

THE FOUNDING OF A PROVINCIAL WOMEN'S COALITION:

CONNECTIONS CONFERENCE REPORT

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I. OVERVIEW

More than 200 women from across Saskatchewan attended the Connections Conference on November 28-29, 1987. The conference was organized by representatives from a number of women's groups in Saskatchewan, in order to respond to government budget cuts and their effects on women. This conference succeeded in bringing together a cross-section of individual women and women from more than 30 groups and organizations--and enabled them to work toward the goals of networking, support and empowerment of women. The outcome of the two-day conference was the formation of a Saskatchewan Women's Coalition, to be called "Connections." A Steering Committee was organized to continue the task of building a united response by women in Saskatchewan.

PROVINCIAL COALITION: RESPONSE TO CUTBACKS

In response to a massive series of provincial budget cuts, representatives of over fifty organizations in Saskatchewan had met on May 2, 1987 to begin the process of building a province-wide coalition. That meeting, organized on the basis of sectors (including labour, women, churches) had appointed representatives from each sector to sit on an "interim planning group." Colleen Myer, President of Saskatchewan Action Committee on the Status of Women (SAC), and Patsy Gallagher, trade union activist and member of Saskatchewan Working Women (SWW), were chosen to represent the women's sector. The Interim Planning Group for a provincial coalition organized a highly successful demonstration of 10,000 people on June 20th, protesting the Devine government's policies at the provincial legislature. They also continued the process of coalition building and at a provincial meeting on October 17th, the Saskatchewan Coalition for Social Justice was formally organized.

In an attempt to address women's concerns about the political agenda in this province and in order to choose representatives from the women's sector to the Steering Committee of the Saskatchewan Coalition, representatives of SAC and SWW jointly developed a proposal for a provincial meeting of women's groups. Such a meeting would enable women to develop a fight-back strategy and contribute to the development of the Saskatchewan Coalition for Social Justice.

Invitations were issued to women's groups from all over the province to attend a planning meeting; SAC spearheaded this effort by coordinating the work through its office. A core group

developed from these planning meetings; they determined that a provincial conference of women--to be called "Connections"--would be the best vehicle for facilitating a fight-back strategy. Women from many groups participated in the conference planning committee meetings:

Saskatchewan Working Women (SWW) - Dianne Barrow, Maureen Woods, Patsy Gallagher, Sheila Roberts, Christine Smillie, Lorraine Moulding;
 Saskatchewan Action Committee (SAC) - Marj Brown and Sandy MacDonald;
 Canadian Council for Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW) - Florence Flynn;
 Provincial Council of Women - Estelle Matthews;
 Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) - Women's Committee - Barb Byers;
 Saskatchewan Government Employees' Union (SGEU) - Women's Committee - Barb Dedi;
 Women's Centre, U. of Regina - Sharon Graham;
 Regina Healthsharing Inc. - Cydney Ruecker;
 Alternatives for Single Parents - Audrey Wildman;
 Saskatchewan Women's Resources - Bonnie Johnson and Marianne Weston;
 Kathryn McNaughton;
 YWCA Regina.

The planning committee applied to the Secretary of State for conference funding. Funding was provided for the conference and Nancy Poole, from the Saskatoon office of the Secretary of State, provided special assistance. However, funding was not received early enough to assist the planning committee and with no money available to subsidize travel costs, planning committee members were mainly from the southern part of the province.

PLANS FOR A WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

Most of the women involved in the planning committee participated as representatives of women's groups across the province; however they felt that the conference should be directed toward individual women, not groups. To this end, it was planned that the conference agenda would begin with an opportunity for women to express what was happening in their daily lives. The planning committee felt that this approach would be particularly effective in addressing the needs of aboriginal women, women from rural areas and women from minority groups. They hoped that with the wide diversity of women and women's groups expected to attend the conference, women would be able to achieve their goals of networking, mutual support and empowerment. Another objective of the conference would be to choose two representatives of the women's sector for the Steering Committee of the Saskatchewan Coalition for Social Justice.

