

Feminist City Club

FEN Fatale

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In mid-April Detroit women were invited to participate in the opening ceremonies for the new Detroit Feminist Women's City Club, paid for by the recently-formed Feminist Economic Network (FEN). The City Club, located in downtown Detroit on Park Ave. across from the Penthouse A-Go-Go Club, and FEN have been the center of heated discussion and have created factionalism throughout much of the organized women's movement.

The conflicts reflect the polarization between different factions of the Detroit Feminist Federal Credit Union (DFFCU). One faction is made up of about half the women on the Credit Union board. These women received loans from the Credit Union to establish the City Club and are the main FEN supporters.

The other half of the board, under pressure from active Credit Union membership, has taken a stand opposing both FEN and the City Club on the grounds that both perpetuate capitalist business systems and rip off working class women.

Both groups claim to be revolutionary, anti-capitalist and motivated by certain fundamental "female principles". The truth is that neither group is revolutionary or anti-capitalist. The Credit Union was supposed to help women gain economic independence from "patriarchal" finance institutions, but in reality is itself only a reformist institution which by its nature functions within capital instead of attacking it.

The DFFCU opened two and a half years ago and was the first organization of its kind in the country. Since then 13 others have opened across the country. Last May, the two founders of the DFFCU, Joanne Parrent and Valerie Angers, suggested to these other credit unions that a conference be held in November 1975 to set up a feminist economic network.

Credit unions in Washington and Connecticut were to draw up separate sets of by-laws which would be studied by women at the November conference. But the Detroit Credit Union, in conjunction with the Oakland (Calif.) Feminist Women's Health Center, established a pattern which they have since followed to the tee by appointing themselves to draw up a third set.

When the Detroit by-laws met opposition in a general meeting at the conference, the supporters simply walked out and remained separate for the rest of the conference.

Structured hierarchically, the only voting members of FEN are its self-selected board of directors. Feminist enterprises may become nonvoting members by paying dues and submitting to FEN's value auditor who judges whether the organization under inspection is aligned with FEN's statement of purpose. The value auditor is accountable to no one but FEN's board of directors and the board is accountable to no one but themselves.

FEN has been financed primarily by the DFFCU. The Credit Union is not legally permitted to loan money to a corporation in excess of that corporation's assets. FEN needed approximately \$250,000 to finance the purchase and renovation of the City Club building, and of course did not have assets of that sum.

The Credit Union by-passed the law by loaning eight individual women money totaling \$250,000. When this move was discovered, credit union members raised enough objections to cause a state audit investigation which is now in progress.

By financing the Feminist City Club the Credit Union has ripped off working women's savings to finance an entertainment center--available only to a class of women who can afford to pay the \$100 membership fee. Although some FEN leaders claim to be anti-capital, FEN is perpetuating class division among women since feminism does not operate in a vacuum. Feminism becomes co-opted by capital as "feminists" organize petty-bourgeois capitalism. Besides exploiting working women's savings, the City Club employs women of this same class as wage laborers, just like any other capitalist organization.

In describing the structure of FEN, its president, Laura Brown, emphasized that decision-making is based on participation--if one participates more then one has a greater voice. She also said that each person has a specific area over which they exert more control--presumably, this division of labor would keep both a janitor and an economist in their respective places. Brown thinks the City Club houses one big happy family, but the employees seem to have a different perspective. As one woman worker put it, "a job is a job."

Like any other business venture posing as a reform movement, FEN turns the fervor of people struggling for their own liberation into profits for the benefit of a privileged elite. Brown states very definitely her opposition to volunteer work which she says exploits women. Yet FEN's employees do not even receive union wages or extra overtime pay (which is illegal). Paying the workers shit wages (\$2.50 an hour) allows FEN, like any other capitalist institution, to exist on the labor of an oppressed group of people. (City Club workers may as well be scooping french fries at McDonalds, which does pay extra overtime.)

FEN is not simply the landlord for the businesses in the City Club; it owns controlling interest in all the enterprises and hires individual women as managers. Brown argues at length that ownership is irrelevant, what matters is who's in control. An unconvincing argument: if ownership is so irrelevant, why aren't the businesses simply given to the women in control?

Aside from running a female version of the Uptown Athletic Club, FEN continuously uses gangster-type tactics to silence dissidents. During a meeting held by general Credit Union membership, there were numerous accounts of physical harassment by Brown and her flunkies. One board member says that having the Credit Union housed in the City Club is "like working in an armed camp". The Credit Union has since moved to Pleasant Ridge, claiming lack of space. The woman said she had been personally assaulted in addition to having her home ransacked by alleged FEN supporters. A Credit Union employee says that they have had to close shop during business hours rather than leave one woman there alone because they "fear for their lives."

Another group strongly opposing FEN and the City Club is the Detroit Feminist Women's Health Center on Eight Mile. Besides objecting to the corporation itself, the Health Center has denounced FEN for opening a profit-motivated health center using the same name. FEN answered the Health Center's objections by serving them a 24-hour pay up notice on a loan which had originally come from Brown's Oakland Health Center. Brown was quoted as saying she would take equipment if sty didn't get the money.

The entire battle is in reality no more than another corporate purge in which only the sex of the participants has changed. Brown, on the one hand, uses whatever rhetoric she needs to achieve her own acquisitive ends. Her "theories" and her feminism are a fraud.

