Bread and Roses

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I'm here to talk about the long and glorious career of Boston's own Bread and Roses.

Five minutes is not enough time to say anything deep, thorough or nuanced, so I'll count on those of you who were in Bread and Roses – let's see a show of hands – to correct my errors in the discussion part of the session. And I'm going to talk really fast.

Bread and Roses was launched Sept '69; and went MIA some time in '71. But it made a big difference in the short period of its existence; it got a lot of things started. Several hundred women were members at one time or another; it had an activist core of well over 100.

Three things you should know about the greater Boston area:

- This is a College town.
- As Demita pointed out, it was whiter than most American cities of its size, & was notoriously segregated
- Its labor movement was dominated by the famously exclusionary building trades, perhaps one reason many of us saw unions in general, and in fact the entire white working class, as reactionary, racist and sexist.

Who were the women in Bread and Roses? We were mostly white, middle-class, college-educated, in our 20's, often single, few had kids. We bought our clothes in army surplus stores. The activist core was made up of New Leftists; many were red-diaper babies.

We defined Bread and Roses as a "Revolutionary Autonomous Women's Liberation Organization".

- Revolutionary meant that we supported liberation struggles around the world and at home. We saw the Panthers and the black liberation movement as part of the 3d world liberation struggle. So we were anti-Imperialist and anti-racist.
- It also meant we were anti-reformist: we didn't want equal rights; we wanted liberation. This caused problems I'll speak to later.

- Autonomous meant that we worked on our own, but were always part of the larger left.

Like many other women's liberation organizations, we were structured in small groups, a number of them pre-existing, that functioned autonomously. We called them "collectives" in a nod to our leftist identity. Some had been formed around specific work, but they were mainly CR groups. There were also work groups that engaged in

particular projects: the collective that ended up publishing **Our Bodies, Ourselves**, others that organized office workers and high school girls, a committee to start a women's center, other groups that held classes in karate or auto-mechanics, and so forth.

We also held mass meetings, initially weekly, where organizational decisions were made. We functioned by participatory democracy: there was no Steering Committee or elected leadership of any kind.

In fact we were very hostile to leadership, which we called "star-tripping", elitism, or careerism. When the organizers of an anti-war march asked for a Bread and Roses speaker, we sent 3 women, all wearing masks.

Parliamentary procedure and centralization were seen as oppressive, and pretty much any formal structure was viewed with suspicion.

You will not be surprised to hear that in retrospect I think we went overboard with the decentralized, no structure, no leadership thing. It led to 2 big problems:

1. The situation described by Jo Freeman in "Tyranny of Structurelessness": when a formal structure is lacking, an informal structure based on friendship circles takes over. There is no accountability, and those outside the in-group are effectively excluded from power
2. Inability to keep the organization going. Bread and Roses never formally died; it just faded away

A second major mistake, in my view, was the equation of "revolutionary" with rejection of all reformism. This didn't apply to everyone but was a strong current in Bread and Roses. It meant we didn't engage in an ongoing way with institutions of power such as unions or legislatures. Our political action was limited to direct action: demonstrations, making demands from outside. This made it hard for us to work with or attract women who had a less all-or-nothing perspective and wanted to make incremental changes in their lives.

Bear in mind that we lasted a very short time, and many of our excesses were ironed out in our "daughter" organizations.

So that's what we did wrong. What did we do right? I see Bread and Roses' legacy in 3 areas:

1. Bread and Roses' gave birth, directly or indirectly to institutions that outlived the organization, including **Our Bodies, Ourselves**, 9to5, the Women's Center and all the projects that came out of that.

2. The left women's liberation movement in Boston lived on, and in some ways kept functioning without the organization the same way it had with it; its members formed the core of the Boston Area Socialist Feminist Organization in the mid-

70’s. The same community lived on after that, too, in lifelong friendships and political collaborations

3. Bread and Roses inspired and shaped the consciousness of hundreds of women activists of my generation and, indirectly, of generations to follow. The energy and creativity unleashed by that too short moment inspired many of us, informed our outlooks and kept us going through the decades. As an example, my current work with the Women’s Institute for Leadership Development, promoting women’s leadership within unions, sounds at first like the direct opposite of what Bread and Roses stood for. But not so.

    - WILD recognizes the value of getting together autonomously as women to see how our individual struggles are shared by others—that is, consciousness raising-- and to teach and learn from each other the skills and knowledge needed to carry on the fight within the larger labor movement.
    - But what about this leadership thing? It turns out that WILD’s formulation, “we can all be leaders”, is a more positive and empowering way of reaching the same goal of building a movement that challenges hierarchy, where all members‘ voices are heard and respected, and leadership is held accountable to a strong, active and knowledgeable base.