The conference planning committee knew that a great deal of stress was being experienced in women's lives as a result of the

PC government's fiscal policies. In order to enable women to relate their personal feelings to the overall political situation and to overcome the sense of powerlessness and increasing numbness, it was decided to adopt a "despair and empowerment" model for the conference. The committee felt strongly that women needed a forum to vent the frustration and stress in their daily lives. Thus, a speak-out was planned for the early part of the agenda. Equally important, however, was the need for women to feel empowered in order to develop a united voice and strategies for action. To this end, strategy workshops and plenaries were planned for the conference.

The planning committee decided to invite speakers from women's coalitions in both Manitoba and British Columbia, in order to give delegates a sense of what had happened in those provinces; this would assist women in Saskatchewan in developing a balance between their expectations and the every day realities of coalition building.

Throughout the planning process, the committee made an effort to recognize and incorporate the principles of democracy, cooperation and egalitarianism into the conference agenda. It was felt that such an emphasis was essential if women were to truly speak out and voice their concerns on an equal basis.

There was a good deal of debate by the planning committee about the questions of "structure" and "process." While some women felt that a certain amount of structure should be incorporated into the conference agenda in order to provide political direction to conference participants, other women felt that the issues and strategies should be determined primarily by the women attending the conference. The planning committee decided that their role would be limited to organizing the physical setting of the conference, then serving as a facilitating group to enable the process to flow smoothly during the conference. The open-ness of the conference contributed to the dynamic Saturday morning workshops when women voiced a multitude of personal concerns about the effects of provincial cutbacks on their lives. However this great diversity of concerns made it more difficult to focus on a provincial strategy during the closing plenary session on Sunday.

The committee had planned for a target group of 100 women and according to pre-registrations, it appeared that things were well on target. Imagine their surprise and pleasure when the planning committee realized that a total of 205 women were actually attending the conference. The women participating in the conference were from a wide variety of backgrounds and they represented a number of regions in Saskatchewan. There were women from the north and from rural communities--women from places such as La Ronge, Uranium City, Lanigan, Sandy Lake, Swift Current, Buffalo Narrows, Sandy Bay--as well as women from the urban areas. There were aboriginal women, immigrant women, trade union women, gay women, community health care workers, students, women receiving social assistance, and government

employees. The higher conference fees paid by organizations helped to subsidize individuals attending the conference.

Women's groups represented at the first Connections conference included:

Sask. Action Committee on the Status of Women(SAC)
 Sask. Working Women (SWW)
 Can. Council for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW)
 Provincial Council of Women
 Saskatoon Council of Women
 Regina Council of Women
 Aboriginal Women's Council of Sask.
 Sask. Native Women's Association
 La Ronge Native Women
 United Church Women
 Rural Inter-Church Development Education Project
 National Farm Women
 Members of the Legislature, NDP Caucus
 Saskatchewan Federation of Labour
 Regina Labour Council
 Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)
 Sask. Government Employees Union (SGEU)
 Communication Workers of Canada (CWC)
 Energy and Chemical Workers Union (ECWU)
 Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
 Retail, Wholesale & Department Store Union (RWDSU)
 Saskatoon Equal Justice for All
 Saskatoon Community Clinic
 Sask. Child Care Association
 Regina Healthsharing Inc.
 Regina Women's Centre and Crisis Line
 LEAF Saskatchewan
 Sask. Assoc. of Women and the Law
 Family Service Bureau
 Regina Transition House
 Elizabeth Fry Society, Saskatoon
 Mental Health Association
 U. of Saskatoon
 U. of Regina, Social Work and Human Justice Depts.
 Sask. Assoc. for Safe Alternatives in Childbirth
 South Sask. Committee to Change Welfare Rates
 Working for Women
 Secretary of State
 Saskatoon Symphony
 University Women's Club
 SAASH
 and other groups.

A number of organizations made donations to help cover the costs of the Connections conference. SAC donated the staff time of their Provincial Coordinator, Marj Brown. SGEU contributed by printing the conference brochures and posters. LEAF made a special contribution toward the costs of the luncheon. And a donation was received from CLC, Local 481--SGEU staff.

