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Wages for Anyone Is Bad for Business . . . . . 1



# Wages for Anyone Is Bad for Business

By Laura Sullivan

Venezuela's 'Bolivarian constitution' contains a unique article (Article 88) recognising women's unwaged work as economically productive. Wages For Housework (WFH) has been fighting for this recognition since 1972, and has participated in the annual Global Women's Strike (GWS) since its inception in 2000. GWS members attended Venezuela's international 'Solidarity Women's Encuentro' in July 2002, and saw women at the heart of the revolution and its social changes. Laura Sullivan spoke to Selma James and Nina Lopez of WFH and GWS

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WFH believed 'women had a right to money of their own', says James, 'because the power relations between women and men, and in fact all power relations under capitalism, were distinctions of wages and a hierarchy in production.' She and her colleagues fought for that money to remunerate the unwaged work of women the world over, meeting some resistance, for example, accusations that WFH was founded because Jewish people like James 'are only interested in money'. James scathingly lambasts the liberal women's movement. She contends that feminist critics neglected to understand that women already institutionalised in the home only have 'two ways to go: they can either get money from the state, or go out and get a second [i.e., waged] job.' 'Women [who went into the male workforce] were absolutely rolled over the feminists orchestrated it, praised it they didn't see women were being rolled over, and they complained women weren't getting equal pay. They also asked for "non-traditional jobs" for women. When the first woman was killed in the mines, I was very angry.' The politics of women's liberation endorsed by the WFH, then, starkly contrasts with a fight for women to enjoy the same capitalist exploitation and oppressive conditions as men.

James explains that when others were 'disconnecting production, which was the production of value and surplus value, from reproduction, which was making human beings', WFH declared that 'housewives and other carers were part of the working class,' that is, women's unwaged labour was productive in the Marxist sense because it contributes to the reproduction of labour. [see inset box] Disgusted with the 'many idiots' who said that women in these unwaged positions were outside of capitalism, James emphasises that WFH 'is an organising movement,' while 'all those who opposed it, organised nothing they didn't say, "We'll do this instead".'

A similar emphasis on practical effectiveness underpins the work of GWS in Venezuela. As James and Lopez tell it, when a CIA-backed coup took place in the country in April 2002 and president Chavez was kidnapped by the opposition, the women 'saved the revolution' when they came down from the shanty town neighbourhoods in the hills around Caracas 'and demanded that Chavez be released. Everyone was in a state of shock. The women insisted that the military do something. The military, who were largely loyal to Chavez, went and got him back.'

Through its newspaper, talks, demonstrations, and videos, the GWS counters media misinformation and silence, documenting Venezuela's revolutionary achievements, such as Bolivarian schools and circles, land redistribution, progress in health care and literacy, as well as women-centred efforts. The GWS sponsored a US tour by Nora Castañeda, president of the Women's Development Bank, which

helps 'women living in poverty become independent protagonists in the revolutionary struggle',<sup>1</sup> particularly through financing thousands of co-operatives. Castañeda emphasises that the daily pressure of women and indigenous people on the Constituent Assembly was crucial to the passage of Article 88, which declares that women's work in the home is 'productive', that is, 'creates value' and entitles women to social security (i.e. pensions, education, and health care), and Article 14 of the Land Act, which gives women heads of household priority in land distribution. A March 2004 GWS letter to the National Assembly urges the full and honest implementation of Article 88. Other priorities, such as the recent referendum recall vote, have delayed its implementation.

Until recently, Lopez explains, the left was largely uninvolved with and unsympathetic toward Venezuela. Traditional Marxists saw Chavez as problematic because his base was primarily in the unwaged sector, 'rather than at the so-called point of production.' James contends that Chavez is 'married to the movement, to the grassroots, which he thinks is central as Marx did as the left does not.'

James contextualises the relationship between Chavez and his followers: 'It's not the first time in history that the movement has related to a leader as a saviour people did to Lenin, who wasn't totalitarian. In the same way, black people related to Malcolm he could do no wrong.' James views access to power as the pivotal issue: 'When people find a leader who wants to lead them where they want to go, the intellectuals are shocked they just have no grasp of how it feels not to have power and then somebody who has a bit of power and wants to go in the direction you want to go and take you with him they don't know how that feels, they haven't been without power.' James and Lopez emphasise people's involvement in the Venezuelan government, whose 'constitution speaks of the people as protagonists of the democracy, aiming for people to represent themselves.' Chavez is 'an organiser, totally practical, connected to the grassroots. His military background is useful civilians don't know how to run a government.' Chavez applies his disciplinary skills to all levels of governing, including the recent election, in which volunteers telephoned ten people to discuss candidates and to encourage voting. In a month and a half, the whole country was organised in such a fashion, with a 73 percent turnout! Boldly and practically devising 'a basically foolproof electoral system (knowing that the big problem was to avoid fraud),' Chavez demonstrated his 'big trust in people's organising abilities, particularly women, who were the majority in the neighbourhoods and helped folks to vote.' The election was peaceful because it was well organised and centrally involved women.

