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Intersectionality: its meaning and its potential for movement-building

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“Intersectionality” is a term that has been coming up a lot in political movements and in the news, especially in regard to the Women’s March on Washington in January. It means examining how the *intermingling* of all forms of discrimination that people experience — based on race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and more — affect their lives and the movements. This idea resonates with me as a woman of color.

Intersectional consciousness is a huge step forward. But in order to reach its full potential, the incorporation of class analysis is needed, recognizing the central division between workers and capitalists. No one oppressed group can win liberation alone! What the vast majority of us have in common is selling our labor-power to survive. This is our shared basis for solidarity and uniting our struggles.



Photo credits — Upper left: Sait Serkan Gurbuz / AP; Upper right: Miladen Antonov / Getty Images; Bottom: Emily Mills

Powerful tool for social change. African American feminist law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw used the concept of intersectionality in 1989 to identify a distinct kind of discrimination against Black women based on the *combination* of race and sex bias.

Among many activists, this recognition of interconnectedness is now a standard to apply in any mobilization. It represents a great advance over the single-issue politics predominant in days past.

Historically, the mainstream feminist movement — the one headlined by people like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan in the media — often had a narrow view that catered to more privileged, higher-income, white women. This led to many people of color dismissing it as a “white women’s movement,” despite the participation and crucial contributions of women of color who fought to make it a broader, more militant cause. (Not to mention the sometimes scorned but principled and persevering participation of feminist men.)

The more conservative section of the feminist movement still clings to a focus on single-issue demands, such as more women in the higher echelons of business, or in political office. But what about women with deeper concerns, like racism, poverty, or violence?

Some argue that bringing in race, sexuality, or transgender rights will only cause divisions in the movement. Actually, the opposite is true. Leaving out these issues leaves out everyone who faces them.

Anybody can be for women’s equality. But what this actually *means* is something different to a poor woman, a single mom, a lesbian, a woman of color, a transgender woman. The strength of intersectionality lies in acknowledging all these oppressions as important and in seeing their interrelationships. It centers the fight on the needs of those who face the most abuse and exploitation. And when you fight for them, you fight for everyone.

I am a Chicana who grew up in a housing project. The feminist movement I saw, one that didn’t address racism, did not speak to me. On the other hand, while I did identify with the Chicano movement, I was unhappy with its failure to address sexism. Then throw into the mix my growing up poor. If economic demands weren’t part of a group’s program, I went elsewhere.

I connected with activists from Radical Women (RW) and the Freedom Socialist Party (FSP) in a fight to defend affirmative action. Our shared program addresses all the issues from a socialist feminist perspective. Since the founding of FSP in 1966 and RW a year later, both organizations have had an intersectional approach. What's different is that our intersectionality comes from a class basis and a focus on struggling for revolutionary change.

Intersectionality plus class. Many people, including people who think “intersectionally,” regard differences in class status as just another way people are discriminated against. But it is much more. The basic division in society is between the capitalist and working classes. And the class divide explains the cause of persecution based on things like gender and skin color.

The capitalist class has always used things like racism, sexism, nationalism, heterosexism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism to keep working people disunited. These and other “isms” are used to justify lower wages for some and divisive privileges for others. This divide-and-conquer continues to this day with astounding success — witness the otherwise inexplicable rise of Donald Trump.

Intersectionality can strengthen movements by promoting mutual understanding and respect and leaving no one behind. But, if devoid of a class analysis that explains our basis for unity, it can keep oppressed people apart rather than bringing them together.

For instance, as a response to persistent racism, there is some movement self-segregation by activists of color and many calls on whites to go organize in “your own community” or “don’t talk, just listen and learn.” (Similar to the injunctions of some female feminists to men.) Multiracial and multi-everything organizing has its challenges, no doubt! And there is a need for separate organizing by an oppressed group at times. But if we want to change society, we are also going to have to come together and wage *unified* struggles.

A way forward. For decades, FSP and RW have brought a class-based, intersectional perspective into the labor movement and every fight for justice.

The party and RW recognize two things as true for people who are specially oppressed on the basis of gender, skin color, etc. One is that our problems will not be solved short of anti-capitalist social transformation. Two is that our experiences, especially those of multiply oppressed women workers of color, give us the motivation to provide the militant leadership that’s needed to win that transformation.

Once we realize the power that we have together in our laboring hands, it will be impossible to break our collective strength. Then we can take the next logical step and dismantle the profit-based power structure that keeps everyone down.

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