GOALS OF THE CONFERENCE

Throughout the workshops, group discussions and plenaries at the Connections Conference, a number of issues surfaced:

1. Were women from all backgrounds and classes fairly represented in attendance at the conference?
2. Were women from all backgrounds and classes given an equal opportunity to speak out and be heard?
3. Was a good balance struck between structure and process?
4. Would we meet our conference goals of networking, empowerment and support?
5. Would we be able to effectively deal with large differences once they inevitably arose from the process?
6. Could anything of value and substance be learned from women's experiences in coalitions in other provinces?
7. Could we possibly achieve what we wanted within the time frame provided?
8. Could we develop and foster enough solidarity to strategize effectively?
9. Would something sustaining be built from this conference that would continue after it was over?

As the conference progressed and major areas of concern were identified, we began to feel a sense of importance and history-in-the-making. In spite of the difficulties and problems which arose, we had a solid sense of what women were about.

Due to the incredible time constraints at the final plenary plus our commitment to democratic principles, the plenary was badly rushed; this restricted full discussion of alternatives for a women's coalition. Despite these problems, we took some major steps at the end of the conference. We agreed to form a Saskatchewan Women's Coalition to be called "Connections." And a Steering Committee was organized, consisting of women who volunteered from a variety of groups throughout the province. The Steering Committee will now have to take up the tasks begun by the conference planning committee and address the issues identified during the conference. This group of 26 women is scheduled to have its first meeting in Davidson on January 24th.

What then was accomplished at the first Connections conference? Obviously, for each woman who attended the answers will vary. However, the critical first step has been taken. A number of major issues have been identified. Provincial networking has been initiated and will be continued through meetings of the various sectors. Bridge building among women's groups will have to be done in earnest, in order to develop solidarity and unity. Ahead of the Steering Committee there lies an inordinate amount of dedication and hard work--with the goal of building a strong movement against the cutbacks and for improving the quality of women's lives in Saskatchewan.

II. CONFERENCE AGENDA

SPEAK-OUT: WOMEN VOICE THEIR CONCERNS

The Connections conference began with a welcome from Kathryn McNaughton, who focussed our attention on the purpose of the conference--to respond to government cutbacks and the erosion of social services. She relayed the greetings sent to the conference by Shirley Carr, President of the Canadian Labour Congress, offering support for our fight-back campaign against cutbacks and privatization, and emphasizing that women uniting to achieve a strong collective face can turn the tide.

After explaining the format and process of the conference, Kathryn introduced the panel of four women. The first speaker was Priscilla Settee from the Aboriginal Women's Council. She noted that the entire Council had come to the conference in order to coordinate efforts for a fight-back.

Nettie Wiebe, a farm woman, described the effects of cutbacks in rural Saskatchewan, the economic constraints faced by farm women, and their special problems regarding child care. Marjorie McCreight, a student at the University of Regina, spoke about the effects of cutbacks on education. Fran Passsmore, who had been forced into early retirement from her government job, remarked on the irony of her situation--having worked at a good job but being happy now to retire from a job that had become so stressful under the present government.

Following the panel discussion, workshop participants broke into small discussion groups, focussing on three questions: the effect of the cutbacks on our personal lives; the effect of the cuts on organizations and groups: the effects of the cuts at a provincial level. An effort was made to combine the personal with the political. Responses of each group were recorded on large sheets. These lists of our concerns have now been typed up and will be made available to conference participants.

PANEL DISCUSSION: COALITION BUILDING

On Saturday afternoon, conference delegates were addressed by a panel of guest speakers. The first speaker was Frances Wasserlein, an organizer of Women Against the Budget (W.A.B.), a B.C. coalition formed in 1984 in response to the provincial government's fiscal policies. Her primary message was one of caution against letting our power be co-opted in the coalition building process. This problem contributed to the collapse of the B.C. coalition, although efforts are currently being made to re-organize.

Tammy Scott, representing the Manitoba Women's Agenda, spoke about the efforts made by women in her province to direct the

government's attention to issues of particular concern to women. One interesting aspect of the Manitoba group's approach was the intensive lobbying effort which grew out of their coalition building.