I wonder how to reconcile James' emphasis on the role of women and the celebration of the revitalisation of grassroots politics with the focus on the president, a top-down form of power, as opposed to spelling out that the ultimate goal is the end of representational politics altogether. In other words, women are identified as political levers in the revolutionary process in Venezuela, but to what end? Is their horizon ultimately antithetical to the goals of Chavez, who, after all, must not only work to stay in power but who has also been increasingly complying with neoliberalisation (i.e. the concessions he's made post-coup)? Chavez is undoubtedly a unique leader very much in touch with 'the people': for the progress of women and all Venezuela's disenfranchised it is presently essential that he stay in office. Yet isn't there still a contradiction between Chavez's position as a charismatic leader in a hierarchical system, and the WFH goal of the *destruction of hierarchies*?

While the GWS women are clearly in sympathy with the goal of overthrowing capitalism globally and to their credit, more involved on the ground with poor women, women of colour, and 'third world' women than most academic or other feminists their anti-intellectualism manifests in static theorisations (starting and ending solely with the unwaged/waged distinction and the fight for women to receive wages for all their labour in the home) and their lack of a real plan for how this strategy fits in with the broader field of struggle against capitalism. When I asked, 'what succeeds wages?', the question was not at all well received. In the first instance it was misunderstood to mean 'What do

women do once they get these wages?' (met with the hostile response of 'You wouldn't even think to ask this question of men'), and in the second, seen as an overly theoretical concern about whether a movement or strategy is 'anti-capitalist' versus seeing what it accomplishes on the ground, in people's lives. Calling the question itself 'inappropriate', James challenged, 'If you see workers on a strike demanding a 25 percent rise, is it for or against capitalism? Your problem is that you haven't made up your mind about wages for anyone capital has. Wages for anyone is bad for business. If you waver, you decide that you don't care if capitalism is hurt, you care if [your strategy] is anti-capitalist.'

At the same time, frustration with perceived strategic or theoretical shortcomings should not lead left intellectuals and activists to dismiss totally the efforts of groups such as the GWS and the women they champion in Venezuela. We should continue to learn about and understand the context the political and material urgency that informs such efforts. Making an easy critique from outside, the 'anti-hierarchy' 'pro-decentralisation' left cannot account either for the popularity of leaders such as Chavez and Castro or for the dialectical relationship between such leaders and state structures and socialist policies, practices, and projects that make a real difference in people's lives (e.g., Cuba's continued 98 percent post-revolution literacy rate; the redistribution of land and wealth underway in Venezuela). Without doubt, the implementation of the remarkable Article 88 will make a great difference in the lives of many Venezuelan poor women of colour, and we should appreciate an organisation such as the GWS, which publicises and furthers such policies.

*My investigation of the history of the WFH campaign became an unanticipated detective effort. The essay that undergirds the work of WFH, 'Women and the Subversion of the Community,' is often cited from a 1975 booklet as being co-authored by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James; however, James's introduction to this collection refers to the 'Dalla Costa article'. And yet a note added by the 1975 publishers (the Power of Women Collective) insists the essay was jointly authored, claiming Dalla Costa publicly admitted this many times. However, not only has Dalla Costa told me James's name was added to the essay without her permission, the first, 1972 English publication of the essay in this booklet lists only one name: Dalla Costa. Perhaps these conflicting attributions reflect not only the split between James and Dalla Costa who did not sign on to the WFH campaign but also the essay's more pressing contradictions over whether seeking wages for housework is appropriate. On the one hand, having made the case that 'domestic work' is a 'masked form of productive labour' (36), the essay concludes that 'the demand that would follow, namely "'pay us wages for housework" ... could scarcely operate in practice as a mobilising goal' (36). On the other hand, an endnote seems to make the opposite case, arguing that 'the demand for a wage for housework is only a basis, a perspective, from which to start, whose merit is essentially to link immediately female oppression, subordination and isolation to their material foundation: female exploitation. At this moment this is perhaps the major function of the demand of wages for housework' (54).*

## FOOTNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Nora Castañeda, *Global Women's Strike* newspaper, No. 2, November 2003, page 3

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