

Rebel Girls' Rag

A FORUM OF WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

Vol. 5 No. 3

75¢

JULY/AUGUST, 1991

News & Views from Toronto Socialist Feminist Action



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ROTTEN FACE OF 'REFORM'

by Michelle Robideaux

As the Reform Party's popularity has grown across the country, there has been a corresponding attempt by the leadership of the party to hide Reform's racist and right-wing agenda. But increased attention by the media and more frequent public meetings are exposing more and more of Reform's perspective, which rests on attacking women, gays and lesbians, people of colour, immigrants, francophones, and workers.

Anyone inquiring about Reform's policies can obtain a vague policy guide which is anything but explicit. For example, on the question of abortion, the party's official policy favors a national referendum, and states that Reform MPs will seek the opinion of their constituents before taking any position. Yet when Reform's leader Preston Manning was interviewed by the *Toronto Star* about this question, a different story emerged. Manning believes abortion should be allowed only when a woman's life is in danger, stating "I'm on the pro-life (side), at least I would favor more legal protection for the unborn." Even in cases of rape or incest, women should not have access to abortions unless their life is threatened.

Shedding light on Reform's real agenda has been made easier by a leading figure in the Ontario wing of the Reform Party, William Gairdner. A member of the Ontario executive of Reform, Gairdner has made his views explicit in a book titled *The Trouble with Canada*.

This book, sold at Reform Party forums and meetings, is one of the clearest expressions of

Reform's trajectory - targeting everything from foreign aid to daycare to women's rights. A few sample quotes illustrate Reform's world-view:

"modern Canada is ruled not by the people, but by a government elite that propagates many values alien to the long-term interests of the Canadian people. It does this by camouflaging its agenda, or by simply proceeding with that agenda in opposition to the will of the people... The people want capital punishment restored? The government bans it. The people want lower taxes? The government raises them. The people want to reduce government and the national debt? The government borrows more. The people do not want official (forced) bilingualism? The government forces it on them. The people want to slow immigration and favour traditional British-European stock? The government increases the flow, and disregards country of origin. The people want a better climate for free enterprise? The government increases the regulation of business..." (p. 78)

The appeal is to middle-class discontent concerning taxes and government spending, the language is populist, and the content is explicitly racist.

Under the cover of 'trimming' government expenditures, Gairdner (and Reform) attacks daycare, bilingualism, multiculturalism, social spending, and public sector jobs. Much of the rhetoric used talks of a return to 'traditional family values', something which the Tory govern-

ment apparently has not promoted sufficiently:

"Astonishingly, it [the state] may even promote the idea of the family in words, while providing funds to special-interest groups that promote perverse anti-family sexual "orientations" (for example, Ontario's Bill 54, which has the unfortunate effect of giving homosexuality the status of normal behaviour); or staggeringly expensive State daycare programs (no one yet has even an inkling of the extent of this burden on the people's pocketbooks - or of the burden of such impersonal care on the minds and hearts of the nation's children); or extensive State support for single parents, the most disastrous model

without husbands (if they marry, they lose support!). Finally, there is the deadly equation: more government = more taxes = more inflation = the necessity for two incomes. Politicians seem impervious to the basic and time-honoured economic lesson: if you subsidize something (like illegitimacy or laziness) you get more of it - that's basic reward-and-punishment theory. At any rate, egalitarian and collectivist government programs have the effect of directly or indirectly undermining the traditional family by subsidizing dependence on the State instead of the family at all ages, through its public schools, its insurance schemes, welfare plans, old-age homes, granting mechanisms, and tax policy - all of which cause citizens to turn to the State for help instead of to the family." (p. 81)



for which is the American AFDC program (Aid to Families With Dependent Children), which even left-wing politicians now agree has amounted to a State incentive program to lure poor, single (mostly black) women out of their parents' homes to have babies

In the book's 500 pages, perhaps the nastiest sections are reserved for Gairdner's argument about Canada's 'core culture'. Essentially, the argument goes that Canada's culture is a white, anglo-saxon one, which immigrants and francophones must be assimilated to.

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A Forum of Women's Resistance

Vol. 5, No. 3

July/August, 1991

Published by:

Toronto Socialist Feminist Action

P.O. Box 70, Station F

Toronto, Ontario M4Y 2L4

Date of issue: June, 1991

Published four times a year in
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Second class mail registration
number 7769.

We are a socialist-feminist group which operates on the principle that mass action is our most effective instrument of change. We believe that the oppression of women touches every aspect of our lives and that the liberation of women will require fundamental changes in the structure of society.

We hold bi-weekly meetings where our policy and overall direction are determined. Smaller committees work on specific events or issues and in different constituencies.

We welcome new members. For more information, phone 531-2369.

This issue was put together by:

Leela Acharya, Sunitha Albuquerque, Iman Aojazairi, Laurie Bell, Julia B., Debi Brock, Carolyn Egan, Nancy Farmer, Mary Gellatly, Shelly Gordon, Miriam Jones, Judy Koch, Gillian Morton, Sharmeni Peries, Jocelyn Piercy, Christina Starr, Jennifer Stephen.

Signed articles do not necessarily reflect the views of the Toronto Socialist Feminist Action, but those of the author.

FIRED UP, FIGHTING BACK

by Lesli Gaynor
& Darien Taylor

Report from Canadian AIDS Conference, Vancouver B.C. (April 14th-17th) and "Keeping Women in Focus" Conference, Boston, MA (April 19th-21st)

The 4th Canadian AIDS Conference, "Enhancing Partnerships," was held in Vancouver, B.C., April 14th-17th. The conference was organized by the Canadian AIDS Society, the Canadian Haemophilia Society, and the Canadian Public Health Association.