Pat Gallagher, trade union activist and member of SWW, provided a focus on the situation faced by women here in Saskatchewan. Her experience in the labour movement provided her with valuable insights for conference delegates. Pat also described the process of organizing the Saskatchewan Coalition for Social Justice, where she sits on the Steering Committee with SAC President Colleen Myer as one of two women's sector representatives. The provincial coalition, organized in response to government cutbacks, provided an impetus for the organizing of the Connections conference.

Following the panel discussion, questions were directed to the speakers. Debate was lively but limited, unfortunately, due to lack of time.

SATURDAY EVENING; WOMEN WORK AND SOCIALIZE

On Saturday evening, a social event was scheduled; women socialized over wine and cheese and viewed two excellent NFB films--the "Feminization of Poverty" and "Prairie Women."

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, a group of "weavers and gatherers" were working on integrating the major areas of concern generated by women in the morning's discussion groups. The "gatherers," along with members of the conference planning committee, reviewed the lists compiled by the groups--focussing on personal, group and provincial concerns--and drew up a list of six topics which they felt incorporated these concerns. The two "weavers," Fiona Bishop and Nancy Poole, then continued working into the night to incorporate this material into a report for Sunday morning's conference session.

That same evening, a group of "facilitators" met with Bonnie Johnson and Marianne Weston in order to plan the next day's workshops. The "facilitators"--guided by the values of democracy, responsibility, co-operation, honesty and egalitarianism--had two key tasks in the workshop session: to encourage discussion, ensuring that each person had an opportunity to speak; and to sum up the contents of the discussion so that a report could be made to the conference plenary.

REPORT FROM THE PLANNING COMMITTEE: THE TASK AT HAND

Sunday had been planned as a day for women to develop strategies. The morning session began with a report from the Planning Committee, presented by Fiona Bishop. Fiona summarized the effects of the P.C. government's attacks on women in Saskatchewan and then challenged us all to get on with the task of developing strategies for action. Her report got us off to an effective start:

 What's the next step for women in this province? That's what we have to deal with today. We don't have a lot of time, so let's get at it.

Yesterday, we identified the issues. Some very fine lists were made of personal, group and provincial concerns. You made the lists, you did an excellent job. Rather than go into a lot of detail, let me say this: the conference organizers have made a commitment to get these lists typed up in their entirety and they will be mailed to you in time--be patient. Give some thought to how you or your organization can use these lists--perhaps as a tool to lobby. But more importantly, take a look around this room and see who made the lists up. We represent a broad range of women. It is important that you acknowledge that when you are reporting back to whomever sponsored you, or just when you are telling other people about this weekend.

You were very clear in what you were saying, in your understanding of the issues. There was a consistency, a wisdom that surfaced through the maze of sheets that were up on the wall. What was really excellent, was the recognition that there is also a consistency in the attacks against us. And that it is pretty clear why. Before I get into that, I want to talk about the "feelings" that keep coming up. Listen to them. I'll list a few:

anger - fear - apathy - isolation - class separation -
 loss of security - impact on friendships - the division
 between the haves and the have nots - no choices -
 exhaustion disenfranchisement - burn out -
 intimidation - doom - resentment - illness -
 demoralization - blaming - no hope for the future -
 alienation - passivity - stress, stress and more
 stress - anger

As groups, you felt under attack: the union busting; the constant attacks against native peoples, non-government organizations, advocacy groups, and counselling services; the gay-bashing, the poor-bashing. As providers of services to women, you have little control over your work. Further, whatever group you are from you still have to work in your own area.

And now, in consideration of provincial concerns, you were also very clear here. There was a consistent theme throughout: there is a political attack by right wing ideology going on. You all talked about it in one way or another: free trade, privatization, contracting out, deregulation, Meech Lake, and cuts, cuts and more cuts; all in order to "alleviate the provincial deficit." It is all part and parcel of the Tory strategy, and we have not faced this kind of attack before. It is cold, calculated and methodical (such as what has happened to farm ownership in Saskatchewan).

