

# Socialist Feminist Theory & Strategy in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union

By Margaret Schmid and Chris Riddiough

*ABOUT THE MODULE | CLASS 1 | CLASS 2 | CLASS 3*

---

## ABOUT THE MODULE

---

### **Suggested Use**

*Socialist Feminist Theory and Strategy in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union* is a three-part teaching module for use with a course on 'Second Wave' feminism, the history of feminism and/or feminist theory. It focuses on the historical period of the second wave in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminist organizations during that period are sometimes criticized as focusing on the concerns of white, middle class, educated women, or as being preoccupied with consciousness raising and rap groups. The Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU) was an exception in both regards. The CWLU's theory, beginning with its 1969 founding conference, recognized what is today called intersectionality – that is, the need to combat not only the oppression of women as women but also the simultaneous oppressions imposed by racism, capitalism, and imperialism. In the only change to the political principles adopted in 1969, the CWLU expanded its intersectional analysis to recognize the need to fight for the liberation of homosexuals, and especially lesbians. Additionally, the CWLU from the beginning emphasized outreach, education, and action in its work.

This module explores the original CWLU statement of political principles and the more complete intersectionality embodied in the amendment adopted by CWLU in 1972; the position paper 'Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women's Movement'; and the strategic framework the CWLU adopted to guide its outreach, education, and action programs throughout its existence.

# Socialist Feminist Theory and Strategy in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union

ABOUT THE MODULE | CLASS 1 | CLASS 2 | CLASS 3

---

## 1 CLASS 1: THE POLITICAL PRINCIPLES

---

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The statement of political principles that was adopted at the October 1969 founding conference of CWLU reads:

*The struggle for women's liberation is a revolutionary struggle.*

*Women's liberation is essential to the liberation of all oppressed people.*

*Women's liberation will not be achieved until all people are free.*

*We will struggle for the liberation of women and against male supremacy in all sections of society.*

*We will struggle against racism, imperialism, and capitalism, and dedicate ourselves to developing a consciousness of their effect on women.*

*We are dedicated to a democratic organization and understand that a way to ensure democracy is through full exchange of information and ideas, full political debate, and through unity of theory and practice.*

*We are committed to building a movement that embodies within it the humane values of the society for which we are fighting. To win this struggle, we must resist exploitative, manipulative, and intolerant attitudes in ourselves. We need to be supportive of each other, to have enthusiasm for change in ourselves and in society, and to have faith that people have unending energy and ability to change.*

These principles reflect the involvement of the women who organized the founding conference of the CWLU and many of the early members in political activism through the movements of the 1960s – civil rights, anti-war, community organizing, student activism. For example, Vivian Rothstein, an author of the call for the conference, was an experienced community organizer who had traveled to Vietnam and met with women from their National Liberation Front. Another early activist, Heather Booth, had

participated in the 1964 Freedom Summer and in student actions at the University of Chicago. They and the other early CWLU activists were keenly aware that these progressive movements were still primarily led by men and that even the most active women were marginalized when decisions of any consequence were made. Out of this grew a consciousness that, if women were to be liberated, independent women's organizations were essential, and that women had to be central to the struggle. One of the major points of contention at the founding conference was whether it was legitimate to found an independent women's organization. Many men in progressive civil rights, anti-war, and student organizations condemned the idea as divisive, and a contingent of women from male-led left-wing organizations were at the founding conference arguing against the creation of an independent CWLU.

The political principles explicitly link the struggle for women's liberation to the struggles against racism, imperialism, and capitalism. Again, this was the result of the experiences of the women most instrumental in creating the CWLU and of the other early activists, all of whom had developed political awareness during the civil rights struggles in the 1960s and the fight against the Vietnam War in the 1960s into the 1970s. This political awareness made apparent that true liberation for women, the goal of the CWLU, could not be won by focusing on white women alone. Instead, the CWLU needed also to work for the liberation of women of color, women in Vietnam and other countries, women working for a minimum wage, women without control of their reproductive lives, and more. It was clear at the founding of the CWLU that the fight for women's liberation was not separate from the struggles of other oppressed people in the United States and around the world. The choice of the word "struggle" which recurs throughout CWLU documents likewise reflects the reality recognized by CWLU activists that the civil rights struggle, the anti-war movement, and the work of student and community organizers alike were pitted against the powerful machines of oppression and destruction.

The concluding two portions of the political principles again reflect the experiences of those most instrumental in founding the CWLU. Many women who had been active in the civil rights, anti-war, or community organizing movements had painful memories of being relegated to making coffee or running mimeo machines while men did the talking and made the decisions. Out of this experience of lack of democracy, disregard, and denial of opportunity came an emphasis on democracy, open exchange of information and ideas, mutual support, and faith in the possibility of major societal change that were hallmarks of how the CWLU operated.