Claiming that matriarchy is her ultimate goal, Brown's conception of "female principles" (woman's "inherently" cooperative spirit) supposedly supersedes both capitalism and communism and is the basis for her claim to be revolutionary. But judging from her activities and not her rap, Laura Brown is the type that would literally steal your insulin. Her arguments are not even worth discussing.

The other side, which is the victim of the strong-arm purge, is represented best by the analysis of FEN by Carol Downer of the L.A. Woman's Health Center. Her arguments reflect the sincere but mistaken view that such business ventures (if run cooperatively) will liberate working women from capitalist oppression. This argument underlies the limitations of liberal feminism in its failure to develop a genuine critique of capitalism and women's oppression.

In a 24-page analysis/attack on FEN and the City Club, Downer writes:

“By setting themselves up as captains of the ship of women’s revolution and by making themselves unaccountable to the women on whom they are building their power base, the women of FEN are instituting the same coercion of labor, power and money that has been the bulwark of the patriarchal, capitalist system.”

She attacks them for their bullying tactics, unrepresentative structures and exploitive ventures, but in the same statement, defends the Credit Union as an anti-capitalist institution. She naively believes the Credit Union is revolutionary because it helps women gain “collective economic strength”--sort of a revolutionary Household Finance.

Downer analyzes capital like any bourgeois economist: at the level of distribution and consumption. Thus she thinks the overthrow of capitalism and the revolutionary power of women can come from pooling their meager resources (to buy what--new human social relations?).

A revolutionary critique, on the other hand, analyzes capital at its productive base. The overthrow of capital lies not in making reforms at the level of distribution of goods, nor in allowing individuals from oppressed groups into managerial strata of capital, but in the destruction of capitalist social relations--the abolition of wage labor, the state and all corporate structures, capitalist private property, and the transformation of all relations of production and reproduction.

A revolutionary loan company will never free women from the isolation of the nuclear family household, nor from the drudge labor of wage slavery. The freedom of women and the existence of capitalist society (despite easy loans for a small group of women) are contradictions. One cannot exist except through the negation of the other.

Essentially, Downer and the anti-FEN faction see the battle as one between the rip-off, patriarchal bad-guy capitalists and the cooperative, matriarchal good-gal capitalists. But any loan company, to continue to make loans and pay wages and overhead must make a profit. Thus exploitation is integral, whether it be on one level through the exploitation of the labor of the employees (through volunteerism or wages) or through the collection of interest from the borrowers (good old usury capital).

Besides, the argument is as anachronistic as the call for a return to a laissez-faire economy. The reason that Brown and her clique are wiping up the floor with their rivals is because they function more efficiently as small-time capitalists, i.e. they are better at cut-throat tactics and maneuvers. The “good” capitalism moves by its own momentum towards cut-throat capital, just as laissez-faire inevitably led to modern monopoly and competition. As long as capital operates, such ventures will necessarily degenerate into Mafia-FEN type developments or collapse.

The public bickering surrounding the FEN controversy distorts the revolutionary activities of millions of women who daily struggle against sexism in their homes and on the job. On the other hand, most of organized feminism is comprised of women numbering only in the thousands, and has become the arena for middle-class women trying to achieve the alienated status of men within this society.

Women who join such projects as the Credit Union and FEN will not succeed in bringing about the liberation of women any more than other reformist institutions have succeeded in liberating people in the past. While women are subjected daily to dehumanizing treatment and attitudes which must be fought against, the true liberation of anyone will only come from the struggle against capitalism in all its forms.

Opening at the City Club

by Polly Anna

The Feminist Women’s City Club had its public opening the weekend of April 8–11 to demonstrate, as the *Free Press* so aptly put it, that “Feminism and Capitalism can go comfortably hand in hand.” It also demonstrated once again how capitalism and exploitation are synonymous.

The women running the club have found yet another way to capitalize on a popular struggle of oppressed people. The opening began with Gloria Steinem, slick feminoid superstar, cutting a ribbon of money, an interesting symbol of “liberation”, constructed as it was out of the most prominent tool of exploitation in the world.

Laura Brown, Director of the Feminist Economic Network (F.E.N.), called the purchase of the old Women's City Club "...the biggest financial undertaking the feminist movement has ever embarked upon. This is the beginning of the feminist economic revolution."

At this stage, Capitalist economics is far from revolutionary. Taking money from Aristotle Onassis and giving it to Christina Onassis is hardly a revolution.

As I toured the club, I had mixed feelings of insult and amusement. The owners of the DFWCC are treating their "sisters" as mindless consumers to the same extent that the producers of "sheer energy" pantyhose do. The only difference is the gimmick used: feminism to the "liberated women" and sexiness to the "cosmopolitan girl".

The club offers a feminist bookstore and souvenir shop in which to buy all the in-vogue feminist literature and paraphernalia, including pencils, cups, and scarves, etc., with catchy slogans, all produced, I'm sure, by the same company that supplies any Big Ten college with their football souvenirs. Presumably, the purchase of all these useful commodities will assure women of their "liberation".

Also offered is an art gallery in which, not artists, but women artists may show their work. Perhaps there is art by artists and then there is art by women. Does that mean that women artists are not real artists or that art by women is not considered art outside a women's art gallery in a women's city club?

The Feminist Women's City Club has a \$100 membership fee so all you sisters with an extra C-Note lying around are welcome to join and swim in a real feminist swimming pool filled with real feminist water and thus become a real feminist woman.

On my visit to the club during its open house, I was invited by a smiling feminist to sign the register "along with all the other wonderful women who came to visit our club this weekend." I'm still wondering how she knew all those women were wonderful.

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #272, May 1976

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