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'Housework is also when a man whistles at you...'

By Pauline Peters

THE WAGES for Housework Campaign is not, it turns out, just about getting money for doing the cleaning. "Housework is putting on lipstick," says Selma James, one of the campaign organisers. "Housework is also when a man whistles at you in the street. It is the housewifely functions we perform in an office. Housework is our identity as women." Every minute of our lives is work and we want the money for it.

There was not a lot of lipstick about at the campaign's first meeting in Bloomsbury on Friday. The style was scrubbed chic with messages: one girl had embroidered shakily on the back of her bomber jacket the words Lesbian Power.

Men were banned from this meeting because, said Ms James women behave differently when men are around. True enough. "Let's take their trousers down, girls," roared a little white-haired lady as three men tried to gatecrash.

In two weeks, the campaign is opening its own office in Tolmers Square, London NW1. "We've just finished scrubbing it out," said Ms James — and presumably that was also housework. They finance themselves with the sale of pamphlets. Some women were spending between £2 and £3 each. The question time was briskly curtailed to make sure people had the chance to buy more. A collection was made to pay for the rent of the hall. Altogether the evening yielded about £80.

They are a lot less brisk about financing the wider aspects of their cause. "Oh no, we haven't



done any sums," said Ms James, really shocked at the thought. In fact a very modest application of Wages for Housework giving £40 a week (their very minimum they say) to the 5,600,000 fulltime housewives between 16 and 60 would cost £11,648 million, which

is about one-sixth of last year's gross national product.

Silvia Frederici, an Americanised Italian, complained to the meeting: "Housework is not included in the gross national product. But if all the housewives went on strike tomorrow, the entire economy would come to a halt."

One of the problems of this campaign is that housework means different things to different campaigners. In this instance it meant looking after children. "If the women went on strike the men would have to stay at home looking after the children. The mines would empty. The factories would be empty... I am so sick of this academic bullshit about who's productive and who is not. If tomorrow we go on strike we will see who is productive."

There were objections to this from the floor. "It's very hard

to strike if there's your husband saying do those dishes or I'll smash your face in."

Several women asked where the money was going to come from. Ms Frederici sighed and said "This leitmotiv, the economic crisis, is really irrelevant. If we are in the struggle together, we will win it."

A lady in the audience said: "There's a lot of money about. I read in the Morning Star that Joe Lyons' Jolyon made £25½ million last year and they aren't investing all of it in this country — think of all the insurance companies! And, do you know, I was passing Harrods two years ago and they'd got a frock in the window for £1,000. I know that Harrods don't put their dearest things in the window so they've got dresses at £2,000 inside—and that was before the prices went up." She went on to say that, as a matter of fact, she did her

housework in one hour flat, no trouble; but then she was lucky to have a few machines to help.

One cheerful thing about this campaign, quite apart from the sheer impactability of it, is that it promises to embrace so many. The chairwoman of the meeting, American biscuit factory worker Ruth Hall, said: "Speaking as a lesbian woman I want to join in this struggle. Lesbians are housewives because they are women. It is expected of us."

"If there were wages for housewives, more women would come out as lesbians because they wouldn't be economically shackled to men. We should all unite in our separate struggles and join together in one big struggle. That is how we will win."

Oddly, nobody mentioned the quality of housework. Might it not have to improve if it is paid for?