Over the life of CWLU, only one change was made in the political principles – this was a modification to the fourth sentence in the principles: “We will struggle for the liberation of women and against male supremacy in all sections of society.” In 1972 this statement was revised in two significant ways to read as follows:

*We will struggle for the liberation of women and against sexism in all sections of society.*

*Included in this struggle is the struggle for the right of sexual self-determination for all people and for the liberation of all homosexuals, especially lesbians.*

The most important change was the inclusion of the sentence defining the struggle for the liberation of women as including “... *the struggle for the right of sexual self-determination for all people and for the liberation of all homosexuals, especially lesbians.*” This broadened awareness made the CWLU statement of political principles more fully intersectional, and was reflected into subsequent CWLU outreach, education, and action work.

The impetus for this change came from lesbians in CWLU who felt it was essential to incorporate support for lesbian and gay liberation in the political principles. When the principles were first adopted in 1969, the gay liberation movement had barely begun. No gay pride parades had been held, no lesbian feminist festivals were established, and Stonewall was still a whisper in the background. By 1970, CWLU had started to incorporate lesbian and gay liberation into its program, and in the summer of 1970 the connection between gay and lesbian issues and women’s liberation was discussed at a meeting sponsored jointly by CWLU and the women’s caucus of the Chicago Gay Alliance. This led to further discussion within CWLU and ultimately the adoption of the principle above.

Also important, the change from the term “male supremacy” to “sexism” is indicative of the sweeping impact of the women’s liberation movement on society. In 1969, the word sexism was not in general use, but by 1972 - in part through the work of CWLU and organizations like it -the term sexism was widely used to denote the institutional nature of the oppression of women, oppression that was now acknowledged to go far beyond attitudes and expectations. The change in the CWLU political principles reflected this more broadly significant understanding, an understanding that the organization itself had helped to create.

## 1.2 READINGS

### *CWLU Political Principles*

Booth, Heather, Goldfield, Evie and Munaker Sue. 1968. *Toward a Radical Movement*. Unpublished.

Alter, Barbara, Ackerman, Carol, George, Liz, Rothstein, Vivian, Weisstein, Naomi, Keller, Alice, Hedda and others. 1969. *A Proposal for a Chicago Radical Women's Conference*. Unpublished.

# Socialist Feminist Theory and Strategy in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union

ABOUT THE MODULE | CLASS 1 | CLASS 2 | CLASS 3

---

## 2 CLASS 2: SOCIALIST FEMINISM: OUR STRATEGY FOR THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

---

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

*Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women's Movement* was adopted in 1973 by CWLU. Written by the Hyde Park Chapter, this paper outlined in more detail the ways in which women are oppressed and provided three strategic goals for projects that CWLU undertook:

- projects must win reforms that will objectively improve women's lives;
- projects must give women a sense of their own power, both potentially and in reality;
- projects must alter existing relations of power.

The introduction to the paper described the competing perspectives within the women's movement of the time. The paper noted the importance of combining personal liberation and growth with structural social change, especially in its economic base.

The paper's five sections laid out a comprehensive approach to organizing:

- Socialist Feminism - the concept and what it draws from each parent tradition.
- Power - the basis for power in this society, and our potential as women to gain power.
- Consciousness - the importance of consciousness for the development of the women's movement, its limitations, and its place in a socialist feminist ideology.
- Current issues and questions facing the movement - a socialist feminist approach to respond to and develop a context for our programs and concerns.
- Organization - the importance of building organizations for the women's liberation movement and some thoughts on organizational forms.

The first section detailed the idea of socialist feminism and described its roots in the traditions of socialism and feminism. It incorporated a feminist perspective that recognized that the institutions of sexism and capitalism combine to oppress women. It then provided a detailed analysis of society and gave examples of the kind of changes it viewed as desirable but not obtainable in current society.

Perhaps the idea of power and the role it plays in women's oppression and the necessity of women gaining power to achieve liberation was the most important idea detailed in the paper:

*As socialist feminists we have an analysis of who has power and who does not, the basis for that power and our potential as women to gain power. Sisterhood is powerful in our personal lives, in our relationships with other women, in providing personal energy and maintaining warmth and love. But sisterhood is revolutionary because it can provide a basis on which we can unite to seize power.*

The remainder of the paper discussed specific issues. It concluded by stating:

*Primarily, we argue for an aggressive and audacious perspective. It is one that our movement began with when we thought we were the newest and hottest thing going. Now, we have found roots. We will need strategy, organization and so many steps along the way. But we must take the offensive again, and this time fight a long battle--worth it because we believe we can win.*

Throughout its history, CWLU included a focus on direct action. The Socialist Feminist paper put this into perspective. The Hyde Park chapter, which drafted the paper, also gave birth to the Action Committee for Decent Childcare, a program aimed at revising licensing laws for childcare centers in Chicago and getting the city to provide funding for centers. Working women, who had limited access to childcare, joined the effort. The jobs work group, later Direct Action for Rights in Employment (DARE), was another example of the use of direct action. In the early 1970s CWLU received a letter from one of the janitresses working at Chicago City Hall asking for help and support in a fight for equal pay with the male janitors. Both the work of ACDC and DARE reflected intersectionality in organizing.

Later in the 1970s CWLU's Secret Storm work group worked with women in the Chicago Park District to ensure that women had equal access to Park District sports facilities such as playing fields and equipment. These are a few examples of how CWLU put theory into action.

