

ERA-The Real Issues

by Charlotte Dennett Colby

It hardly needs to be said that lesbians and gay men have become the brunt of an increasingly virulent STOP-ERA campaign. Those titillating purple pamphlets that purported to show the "ERA/GAY/AIDS connection" may have slipped into well-deserved obscurity, but the gay-baiting continues through deceptive telephone polling (Would you still vote for the ERA if you knew it would lead to homosexual marriages?) and slick radio spots ("They say (with an ERA) that I should have the right to marry a

woman and my brother the right to marry a man.").

How voters respond on November 4th may tell us something about how deeply the vein of homophobia runs in this state. But I have no doubts that the "hunting season on... gay people," as Euan Bear so aptly put it (OITM, February 1986) will extend far beyond election day. And it will do so, I would argue, for the very same reason that the hunting season is open on women and minorities, HIV sero-positive individuals, drug-takers, and day-care operators. Robots and computers are

taking away jobs by the millions. Who works and who stays home (or is segregated, quarantined or somehow removed from the workaday world) will be a burning issue by the year 2,000.

Only four years ago, a former economist with the Commerce Department predicted in a report to Congress that "ten to 15 million manufacturing workers and a similar number of service workers will be displaced from their existing jobs." The speed and force of robotization, he said, would be "awesome." Two years later, industry consultants Booz and Allen estimated that as many as 38 million office jobs alone would be lost to automation.

The first time I read the predictions was during the second year of the Reagan administration. Robotics expert James Albus caught my eye with the assertion in 'Time' that today's technological revolution would "far exceed the 19th century industrial revolution in its impact on mankind." Job loss, other said, would be massive. How, I wondered then, would society cope? Who would be hurt?

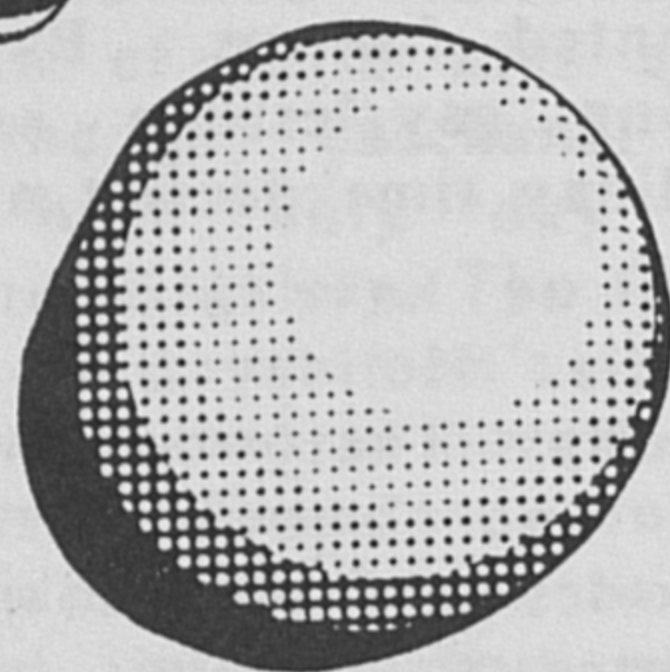
Ronald Reagan gave the answer in mid 1982 when he told a group of women supporters that "part of the unemployment is not as much due to recession as it is the increase of people going into the job market, and ladies, I'm not picking on anyone, but because of the increase in women who are working today, and two-worker families and so forth..." (His voice trailed off, but we get the point -- working women, not structural changes in the economy, were being portrayed as the cause of unemployment.)

At the same time, a coalition of women's groups, alarmed over the Reagan administration's cuts in women's programs, put out a report called "Inequality of Sacrifice" chronicling the systematic attacks on federal policies that gave women access to the workforce, whether job training programs, family planning counselling, or day care assistance.

The witch-hunts against working women had begun. And they got uglier -- starting with a wave of media-hysteria over child abuse in day care centers. Few people know that a Los Angeles District Attorney, in February of this year, dropped charges against five of the seven teachers originally accused of molesting children in the famous McMartin Pre-School Case which by 1984 had sent shock-waves across the nation and ultimately destroyed the careers and reputations of teachers in a number of related cases. Few mothers concerned for the safety of their children have read, for instance, that children in Jordan, Minnesota have admitted that they made up stories about having sexual orgies with adults in that

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