I have learned so much about what moves me and my coworkers, how to effectively organize collective action, how deep and broad the range of things we struggle with under capitalism, as workers in our lives and at work. And I have also learned how enormously lucky I am to be aware of this larger tradition of struggle and thought.

Sometimes we assume that people's lack of interest or commitment to these traditions is deliberate. I have learned that people are unaware of these traditions. The left has not been widely present in the workplace for a long time. Some labor leaders see the middle class as our goal, and while demanding more of the share of wealth we produce is not a horrible goal, we know as radicals it doesn't touch the sheer inhumanity of capitalism.

Sharing this tradition and the lessons of these politics is an important part of organizing, sharing the potential for a different world, a different world that is informed by all of our insights into the failure of capitalism as a way of organizing life. And going about it in a way that understands people's alienation from the processes of struggle itself is more effective organizing. At least it has been for me in modest shop floor activities. Building bigger more lasting organization with this foundation is a longer-term project.

There are many more opportunities to learn from this socialist-feminist approach to organizing because capital is constantly reorganizing our lives and work in ways that further alienate us from

ourselves, each other and the very process of political change. For all the above reasons, I think a socialist-feminist process is the most effective way to build the power and collectivity needed by the class. And for the reasons above, I think the workplace is an important place to implement this strategy.

Only conscience resistance will effectively undo the institutionalization of gender roles and the obstacles they create for building-class conscious movements. Gender roles are institutionalized and interfere with building collective struggles, interfere with collective goals and identities. Socialist feminist process and goals are aimed at developing this conscious resistance.

Lynne Williams

P.S.

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