The polarization between the government, bureaucrats and AIDS professionals on the one hand, and People Living With AIDS/HIV (PLWA/HIVs) and

PLWA/HIV Caucus to try to give direction to conference proceedings and results.

This confusion was especially acute for HIV+ women and the people who provide services to them. There was very little content directed towards their needs, aside from medical facts and statistics which described women only as childbearers or vectors of infection. Many women were looking forward to the panel "Women and AIDS: Gynaecological Concerns" because we need to have women-specific symptoms validated in a national forum. This would lead, we hoped, to a change in the U.S. Center for Disease Control's definition of AIDS (from which Canada's Federal Centre for

tween medical research and AIDS professionalism, and the HIV community which needs information on which we can act. Many questions from the floor echoed this concern. Service providers and HIV+ women (and there were lots of them at this conference, speaking out) asked what use they could make of the information presented. This was just one example of the many panels which called into question the aim of this conference to enhance partnerships.

The following afternoon, we were on the panel of "Women and AIDS: Addressing the Issues/Confronting the Barriers." We felt that it was very important to raise some of the issues that the conference had failed to

▲▲ Voices of Positive Women in the Fight Against AIDs ▲▲

community-based programs on the other, was apparent from the opening plenary when Federal Minister of Health and Welfare Perrin Beatty was confronted by AIDS activists who showered him with peanuts and shouted "Peanuts of AIDS" -- a comment on Federal funding. The audience was very split in their response to this action. Instead of moving to close this gap, the conference proceeded to reinforce it.

PLWA/HIVs and participants from community-based organizations questioned "What is meant by partnership? Are all the partners equal?" PLWA/HIVs were given mixed messages about their place in the conference and formed a

AIDS takes its definition) which presently excludes women's symptoms.

However, the panellists were uniformly out of touch with this issue and many others. Dr. Hilary Wass of Vancouver was underinformed and unsupportive of HIV+ women's decision to bear children as a form of "denial."

Drs. Francine Leclerc and Norman Lapointe presented a statistical picture of a group of HIV+ women in the Montreal area which was disconcertingly detailed and divorced from women's experience and daily lives. It left many people in the audience with an overwhelming sense of the disconnection be-

address: women and HIV/AIDS, reproductive rights, treatment, the place of women living with AIDS and HIV in the movement, the FCA definition, and making links with other social change agendas and other "marginalized" groups. We tried to direct the workshop so that it produced concrete, specific demands from which all participants would take direction.

This attempt to connect the work of the conference to our struggle in the HIV community was not something that most people in attendance seemed to understand. This was the only workshop that we attended that challenged people to buy in. In the end, the participants produced a list of issues relating to women and HIV/AIDS. The HIV+ women who attended this workshop and who were very vocal about their lives and their invisibility took these issues to the PLWA/HIV Caucus meeting and developed a successful press release and press conference within 24 hours to highlight our issues and the Caucus critique of the conference. The commitment of PLWA/HIVs to their issues was obviously evident, but the commitment of their "partners" was never voiced.

In contrast to the Vancouver conference was the "Keeping Women In Focus" conference in Boston, organized by the Fenway Community Health Center on Women and HIV/AIDS, April 19th-21st. This conference was developed by community-based groups to be a useful, prac-

Foreign Aid Reform (C-FAR) and the Alliance for the Preservation of English in Canada (APEC).

As one individual's views, this sort of racist garbage can perhaps be written off. In fact, however, it meshes with the Reform Party's policy opposing "any immigration policy... designed to radically or suddenly alter the ethnic makeup of Canada." Reform's opposition to multiculturalism and bilingualism is based on the same arguments as those found in The Trouble With Canada.

Reform's leadership may try to say that the party is not a haven for all brands of right-wing bigots, but it cannot conceal what Manning and Gairdner have publicly stated. Reform also can't hide the fact that sec-

tions of the Confederation of Regions party have joined in Ontario, as have members of APEC.

It is imperative that the Reform Party be exposed for what it is - a right-wing, racist, sexist and homophobic party which wants to make the working class and poor bear the burden of hard economic times. Tapping into the anger which Reform is counting on to build its base will require serious unity and determined coalition building. It will also mean using every opportunity to confront the Reform Party and build where we know we can break people from its agenda. Unfortunately for Manning, a good starting point for building opposition to Reform may well be his now explicitly stated desire to attack abortion rights.

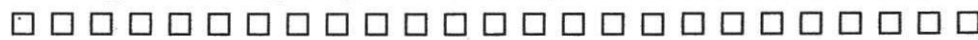
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According to Gairdner, immigration must be tightly controlled and no neighbourhood must be allowed to surpass a rate of 15 percent of immigrants, lest what he calls the "cultural comfort zone" be surpassed. Beyond this 15 percent, whites are made "uncomfortable": "...whenever an invading culture reaches about this percentage of the total, the majority gets restless." (p. 408). Similarly, Gairdner opposes bilingualism on the grounds that Canada's culture is anglophone, and "forced bilingualism" is threatening the very basis of Canadian society. In putting forward these ideas, Gairdner does not hesitate to quote documents from racist organizations such as Citizens for

tical opportunity for skills development and education. HIV+ women's involvement in the conference was very visible. There was no need for a caucus to form in order to develop a set of demands; the purpose of the conference was to develop the demands. The closing plenary's focus was to finalize a set of demands which people took back to their organizations. Participants were invested in these demands through a process of struggle and reaching consensus.