The result is that people are being divided--not just divide and rule, but divide and intimidate. This is clear through the racism, the pitting of one women's group against another for the precious few dollars that are still being given out for service delivery. Consider the impact on the poor, the spin-off effects, the increase in volunteerism, the need for non-government organizations to constantly fund-raise. And the question is WHY? Because you are fighting a political strategy. It is a strategy that pits services against profits. A philosophy that sees the answer to unemployment as giving money and tax write-offs to businesses, in the hopes that they will hire employees and create new jobs, instead of looking at a full employment policy.

At a time when support services are so desperately needed, they are being cut back. All as a direct result of P.C. strategy. Our province is witnessing the total erosion of human services. And you were able to list them all.

You also know that we are not alone. B.C. is under attack. Manitoba is facing wage freezes. We know about the Fraser Institute in B.C.--and the links that exist with Pirie in Britain (Thatcher's mentor). We know they are all connected, and that they learn from one another.

But you know something, we all learn from each other too. Remember what we learned yesterday about the Manitoba and B.C. experiences.

All of you, as a group, were clear about another common theme. It is this: we cannot accept the fact that there is nothing to be done to fight back. True, we get demoralized sometimes. But most of all, we get very angry. And it is in the anger that we find the strength to fight back.

So, you know what the problems are, but you also know what the solutions are. Let's get on with the task at hand and develop the strategies for action.

SUNDAY WORKSHOPS: STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

The strategy workshops were organized around six major areas of concern generated by the Saturday discussion groups: Health, Poverty, Human Rights, Employment, Education and the Rise of the Right Wing Agenda. Two other areas had also surfaced: the Feelings being experienced by women as a result of social conditions (Fiona touched on this area in her report); and Childcare (this issue was identified in the lists of concerns and will need to be addressed more fully at a future conference).

Conference participants were asked to select a workshop group from among the six areas of concern. Facilitators assisted the groups by focussing the workshop discussions, while recorders kept notes for each group. The assistance of these women was invaluable.

The workshops were scheduled to last for an hour and a half, not nearly enough time to address the tasks at hand. Each workshop group was asked to consider four questions:

1. What is the change you want? What do you want to achieve? What is the end you want? (Each facilitator was encouraged to limit this question to 3 or 4 main goals)
2. What are the strategies and activities which would get us closer to the goals as stated from question #1?
3. What groups or individuals would you want to work with to achieve this change?
4. In what ways could those working with you and your issue relate to others working on other issues? How can we all share what we are doing and work together in areas where our issues touch?

When the conference returned to plenary session, each facilitator reported on her workshop's goals and strategies, the groups they would work with and their proposals for the next step to be taken by women in Saskatchewan.

III. WORKSHOP REPORTS

WORKSHOP GOALS

The two workshops on human rights proposed a number of goals: get rid of Grant Schmidt; demand justice and equal opportunity for all people (including the right to speak out, the right to healthy lives, childcare, employment); expand and strengthen the Human Rights Commission (to provide better protection for sexual orientation, basic human needs and freedom from fear and assault); make the government more accountable at all levels; challenge racism and class action.

The employment/unemployment/under-employment group focussed on several problem areas and proposed three goals: full employment, with work available for everyone; better enforcement of the rights of trade unions; reinstatement and better enforcement of occupational health and safety standards.

The two health care groups called for both short term and long term goals. Their immediate goal is to stop the erosion of the Saskatchewan health care system, by reinstating programs and focussing on patient care. Their long term goal is to create an improved health care system based on universal accessibility, a comprehensive health education system with an emphasis on preventative strategies, and community-based health care.

The workshop on cutbacks in human services proposed three goals: comprehensive and integrated support services to be seen as essential rights; an empowering, just human service system that allows the opportunity for all persons' needs to be met with dignity, integrity and equality; appropriate funding for reinstating and increasing services.

