Feminism and Black Nationalism

By MYRNA HILL

There is a theory held by some people that you can't set a Black nationalist and a feminist at the same time.

That theory is incorrect and is based on a misunderstanding of what both movements are about. Both movements are revolutionary.

In the American economic system, Blacks and women are caught in a continuous cycle of unemployment. They serve as a reserve labor supply to be drawn on in times of national emergencies like World War II.

They get the lowest paid jobs—or they perform unskilled work such as when women get stuck with the care and feeding, at their own expense, of the next generation of labor for industry to exploit. Generally, Blacks get the most undesirable jobs, the ones that nobody else wants. In this role, Blacks and women can be used as a tool against privileged white males, if, if we are too ungratefully ugly may find themselves condemned to a lifetime-grade.

The women of feminism and the people of feminism are far more convival and profit-able for the U.S. capitalists. Racism and sexism, traditional aspects of the American social system, serve to maintain profitability of the present system by creating a better one, a socialist system, and that will require a revolution.

The same radical change in the basic character of American society is required for the liberation of all Black people.

It is the same capitalists who deny Blacks good jobs and education that deny women good jobs and education. The same capitalists who won't allow Blacks to control their own communities won't allow women to control their own bodies. It's the same advertisers who have denied that "Black is beautiful" who have also denied women's natural beauty. So it is clear that Black and women have the same enemy.

Some Black nationalists, such as the Muslims, think that all whites are to some degree the enemies of Black people, because they all benefit from, and to some extent can all be expressed as participating in, the oppression of Black people. Others feel that poor whites are potential allies, and will become the actual allies of Blacks in the struggle to destroy the system that exploits them both.

Nationalists who are members of the Socialist Workers Party, like myself, take the position that the American revolution will bring all sectors of the U.S. working class, Black and white, into a common struggle against the ruling class, but that the groups that are most oppressed, such as Blacks and other oppressed nationalities, will play the leading role.

For all revolutionary nationalists, the primary enemy is uncontestably the same: the small group of white ruling-class men in whose hands are concentrated most of the wealth, and therefore the power.

Similarly, some feminists think that all men, in all economic classes, are the enemies of women for similar reasons as those given by the nationalists: all men to some extent receive privileges from the oppression of women. Furthermore, men serve as agents for the system in maintaining the oppression of women.

Others, particularly many Black feminists, see potential allies among women of all classes and women within the ruling class. They recognize that many women too are oppressed groups and that women look with suspicion on declarations of solidarity from white-class black women, and sometimes even exclude poor white women as allies.

Female anti-racist Marxists, like myself, hold that all women are potential allies, but that those—like Black women—who suffer most from this system will lead the fight to liberate us all.

But all feminists unanimously heap the largest share of blame for the suffering on their suffering on the rich white men of the capitalist class. And increasingly, as the movement develops, this group of men that has all the money and wields the most power, is finding itself the target of feminist struggle, in much the same manner that the capitalists are finding themselves the target of Black liberation movements.

In fact, our increasingly harassed rulers have even begun to feel the force of united pressure from the nationalists and feminists, pressures for the capitalists to get up off of a portion of the profits they have stolen from us for so long. At Manhattan Community College, the nationalist Golden Drum Society and the campus women's liberation group have begun to see mutual gain in supporting each other's demands for Black control of the Black studies program and for adequately equipped and staffed campus-located childcare facilities.

This kind of sticking together causes understandable uneasiness in high places, and it's not surprising that the ruling class is going all out to sow suspicion and confusion, and to try to slip in the bud all such "unhealthy" alliances. Unhealthy from the capitalists' point of view, of course.

To discourage such dangerous partnerships, the ruling class does its best to distort the image of such movements in the news media. They print article after article assuring Black women that women's liberation is crazy and silly and has nothing whatever to do with them. And when Black feminists try to say anything different, it doesn't get printed. They try to make it appear that Black nationalism is all hateful whitey, wailing all over women, and bombing everything in sight for no good reason.

In fact, actually, the essence of nationalism is the very rational claim that the Black minority of America has a right to national self-determination. And the essence of feminism is the valid claim of female human beings to determine and control their own destinies, free from exploitation and from domination by other people who happen to be male.

Another energetically promoted source of needless Black antagonism toward feminists is the notion that the nationalist and feminist movements are somehow in competition with each other for the crumbs from the capitalists' table, so that the successes of one must be at the expense of the other.

At the root of this mistaken notion is a misunderstanding of the economic demands of the Black community and of the meaning of the women's liberation demand for equal opportunity in jobs and education.