In the future, we hope to see more examples of conferences organized for action by people who are not afraid of the challenges that come with forging partnerships. ▲

SOLIDARITY NOT COMPETITION



by Shelly Gordon

'Solidarity, Not Competition' is the theme of the movement against a three-way free trade deal between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico. This international alliance between workers of all three nations promises a much clearer class perspective and much less nationalism than the 1986 campaign.

Trade union and social activists from all three countries discussed how to turn the 'Solidarity, Not Competition,

sentiment into a militant fight-back at a conference co-sponsored by the Labour Council of Metro Toronto and York Region, common Frontiers and the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice in May.

Unionists from Canada, Mexico and the U.S. all said that while the free trade deal poses a threat to workers in each country, it also provides an unprecedented opportunity for the trade unions, environmental and social justice groups from all of the countries to work together.

But international solidarity is not built on good wishes. It is built on supporting the interests of workers in the other countries as well as our own. Alfredo Dominguez, of the Mexican Authentic Labour Front (FAT), said, "When we ask U.S. and Canadian workers for help, we are only asking them to act in their own interests... Mexican, U.S. and Canadian workers have common interests which we must promote with common action. The key for all of us is to bring up the standard of living in Mexico by supporting free, independent unions and genuine political democracy ... good secure jobs will not come from trade agreements among the wealthy. We need free workers and not free trade."

Ron Blackwell of the American Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTW) quoted a Mexican sister: "[W]e cannot find [solidarity] based on protectionism because there is nothing in it for Mexican workers. And we can't find unity based on free trade ... because the trade unionists in the United States, and especially in Canada, know too much about free trade. What we have to find is some alternative to either protection or to free trade and to build on that common ground both an alternative policy agenda and an alternative politics in our three countries."

Blackwell said that he believes increased economic integration is inevitable and that our strategy should be to articulate an alternative integration plan for the region. He and others propose that we tie a social agenda to the trade agreement. We should insist that the trade deal

include: 1) guarantees of adjustment assistance for workers and communities in each of the three countries; 2) immigration reform that guarantees human, civil and labour rights to migrant workers; and 3) a social and environmental charter that would seek to 'harmonize disparities on wages, working conditions, social standards and environmental standards between the three countries in a way that the lower standards are raised..."

Several speakers proposed strategies for the fight back in Toronto and Canada. As Linda Torney, President of the Metro Labour Council said, "...no battle was ever won starting from the top and trickling down".

Leo Panitch told participants that one of the major reasons that the last anti-free trade movement lost is that it was defending the status quo. The Pro-Canada Network fought to maintain the Canadian welfare state against the threat of American economic and social integration. He believes that, through the polls, the mass of Canadians are now saying that they are looking for alternatives. This time the anti-free trade movement has to put forward a new vision, a new economic order, an alternative to free trade and the broader neo-conservative economic and social program in order to win mass support and defeat the deal.

Panitch and several other speakers said the way to do that is to 'think globally, act locally' ... to build local actions and coalitions to defeat local manifestations of this economic policy. Local actions can empower and educate activists. They cannot, however, stem the global economic integration of capital. They have to be part of a broader movement.

Jim Benn, a laid-off American steel worker and Coordinator of the Federation for Industrial Retention and Renewal (FIRR) described the overall economic program this way "...[T]he issue of the free trade agreement, of economic integration is just one aspect of the whole crisis of de-industrialization that the U.S. has been facing and I see that Toronto has been facing too. It's really a reflection of the greater freedoms that we've given to capital over the last twenty years. Every time we come up against an economic crisis in the U.S. the Reagan or the Bush administration has come up with a solution

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MOVEMENT BRIEFS

Reproductive Rights: A Global Perspective Sex Selection/Population Control/Forced & Coerced Sterilization/Prenatal Testing for Disability

The film *La Operacion* will be shown followed by a panel discussion.

7 p.m. Wednesday, July 17
Gladstone Public Library
1101 Bloor St. W.

Sponsored by: Cross Cultural Communication Centre, DisAbled Women's Network - Canada, DisAbled Women's Network - Toronto, Immigrant Women's Health Centre, Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics, South Asian Women's Group, Toronto Socialist Feminist Action, and Women Working With Immigrant Women.

Wheelchair Accessible.

For further information, call 969-8463.

The Tories are coming! The Tories are coming!

The Tory convention will be held in Toronto August 5-9, 1991.

The Coalition for Social Justice, a network of labour, women's and other groups, is mobilizing resistance throughout the week. The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty is hosting a tent city called Mulroneyville, all to protest the Tory agenda of cutbacks, free trade, the GST and wage freezes. For more info call Laurie at 531-4171.

Join the fight against the Reform Party.

The Coalition Against the Reform Party (CARP) has held two spirited demonstrations in Toronto. Preston Manning's arrival in Toronto was met with a strong picket of demonstrators exposing the Party's racist, anti-Quebec and anti-choice platform.

CARP meetings are held every second Wednesday, 5:30pm at 427 Bloor St. W in Trinity-St Paul's Church.

For more info. call Mary at 531-2369.