The workshop on poverty proposed both a short term goal and a long range goal. Their immediate goal is to increase the level of social services and to redirect the objectiveness of the whole program. Their long range goal is to create an awareness about the root causes of poverty with the aim of changing the system which creates poverty (including support for the right of Aboriginal peoples to self-government).

The group discussing education cutbacks called for three goals: adequate government funding for open access to quality, autonomous education; tuition fees based on a sliding scale according to the student's income; special programs for special needs (with childcare support at all levels, student project grants in specific areas and facilities for disadvantaged students).

Three workshop groups met to discuss the rise of the right wing agenda. At the most general level, they made the following proposal--to raise the consciousness of people to collectively

determine a new model of governance which strives to meet the needs of all. The groups also proposed that we undertake education at the grassroots level, initiate actions which put the right wing on the defensive and develop an alternative agenda for women. On the political level, there was a call for a general election, a ban on free trade and privatization, inclusion of a Charter of Rights for Women in the Meech Lake accord, and a call for feminist socialists to get more involved in the political process.

WORKSHOP STRATEGIES

The two workshops on human rights proposed a number of important strategies:

- build unity and support systems at the personal level and build solidarity at the political level;
- make use of already existing organizations in the coalition building process and create new organizations;
- utilize the media to our advantage--through letter writing campaigns and letters to the editor;
- enable women to gain better control over funding;
- educate and raise awareness--for the empowerment of women (by providing information and resource kits);
- to plan and take part in civil disobedience actions (such as marches and pickets), and creative protests (such as humorous award ceremonies--"Jerk of the Year" awards);
- engage in effective lobbying;
- maintain our momentum and continue to build strength;
- initiate legal challenges when our rights are being threatened;
- advertise and promote our work through already existing networks, (e.g., newsletters).

The employment/unemployment/under-employment group stated emphatically--an injustice to one of us is an injustice to all; they proposed that by looking after the minority groups who are exploited by profiteers, we will all achieve equality. The group also called for lobbying of political allies sympathetic to our cause and presentation of a brief to the legislature outlining what we want done.

The two health care groups focused on the effects of the government's spending priorities and proposed strategies which include: speaking out in public forums (e.g., community and constituency meetings); building a federation of health care organizations which will provide a united front; consolidating all health care workers (professionals, union members, community workers, and health advocates) in order to achieve and maintain solidarity; considering civil disobedience actions (such as mass applications for exemptions under the drug plan or contacting dentists en masse for service during times such as Christmas break).

The workshop on cutbacks in human services outlined strategies such as: a vigil to publicize needs for services; a forum in a familiar public place; creation of a planning committee to deal with policy and funding (to be comprised of a strong client voice plus representatives from both governmentt and human services organizations). They called for the development of an over-all women's agenda which would set a model for how the Department of Human Services should be run--in other words, to take control.

The group discussing education cutbacks called for: non-partisan elected representatives from all student and teaching bodies to advise the Minister; educational strategies (including publications, pamphlets, letters, news releases); lobbying strategies such as an "On-to-Ottawa Trek," a one day shut-down of all educational institutes combined with a parade to the Legislature; and an effective campaign for a fairer tax system to fund education for all.

Three workshop groups met to discuss the rise of the right wing agenda. Many important strategies were put forward:

- develop a mechanism for analysis;
- instigate a process for co-ordination of information among the many groups involved;
- form a Provincial Steering Committee at the conference to continue the work (including co-ordination of the actions proposed in the strategy sessions);
- consider a major action around International Women's Day or Mother's Day;
- plan a women's alternative agenda in response to the right-wing agenda presently being put forward;
- organize a mega-education campaign regarding Free Trade and Privatization;
- continue to focus on our common goals;
- consider a women's public strike (similar to the one in Iceland);
- work within the Saskatchewan Coalition for Social Justice.