Some time ago, white construction workers in Pittsburgh believed that the Black job applicants' goal was to take away their jobs. They were misinterpreting what was basically a demand for Black full employment. Similarly, some nationalists misinterpret the economic aims of women's liberation. But it is false that Blacks and women have to fight over the same few unattractive jobs. There is a lot of urgent work to be done in this country, like building adequate housing. But people aren't getting hired to do the work that's really needed, because the capitalists are too busy concentrating on what makes the most profit.

The feminist demand for equal opportunity is a threat, all right—but not to the Black community. Rather, it threatens the continued existence of an economic system to which the basic human needs of both women and Black people are sacrificed.

At this point, some nationalists may say, and some are already saying, "Yes, the women's liberation movement is all right, but it's the white woman's thing, it's not for Black women.

But examination of Black women's triple oppression—as women, as Blacks, and as workers—provides eloquent argument that these objections are based on ignorance.

White feminists demand equal opportunity in jobs. Black women workers, averaging $3,000 per year, have the lowest average wage in the country.

Women's liberation demands free, community-
controlled abortion services, with no forced sterilizations. Four times as many Black women die from child-bearing related causes as do white women. This demand also relates to those who fear that abortion is genocide, since community control and no forced sterilizations are included. No community is going to exterminate itself.

The feminists demand community-controlled, 24-hour child care. Bureau of Labor Statistics figures show that a larger proportion of Black women hold jobs than do their white sisters, in every age group except for the 16-24-year-olds, who are most likely to have very young children with no child-care facilities in which to keep them.

These facts make it very clear that the issues of the women's liberation movement, far from being just a white thing, are even more relevant to the needs of Black women.

Other objections to Black participation in the women's liberation movement are that we need the efforts of Black women for the Black struggle, and that Black women's primary responsibility is the bearing and education of a Black nation.

But the issues that most concern Black women—jobs, low wages, community-controlled medical care—are the Black struggle! How these issues could somehow "divert" Black women away from the Black struggle is a mystery indeed. And when Black women organize around these issues, it becomes evident that they are inseparably tied to other such issues. For instance, if you talk about the inflation that cuts into Black women's paychecks and welfare checks, you need to consider the Southeast Asian war, which is a great deal to blame for inflation.

The nationalist brothers who counsel Black women to concern themselves solely with bearing and educating Black children to build our nation forget that the Black home does not exist in a vacuum. Black women in this country have been having babies for quite a while. What we want is not just more Black babies but a new Black nation that is free. To have that, we'll have to destroy this society, which condemns Black children's aspirations as hopeless, and where the evidence of Black unemployment and despair hang out every day on any Harlem corner.

Black women can't do anything about changing this situation by cooking greens and getting pregnant. The struggle that will replace this system is outside the kitchen. For Black women's energies to be used up sewing clothes and waiting on men is a luxury that we cannot afford, even if it were desirable, which it is not. We can't spare half the brain power of our people; we're going to need it all.

As for the claim that Black feminism is divisive and therefore holds back the revolutionary struggle, it is more accurate to say that Black male supremacy is a reactionary force that needs correction.

It is sometimes said that male domination is Black people's African cultural heritage and that in pushing women around, Black men are undoing this society's negation of Black manhood. But examination of our heritage reveals that it is very diverse—as diverse as the submissiveness of Zulu women and the aggressiveness of Nigerian market women are different from each other.

For instance, among the Balonda tribe in Southern Africa, women held a position economically superior to that of men. Women ran the tribal councils, and when a Balonda young man married, he left his own village to go and live in his wife's home. And in ancient Egypt, the husband had to promise to love, honor and obey the wife.

That doesn't sound much like an unbroken tradition of male supremacy, does it?

It is just as wrong for Black men to think that the human qualities of self-respect and assertiveness belong only to the male sex, as it is for whites to think that intelligence and sensitivity are limited just to the white race.

Apart from its obvious disadvantages for Black women, Black men's sexism plays right into the hands of the white ruling class. Sexism, Black and white, is an essential component of American capitalism, and it serves an important function in the successful running of that system.

Black men's role as agents of oppression for Black women is very convenient for the capitalist exploiters. The ruling class has in fact gotten very good at promoting Black male supremacy. For instance, one of its more effective efforts was bestowing on the world the Moynihan Report, which announced the urgent need for the existence of an American Black matriarchy—that's a society ruled by women—despite the fact that in this society neither Black men nor Black women have ever been in a position to control the lives of their own communities, much less exercise power over the whole society.

It is male supremacy, not feminism, that undermines the Black liberation struggle by holding back our fighters and helping out our oppressors.

For the capitalists it's very useful indeed to have Black men busy keeping Black women from getting up, because upply "niggers" of either sex are dangerous. And upply women definitely bear watching!