▼ We're here. We're queer. And we're better organized! ▼

Queer Nation Toronto is fighting back against the increasingly violent instances of gay bashing (and lack of positive police response - encouraging the basher to file charges against the victim doesn't count) occurring on our streets. A rally and "March Against Violence - Queer Without Fear" will be held on Saturday June 29, 7:30pm starting at Cawthra Park, 519 Church St. The march will take back the streets that gay bashers have claimed as their own. Bring whistles and other noise makers. ▼ ▼ ▼ ▼ ▼

Dykes and Tricks

by Laurie Bell

Anyone who is a parent will tell you how demanding it is. Children introduce a constancy to one's life that is as unique as it is challenging: they are always there and they are always going to be there. That recurring realization is powerful and, to say the least, scary as hell. It is not surprising that most days it is all most of us can do to get everything involved in a day of parenting done, much less have time for very much reflection about parenting itself. But it is critical that we do, not just in an abstract sense, but because inevitably the way we think about parenting determines how we construct our parenting and family relations.

Feminists have been analysing and critiquing "the family" as an institution for decades. Simultaneously, feminist women have made efforts to construct their own relationships in new ways, with varying degrees of success and support. For lesbians, non-traditional relationships are in one respect a given, since relationships with men are part of the traditional prescription. But after that, lesbian relationships can conform or aspire to the same relationship structures as traditional heterosexual family relations. This raises some interesting questions for lesbians when it comes to raising kids.

There have always been lesbians who are mothers, having had children while in straight relationships. They have faced a unique set of complexities that come with parenting their children after coming out.

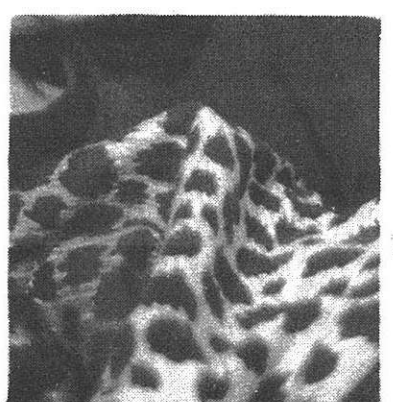
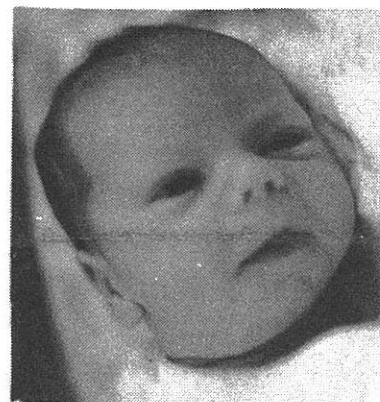
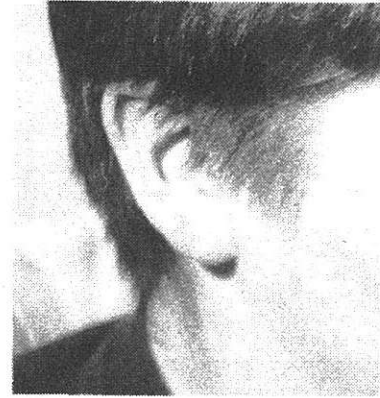
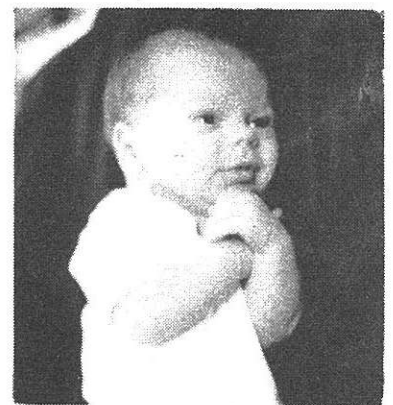
But I want to talk about the lesbian baby boom. Lesbians have recently begun pursuing parenthood as lesbians. Without engaging in a thorough analysis of parenting and family struc-

tures we are at risk of, one by one, couple by couple, duplicating or approximating much of the traditional heterosexual model of family-building and child-raising rather than challenging, opposing and transforming it.

My own experience venturing into the world of lesbian parenting has verified that it is not necessarily a revolutionary or radical activity in and of itself. I would argue it is often quite the opposite. While extremists might turn green at the thought of lesbians rearing and raising children, there is also a tendency to find comfort in lesbian parenting and lesbian families. All of a sudden you're not the sex and gender radical you once were to parents, relatives and the world. Now you're a couple with a kid just like everybody else. In that set up the gender of the parents becomes easier to overlook in many ways. In other words, structurally we appear and in fact are like straight couples and parents and that is usually soothing to others. It is worrisome to me because these models are the very ones that as feminists we have sought to deconstruct because we have identified them as being oppressive and problematic for women and children. And we may be proceeding under the false assumption that if one takes out a man and inserts a woman it fundamentally changes the relationship itself. For me, it leaves the most pressing questions about family structures not simply unanswered but un-asked.