WORKSHOP PROPOSALS - OTHER GROUPS

When considering who they would like to work with in building a fight-back campaign, the workshops suggested a broad spectrum of groups and individuals including:

- women's groups
- community groups
- rural groups
- farm women
- churches
- labour unions
- union women's committees
- professional groups
- Sask. Coalition for Social Justice
- other coalitions
- minority groups and immigrants
- Aboriginal women and Native groups
- SIFC & Gabriel Dumont
- Native schools, band councils
- seniors
- students, student unions
- university women's centres
- teachers & faculty unions
- education associations
- day care centres & pre-schools
- human rights groups
- health care workers and health care consumers
- unions of the unemployed
- politicians and political parties
- NDP women
- Christian feminist network
- neighbours and friends
- mothers

Essentially, it was suggested that we attempt to work with all groups and individuals with whom we share a common goal.

WORKSHOP PROPOSALS - THE NEXT STEP

When considering the next step to be taken by women in Saskatchewan, the workshop groups made some key proposals which became the basis of discussion in the final plenary session. These suggestions ranged from plans for specific actions to proposals for an ongoing provincial women's coalition. The most outstanding of the plans included:

- organize a provincial women's coalition;
- articulate clear objectives;
- conserve our energy and focus;
- sponsor regular conferences to continue the work;
- continue networking - (a point made by all groups);
- organize a clearing house for information (using SAC as a central resource centre);
- compile a master phone tree of women's organizations;
- ensure the publication of unbiased news reports;
- make announcements to the public about the real reasons for job actions;
- continue education of the public (with special attention to youth);
- utilize public forums to highlight our vision of society
- formulate a Disaster Plan;
- undertake actions which will galvanize the public and force our agenda to the forefront;
- adopt civil disobedience strategies;
- commence fundraising efforts;
- inform all provincial groups about the birth of Connections;
- work towards resolving conflicts between women's groups which may weaken solidarity;
- form a Feminist Socialist political party.

Women now turned their attention to the next step, implementing these plans in order to organize a fight-back against the P.C. government's budget cuts.

IV. FINAL PLENARY

There were extreme time constraints during this plenary session, as women "raced against the clock" to bring the conference to a conclusion. Not only had the Sunday sessions begun late, but women at the Connections conference had undertaken an immense task, in transforming their "despair" into "empowerment."

The plenary was facilitated by Bonnie Johnson and Marianne Weston of Saskatchewan Women's Resources. With the time so short, feelings were running high. After workshop reports were given by each facilitator (and recorded on large sheets by Maureen Woods and Nancy Poole), microphones were set up so delegates could address their questions or concerns to the group at large. Intense feelings were experienced as individual women voiced their concerns.

ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S CONCERNS

Bernice Hammersmith, a member of the Aboriginal Women's Council--one of the groups invited to participate in the Connections conference, addressed the plenary on behalf of Aboriginal women. She commented on some of the problems experienced by Native women who attended the conference and expressed the hope that stronger links would be built between Aboriginal women and other women's groups.

Bernice emphasized that Aboriginal women had come to the conference to share common concerns as well as common solutions, but that they had had problems connecting with other women at the conference. She spoke of the racism which tended to downgrade the personal experiences and solutions which they had as Indian people. Bernice pointed out that Native people have been experiencing for the past hundred years the problems identified by women at the Connections conference--problems such as poverty, unemployment, poor health care, lack of control over their lives, lack of human rights. She reminded women at the conference that "your basic human and civil rights have never been ours."

Bernice issued an invitation to women at the conference on behalf of Aboriginal women--"that you come see us in our communities, that you share with us as just women what kinds of problems we face." She urged women's groups to come and support Aboriginal women in their struggles: "when you ask for our support, please come and support us." She urged women at the conference to listen carefully to Native concerns: "we're willing to talk if you're willing to listen." Bernice pointed to the Aboriginal struggle for self-government. She noted that Aboriginal women had another set of problems--not only as women but also as Indian people.

Bernice promised that if Native women were allowed to participate fully in the women's coalition, "you're going to have the most dedicated women you ever saw--because we know what you're facing now." She emphasized how "we'll be really powerful if we're together."

WOMEN EXPRESS THEIR CONCERNS

Other groups and individuals also addressed the plenary, voicing their concerns. One woman who explained how she had first become involved in the Women's Community Centre as a victim of assault, described her experiences and her positive feelings about the conference.