## 2.2 READINGS

Hyde Park Chapter (Booth, Heather, Creamer, Day, Davis, Susan, Dobbin, Deb, Kaufman, Robin and Klass, Tobey). 1972. *Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women's Movement*. Unpublished.

Action Committee for Decent Childcare Report, *ca* 1972.

Direct Action for Rights in Employment, *Press Release Announcing Susie Bates' Filing of Gender Discrimination Charges*, 1973.

Secret Storm Report, *Women Put Parker in His Place*, *ca* 1976.

# Socialist Feminist Theory and Strategy in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union

ABOUT THE MODULE | CLASS 1 | CLASS 2 | CLASS 3

---

## 3 CLASS 3: A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

---

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

CWLU continuously worked to develop strategies for successful work, guided by papers written by CWLU chapters; the chapters of CWLU were a combination of consciousness-raising groups and political discussion groups. The first of these papers was *Some Thoughts on Program*, inspired by *The Longest Revolution*, by British Marxist-Feminist Juliet Mitchell. The paper was written by the members of the Midwives (officially Midwives of the Revolution) chapter of CWLU. Presented at the CWLU second conference in 1971, this paper noted conflicting views within the women's liberation movement about how to best move forward. For example, some argued for consciousness raising as the main focus for work as opposed to practical programs to meet immediate needs such as childcare. Instead, *Some Thoughts on Program* argued for a program and strategy which emphasized struggle on many different levels, none of which was a clear priority over the others, and none of which was adequate without the development of the others.

To illustrate this idea of a multidimensional, multifaceted program to struggle against the oppression of women, the Midwives said that they

*"...conceived of making a visual chart. Along the sides are the four major roles into which women are placed in American society – roles which oppress us. First is our role in production (as surplus, menial, malleable labor force; domestic workers and keepers of the work force); second is production (being responsible for the reproduction of the race); third is sexuality and fourth is our role as socializers of children.*

*"Across the top are the different levels or dimensions of struggle which we have begun to see as necessary to build our movement. First are struggles around the immediate needs of women.... Second is the development of consciousness through educational and other work...The third area ..is work which leads to the development of an analysis of women's oppression and all oppression in our society, and which will lead us to developing a strategy for transforming this*

*society...And the fourth dimension is the building of a vision of how society should look and the building of alternative institutions to the oppressive ones which exist today.”*

Underscoring the understanding by early CWLU activists of the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, the paper recognized:

*“...this is just a two dimensional chart. It helps us look at different types of program necessary to organize around women's oppression as women. But it is clear that women are not only oppressed as women, but are also part of all other oppressed groups within this society (e.g. blacks, workers, students, gay people). Because of women's interrelatedness to all of society we must have a view of program which says that our oppression as women cannot be separated from the oppression of all other groups. That means that our movement must work on program which struggles against all kinds of oppression and must respond specifically to the ways the oppression of these groups affects women in them.”*

Lively discussion of this proposal for analyzing programs occurred at the second CWLU conference in April 1971 and resulted in the adoption of the “the Mitchell chart” as an influential tool for CWLU planning and strategy. Throughout the remainder of CWLU’s existence, the Mitchell chart guided the organization’s work. For example, in 1973, existing CWLU projects were graphically displayed using the Mitchell chart:

	<i>Production</i>	<i>Reproduction</i>	<i>Sexuality</i>	<i>Socializers of Children</i>
<i>Service</i>	Legal Clinic and DARE (job discrimination cases)	Pregnancy Testing, HERS Line, Emma Goldman Clinic, Alice Hamilton Clinic, Abortion Counselling Service (Jane)	Legal Clinic (lesbian rights cases), HERS Line, Emma Goldman Clinic, Rape Crisis Line	Legal Clinic (Divorce and child-support cases)
<i>Education</i>	DARE (Secret Storm), Liberation School (Women and the Economy), WOMANKIND (Don't buy Farah Pants)	Outreach (Secret Storm), Liberation School (Our Bodies, Ourselves, Preparing for childbirth) , WOMANKIND (What About Birth Control)	Lesbian Group, Liberation School (Our Bodies Ourselves, Sexuality), WOMANKIND (Reply to Ann Landers)	Outreach (Park District), Liberation School (Families, Free Children) , WOMANKIND (And Jill came tumbling after)
<i>Direct Action</i>	Direct Action for Rights in Employment (DARE)	Abortion Task Force & Health Group, 'Abortion 7' Defense, Action Committee for	Rape Crisis Line	Outreach (Park District), Action Committee for Decent Childcare (ACDC), ,

		Decent Childcare (ACDC)		
--	--	----------------------------	--	--

As is apparent, CWLU developed on-going programs in each of the areas of the Mitchell chart, resulting in a broad, diverse, far-reaching array of outreach, education, and action programs aimed to empowering Chicago women to help achieve their liberation

### 3.2 READINGS

Juliet Mitchell, 1966, *The Longest Revolution*, New Left Review, No. 40.

Midwives Chapter. 1971. *Some Thoughts on Program*. Unpublished.

Examples of the usage of the *Juliet Mitchell Chart*