"Parent" is a verb more than it is a noun, describing something extremely important that I do rather than identifying who I am. My parenting is informed by and greatly determined by other important things to me - lesbianism, feminism, socialism, and ac-

Considerations on Les



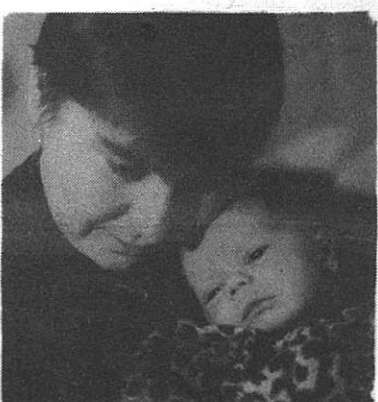
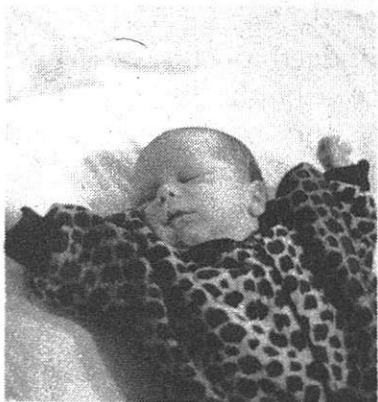
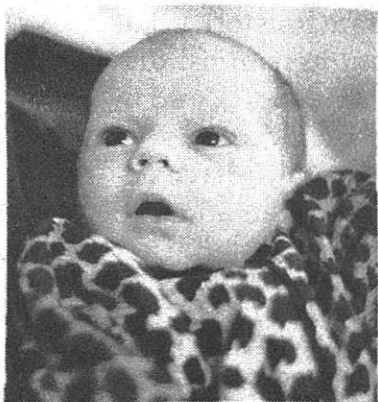
tivism. And now they in turn are affected by my parenting. It would be a distortion to pick out one of these primary activities and use it to identify myself.

As a lesbian who has no biological relationship with my child I have become very conscious of the reality that I am a parent because I parent; I am who I am to my son because of what I do with my son emotionally, practically, financially and so on. This is fraught with insecurities because everyone else seems to derive their parent status from who they are to the child, that is, mother or father. This dynamic has led lesbians, I believe, to look for a way to be a parent. We unfortunately adopt the model of the heterosexual

nuclear family model and try to squeeze ourselves in.

Perhaps this would not be so bad if the model was one worth aspiring to, worth adapting to lesbian reality. But it is this very model we have been critiquing and what's not good for the goose is not bound to be good for the gander. This model insists on the direct relationship between permanent monogamous relationships and childraising. But we know that this is a terrible contradiction. Relationships with children are meant to be lifelong and relationships with lovers are not necessarily meant to be so. Experience suggests in fact that this is rarely the case. Heterosexuals plod on, establishing family relationships on

bian Parenting



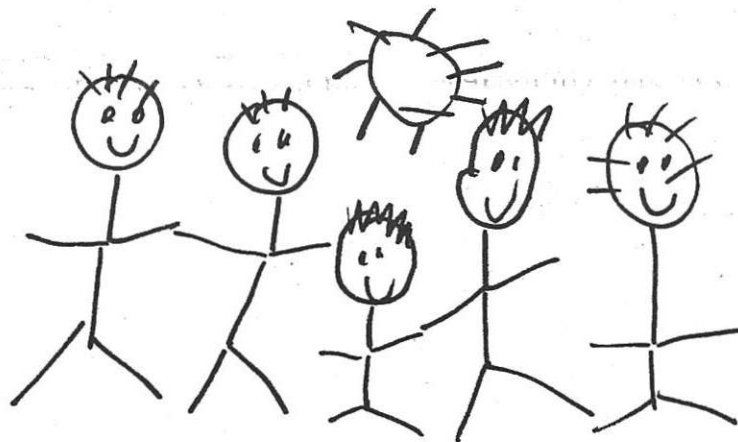
One objective of the feminist movement has been to involve men equally in the care and raising of children. It is also not to perpetuate couple-centred parenting as the only model for child-raising. I am less encouraged by the literature that depicts two mothers than I am by the attempts to promote child-raising in much more communal ways.

bell hooks says in "Revolutionary Parenting",

Childcare is a responsibility that can be shared with other childrearsers, with people who do not live with children. This form of parenting is revolutionary in this society because it takes place in opposition to the idea that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childrearsers. Many people raised in black communities experienced this type of community-based child care.

If my child's life is radically different from most of his peers, it is a distortion to focus the difference on the lesbian sexuality of his parents. His life is different because he spends more Saturdays at demonstrations than at shopping malls. Different because he spends Tuesday nights with a lesbian who is integrally involved in his life. Different because he spends Sundays with a heterosexual man who assumes emotional, practical and financial responsibilities that are usually reserved exclusively for parents. Different because his parents love each other deeply but do not view their relationship as lifelong lover, but as lifelong co-parents. Different because when the day comes for him to draw a kindergarten rendering of his family it is anyone's guess who he will sketch with his crayons and his child's eye of his own life.

photo: Left Eye



My Family

the basis of couple permanency as the acceptable ideal and, as if it were attainable, lesbians who want to parent should be aware of jumping on the bandwagon.

When relationships "break down" they are then forced to rely on the state to arbitrate their lives and their children's lives.

One of the most frequent questions I am asked is "What does your son call you?" In acknowledging that there is no existing language for my relationship to my son the underlying question is "who am I to him?" and what messages are we giving to him about who I am. Much of the current vernacular talks about two mothers. I find this an unfortunate response to the amiguities

presented by lesbian parenting. In the traditional nuclear family model, everyone has a place and a name. The wonderful possibility in lesbian parenting is that it shakes all that up. The voids, vacuums and uncertainties may be anxiety-producing on the one hand but they are also where the greatest potential for revolutionary activity to take place exists. If we rush in and fill them with variations on the heterosexual nuclear family theme we are missing opportunities to think and do parenting in radically new ways.

The point of lesbians engaging in parenting is not to make child-raising woman-centred. Child raising has been that historically.



