

**December 16th 1989**

**Statement of the Women's Coalition Against Racism and Police Violence**

In the past few weeks we have heard a lot from spokespeople of the police force that people should not meet like this to discuss the crucial matter of racism and police violence. We have been told that we have no right to do so and that in doing so we are 'inciting violence' and are a 'threat to a free society'. We have also been told that any citizen who criticizes the police is maligning the character of people dedicated to law enforcement. We have further been told that rallies like this are sensationalist, create divisions and polarisation and provoke violent reaction in the community.

We are here today to say that we believe that in a democratic society the police must be accountable to the public for their actions. We are here today to say that as citizens we understand our freedom of expression to allow us to comment on all aspects of social institutions and whether or not they are serving us. The police force is no exception to this. In fact, if the police force becomes an exception to this rule we do not live in a democracy. We ask Mr. McCormack is this now a police state?

We are here today to demonstrate that our actions in protesting racism and police violence in fact creates a unity among those who believe that we have a right to call for police accountability. For the first time in many years this call brings together the many voices of communities throughout Metro Toronto that live in fear of violent reaction from the police because of the colour of their skin, their lack of economic power and/or simply because they are women.

No, Mr. Lymer, we are not only one hundred or so visible minorities. And yes the time has come to respond to inflammatory and threatening remarks made by yourself, some members of the Police association and Mr. McCormack himself. These remarks in fact are the ones which not only allow police brutality to continue in our communities but give sanction to the racist and sexist violence that is meted out against us everyday on the street.

Just as the massacre of the fourteen women in Montreal was no isolated incident but representative of the hatred of women in the society so too the shooting of Sophia Cook was no isolated incident but representative of the hatred of Blacks and other peoples of colour in the society. We caution the members of the police establishment in the city against feeding into this enormous social problem, and remind them that it is their responsibility to protect all communities from this growing tide of violence against us.

We are here today in an environment of grief and rage, fear and action in the wake of the killing of fourteen women in Montreal. It is important that every community in every quarter, in every city, in every province take time to mourn this atrocity. We ask you now to join us in a moment of silence for the women of Montreal.

Those killings only serve to strengthen our resolve in taking up the responsibility to speak out where all such injustices occur.

We in the Women's Coalition Against Racism and Police Violence are 35 women's groups and progressive organisations in Toronto. We felt it necessary to take up our responsibility after the police shooting of Sophia Cook, an innocent Black woman now paralysed from the waist down. As you know this was the third shooting of a Black person by police in Toronto in a 15 month period. The shootings of Lester Donaldson and Michael Wade Lawson ended in the loss of their lives.

It has been two months since the shooting of Sophia Cook and ten years since the Black community has asked and agitated for an independent civilian investigative body. In the ten years since the first spate of police killings, the Black community has paid in blood and brutality for the system where police investigate police and for a policing system which refuses to acknowledge racism as part of police practice in the Black community.

We have seen police chiefs come and go, we have seen task forces on policing report and leave. The window dressing has changed but the grim reality remains the same. Today we are dealing with a police bureaucracy which thinks that a few handshakes in a barber shop in the community will take away the pain and loss of our sisters and brothers, brutalised and killed. Today we are dealing with a Solicitor General who offers us an investigative body made up of ex-police officers in a lame attempt to meet our demand that police no longer investigate police. Today we are dealing with the results of an OPP investigation which says the Constable Cameron Durham, the officer who left Sophia paralysed did no more harm than a kid playing with a bb gun in a back yard.

Yes we are angry that after ten long years this is what we are offered. Yes we want it noted that the only acts of violence that have been committed in these encounters have been committed by the police. And yes, we want it noted that there has been no compensation and cold comfort for the families of Lester Donaldson, Michael Wade Lawson and now Sophia Cook. And yes, we are angry that these families have to bear the scrutiny and accusations of the media the politicians and the police as they attempt to put their lives back together in pain and loss. We are not talking about people's lives here not police statistics.

We have called you here today then to pay tribute to those lives, to show your material support for the long, difficult and expensive struggle which Sophia Cook and her family now face. In the last few weeks, as Sophia has lain wondering about her future, whether she would walk again and how she as a Black woman would raise her child in this racist society, she has bravely endured public attention and spoken out against the lenient charges against her attacker. Sophia is with us here today. We ask you to rise and applaud her courage.

We do not have guns. We do not have well paid beaurocrats. We do not have the

fat budget of the Metro Toronto Police Force. We do not have police or government power. What we have are a few placards, the occasional use of a photocopier and a whole lot of people who believe that if we speak out, if we call for justice, if we struggle for an end to racism and police violence it will alleviate the oppressive conditions under which Black people, women, working people, gays and lesbians, live in this society. Any civil right that any oppressed people fight for, all people benefit from. In the words of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, "An injury to one is and injury to all".