TALKIN' BOUT A REVELATION: DISCUSSING SEXUAL ABUSE

by Debi Brock

When I first wrote about the sexual abuse of children and young people in 1984, my purpose was to critique the then recently released federal government sponsored Report of the Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youths (the 'Badgley Report', after its chairperson). I was concerned with the ways issues made visible by feminists are taken up by the state, but in the process are transformed into legal, medical and administrative categories and problems which may bear little relation to our original demands or intents. In a system where capitalist and patriarchal relations are deeply embedded in state institutions and practices, state responses to our demands often appear to accomplish little in the way of practically addressing the oppression of women, children and adolescents. It may even ultimately result in our losing control over how social problems like sexual abuse are conceptualized and addressed.

In the process of doing this work, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the way in which feminists were putting the issue of sexual abuse forward; through what we might refer to as a popular feminist discourse on sexual abuse. I want to raise a number of concerns about ways of approaching sexual abuse which have general currency among feminists. I do not provide a comprehensive critique, but merely draw attention to a number of issues where it is necessary to challenge existing assumptions. Nor do I develop a critique of the burgeoning literature, which is much more complex than what boils down in popular discourse, though one can certainly also locate these problems amidst the literature itself.

While children and young people (primarily female) are the targets of sexual abuse, its existence and prevalence is, as MacLeod and Saranga assert, a "problem of masculinity;" of how masculinity is socially constructed so that men are able to sexually abuse children and young people. To begin by ad-

ressing sexual abuse as a problem of masculinity is to bring into question from the outset the 'cycle of abuse' formulation which has gained general acceptance, including among feminists. This formulation, which poses that those who have been sexually abused themselves become abusers of their own children, has been accepted in a rather uncritical manner. How can this make sense when most of those who are abused are female and the vast majority of abusers are male? Women rarely sexually abuse their own children, whether they themselves have been sexually abused or not. This perspective appears to derive from the more orthodox literature on sexual abuse, which categorized women in the role of colluders in the sexual abuse of their children by men, by somehow allowing it to happen. This 'blaming mother' perspective is generally rejected by feminists as it shifts attention from the real male perpetrator, but nevertheless, the notion of a 'cycle of abuse' lingers on.

The call to action against sexual abuse has been supported by horrifying stories of coercion and trauma inflicted upon the victim/survivor. While this narrative certainly speaks to the reality of a great number of women and girls' lives, it is not the entire story. Where in this narrative can women who have experienced sexual abuse in a non-coercive context locate and make sense of their own experiences? Those who participated not because they were violently coerced, but because they 'didn't know that it was wrong'? What of those who found the experience pleasurable (and later felt ashamed about that)? Or those for whom molestation was such a part of the fabric of their every day existence that it was 'just the way that it was'? Without presenting a wide range of stories conveying how sexual abuse occurs, we do not get a picture of how normalized (and therefore all the more insidious) sexual abuse can be in the lives of women and girls. It also makes it difficult for those who have these kinds of experiences to put themselves in the picture by connecting their own abuse with the

sensational, dramatic stories that are so prevalent in feminist discussion, in media reports, and in the first person accounts of traumatic abuse which have become part of the 'dramatic true story' genre of mass market paperbacks.

Of course the ability of children and young people to give informed consent to sexual activity with an older male is rightly questioned. Any form of sexual contact indeed constitutes an abuse of power on the part of the perpetrator, and the absence of physical or psychological force does not justify the act. But knowing this does not address the issue at hand.

I suspect that the conflation of sexual abuse and 'sexual violence' adds to this obfuscation. This conflation identifies all sexual abuse as inherently violence against women, in order to identify and convey women's social powerlessness, and to link a range of practices inflicted upon women as a result of this lack of social power vis a vis the problem of masculinity. However, use of this term actually obscures the different ways in which sexual abuse occurs. I suggest that it would be less analytically fuzzy to map out patterns of 'sexual exploitation', a term which identifies the operative power relations without conjuring images of



beatings and other forms of physical force which may not have been part of the experience of sexual abuse. Liz Kelly also raises the point that we need to account for the "range and complexity" of how women define their own abuse, develop terms for those, and locate them on a "continuum" of sexual violence. However, while this kind of accounting is essential, Kelly's approach does not address the problems of using the term 'sexual violence' as the descriptive referent, which can actually work against her intentions. Nor

is a continuum model a very useful one, as it can be used to present a linear model with an implicit hierarchy of experience, from mild (i.e. inappropriate touching) to the horrific. To conceptualize sexual exploitation through a mapping of experiences allows us to better understand the complexities of women's experiences, an approach which allows the inclusion of other, non-sexual experiences (for example, beatings, racism, poverty) which are factors in oppression and exploitation. Then we might get a more holistic, integrative picture of women's lives and the place of sexual abuse in them, a process which cannot be accomplished through the use of a continuum model. This leads to a further concern.

All too often analyses and discussion of the dimensions and impact of sexual abuse is separated from consideration of other forms of abuse of power which women have experienced in their lives, particularly physical violence. Where physical violence is recognized as a contributing feature to the victim's trauma (for example, when it accompanies the sexual abuse), it appears to be subordinated to the impact of the sexual acts. Further, physical violence may also be occurring in separate contexts from the sexual abuse, and may have a far more traumatic impact than the incidents of sexual abuse. For example, young women and girls may be subject to frequent beatings which happen at different times and in different contexts than sexual abuse (and the beatings may also be inflicted by a person other than the one responsible for the sexual abuse). In Canada at least, this subordination of acts of physical violence to the impact of sexual abuse has had an impact on government policy. When the Badgley committee was mandated to investigate child and youth sexual abuse in Canada, as a result of demands upon the state by feminists to take action, it did so by addressing sexual abuse as a discreet phenomenon. (The findings and recommendations of the Badgley committee have substantively shaped changes to legal and social policy since their report's release; for example, through the passage of Bill C-15 which introduced numerous revisions to sex-related legislation in the Criminal Code of Canada.) While studies undertaken by the committee found that the rate of

physical violence was higher than that of sexual abuse (which was itself alarmingly high), they failed to address the significance of physical violence, as it was beyond their specified mandate. Finally, emotional trauma need not be a direct result of physical and sexual abuse, or even the abuse of male power. Also formative of who we are may be the every day experience of poverty, racism, neglect, or the early death of a parent. These cannot simply be dismissed as separate issues. Any of these factors may be more constitutive of our identity (and our pain) than the experience of sexual abuse in our lives. We need to be more aware of how all of our experiences intersect and merge with one another. Sexual abuse cannot be considered in isolation.

For women who have been sexually abused, that abuse becomes constitutive of their identity in feminist discourse, and other experiences are subordinated to the power of the narrative of the sexual abuse victim/survivor. Women who reveal themselves to have been sexually abused when young risk having this become constructed as the crux of their identity - considered the formative experience of who they are. As a result, other events in or conditions of their lives appear to take on a lesser importance, and their actions are perceived as always related to their status as victims/survivors, and thus the root of personality and source of troubles. While we want women to break the silence which has surrounded sexual abuse by telling their own stories, this shadowy prescriptivism can mean that to reveal oneself as having been sexually abused as a child is to lose further control over others' perceptions. How then can women try to take control over their own lives by speaking about their experiences of sexual abuse?

In feminist analysis, 'sexual abuse' has become a monolithic category and a totalizing discourse which blurs women's experiences while it seeks to uncover them. Part of how this is accomplished is through beginning analysis by using a unitary category of 'women'. Indeed it is a basic truism of feminism that the way in which sexuality has been gendered provides a cornerstone for the oppression of women, through the use or threat of sexual abuse and rape: our sexual capacities are always available to men without our

consent. It is a form of oppression which all women are subject to; that which we all experience simply in being women knows no boundaries of race, class, age or sexual orientation. But emphasizing what unites us so powerfully also blurs differences in how women experience abuse as a product of these same factors, when we need to know how abuse is experienced differently by women and devise strategies for addressing it which do not focus solely on gender. Some feminist therapists encourage women to reconceptualize their lives to fit the narrative of the victim/survivor, in the context of patriarchal social relations. But the 'victim of patriarchy' can only make partial sense of the experiences of the young black female who is sexually abused by the older white male. Or of the experiences of the girl from an impoverished family who must share a room with an older, abusive brother. When devising strategies for addressing sexual abuse, we need also account for the diversity of conditions which women face in, for example, reporting the abuse of their children to social service agencies or police. The Brixton Black Women's Centre points out that black women who report such abuse then have to face the racism of the police and the courts, toward themselves, their children and the perpetrator of the abuse. The manner of redress is likely to be shaped more by racism than be a response to the abuse.

Perhaps once we show how forms of oppression like sexual abuse reveal a "collection of experiences," entailing both similarities and differences, the term 'women' will develop a more fluid, open interpretation, and will become easier for us to use. Knowing women's different experiences of subordination is an essential basis for understanding women's lives, making connections, and forging a strategy for political action. The personal is, as ever, political. However, the current construction of sexual abuse may be leading us away from, rather than clarifying the dimensions of sexual abuse and what we need to do to stop it. Feminist analysis must be a tool which helps us to understand our own lives and act to change them and the social relations which have made them as they are.

The above has been abbreviated from a longer piece for inclusion in Rebel Girls' Rag.

continued from page 3 □ □ □ □ □ □ that has cut back regulation, that has lowered standards.. The impact of all these kinds of solution has meant that capital has become more concentrated -- that it's become freer."

Floyd Laughren, Treasurer of Ontario, explained to conference participants that the recent NDP Ontario government budget sets out to strengthen economic competitiveness through a skilled workforce, technological innovation and a solid social and physical infrastructure. This contradicts the federal conservative strategy of building Canadian

LABOUR NOTES CONFERENCE

by Barry Weisleder
OPSEU Executive Board
Member, Region 5

They came to Dearborn, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, from all over the United States, the Deep South, both coasts and the Mid-West. Another 200 came from Canada, a dozen from Mexico, and a few from as far away as Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines. Over one thousand union activists in all!

What brought them together, April 19-21, was the call of a unique publication, Labor Notes, which serves as a voice and a network for unionists fighting for rank and file democracy and greater militancy in our organizations.

The decade of the 1980s was not so good for labour, especially in the U.S. where the organized sector of the workforce fell below 16 per cent. Add to this: plant closings, concessions, labour-management cooperation plans, and scabs everywhere -- and you get the picture.

But the Labor Notes Conference was not the time or place to mourn, but rather to organize. The conference schedule helped to highlight signs of a turning point; a revival of the labour movement.

There were reports on important struggles -- NYNEX, Pittston, Eastern Airlines, New York Daily News -- where the "victory was in the fight itself", if not always in the result.

There were fascinating presentations by workers playing a leading role in new kinds of organizing: the Los Angeles Justice for Janitors campaign, incorporating aggressive picketing and civil disobedience tactics; the North Carolina-based Black Workers for Justice who set up workplace committees and hold

capital's global economic competitiveness by reducing labour costs, reducing the cost of the social infrastructure, high interest rates and a low dollar.

Sam Gindin from CAW argued that the Ontario government has taken up the wrong argument. He said that by adopting global economic competitiveness as its objective, the Treasurer would sooner or later start looking to lower wages. Rather, he said, we should adopt a different set of economic objectives, an alternative economic program and industrial strategy.

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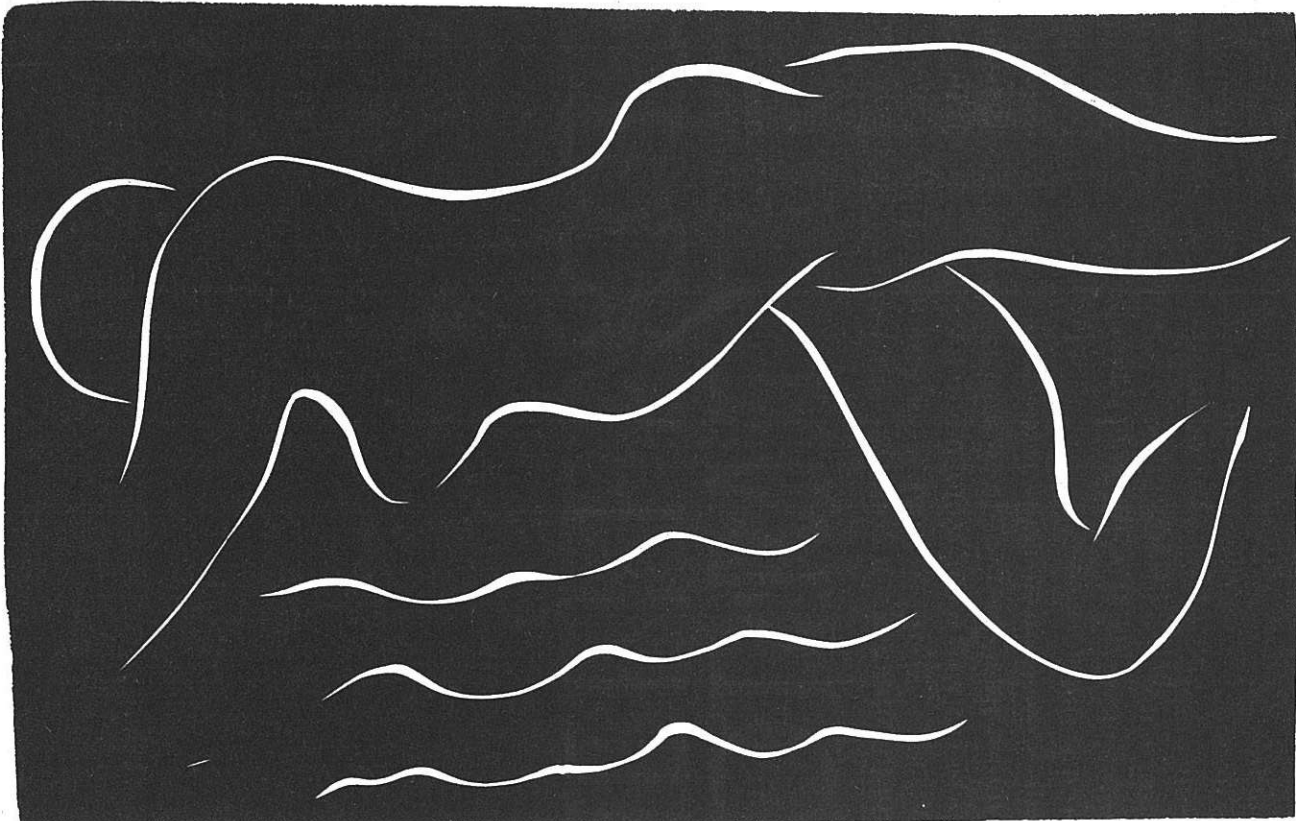
"speak-outs" in non-union plants long before union staffers arrive on the scene; The Woman Worker group from El Paso, who organize Latina women in garment sweatshops; and campaigners for union democracy, featuring Teamster Union reform candidate for President, Ron Carey, and United Auto Workers' New Directions reform caucus leader Jerry Tucker.

The most difficult challenge to participants at this conference was deciding which of the many simultaneous workshops to attend. There were meetings organized by sectors of the workforce (postal workers, auto workers, health care, education, phone, transit workers, etc.); and there were seminars held on specific topics (war, the environment, Central America, Asia, empowering women unionists, Mexico's Democratic Labour Movement, Fighting Plant Shutdowns, Labour Videos, Canada-U.S.-Mexico solidarity, and many others).

The workshops on continental trade integration, and Canada-U.S.-Mexico attracted overflow crowds. So did a workshop on Independent Political Action, featuring a representative of a new group called Labor Party Advocates, which is led by Tony Mazzocchi, Secretary-Treasurer of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union.

It really underscores the need for a publication, and a gathering, like Labor Notes, in Canada, to help make all of our unions more democratic and more effective in fighting the bosses' agenda.

But for the time being the best continental news source and inspiration for such a perspective is Labor Notes, to which you can subscribe by sending \$10.00 (U.S.) to 7435 Michigan Ave., Detroit, Michigan 48210.



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