A representative of Immigrant Women of Saskatchewan came forward to express her thanks for the conference and to explain some of the special concerns of immigrant women. She explained how immigrant women have extra problems as immigrants on top of all the problems faced by women--that they face problems such as destitution, isolation and terrible working conditions. She emphasized that immigrant women are in dire need of support from other women.

Another woman expressed her desire to have at least one outcome from the Connections conference: "that we say that we as a group are not satisfied with Grant Schmidt as our Minister responsible for the status of women in this province." Her statement was greeted with sustained applause.

PROPOSALS FOR A WOMEN'S COALITION

While there had been a decision by the Planning Committee not to have formal resolutions brought forward at the plenary session, it became apparent that there was a need to respond collectively to the proposals being made from the floor. In line with recommendations coming forward from the strategy workshops, a number of proposals were put to women gathered at the final plenary.

Women at the conference responded positively to the proposal that we form a continuing umbrella organization of women provincially and that a steering committee be formed to accomplish this task.

It was then proposed that "we state for the record that this conference determines that we are a women's coalition and that we are called Connections." Conference participants were asked to stand to indicate their agreement with this statement. When we stood up in overwhelming numbers, the motion was declared passed.

Next, it was proposed that we elect a steering committee for the coalition, with the following tasks:

1. to do a follow-up on the conference (by amalgamating information and distributing it);
2. to look at planning an event around International Women's Day;
3. to develop a basis of unity;
4. to determine our resources in the women's organizations that can be employed to further the goals of the women's coalition.

It was also suggested that the steering committee undertake other tasks, such as building closer ties with Native women in Saskatchewan. To this, we responded with applause.

It was then suggested that we proceed to elect a steering committee; however, conference participants were also reminded of the tight time constraints. An extension of daycare services and lunch until 1:30 p.m. gave us a little breathing space. We were thus able to turn our attention to the selection of a steering committee.

It was suggested that we have people who are interested in participating on the steering committee do so on a volunteer basis, in order that the process be inclusive and not exclusive. This recommendation was greeted with applause. Two options were proposed--that we either have volunteers and nominations from the floor, or that women come together voluntarily to form a group at this time. Amid concerns about having a democratic election, it was suggested that we ensure that no-one be excluded from the steering committee, and that if volunteers came forward at that time, it would be possible to have a steering committee confirmed by election at a future meeting. The important thing was to get going now.

At this point, women were asked to come to the front of the room if they wished to be part of an ad-hoc steering committee for the Connections coalition. In a wave of solidarity, 26 women came forward to introduce themselves to the plenary and to sign up as members of the steering committee. While most of the women joined as individuals rather than as representatives of groups (since there was no time for anyone to consult), it became clear that the new steering committee was broadly representative of a diversity of groups and interests. In addition, it was suggested that other women might be added to the steering committee at a later time, in order to ensure that it was representative of all sectors. The Connections Steering Committee members are:

Lois Abrahams, Laura Allison, Jane Bouey, Barb Byers, Merina Chapiel, Arati Chattopahayay, Tes Cournoyer, Elaine Crebo, Barbara Dedi, Pat Desjarlais, Kim Duns, Florence Flynn, Lauri Gilchrist, Sharon Graham, Brenda Green, Ronnie Leah, Georgina Loucks, Sandy MacDonald, Marjorie McCreight, Estelle Matthews, Cydney Ruecker, Neena Saxeena, Judith Sunde, Donna Yew, Bernadette Wagner, Audrey Wildman.

The conference was asked for its confirmation of this group of 27 women as a steering committee for the Connections organization in Saskatchewan. This support was indicated by the sustained applause of all gathered there.

Before the plenary was adjourned, the conference also confirmed that Pat Gallagher and Colleen Myer would continue as representatives of the women's sector to the steering committee of the Saskatchewan Coalition for Social Justice.

At the very end of the plenary session, the entire conference linked hands in a circle, accompanied by a song of solidarity.

THE WORK CONTINUES

It is now up to the Planning Committee to carry out the tasks assigned to it by the Connections conference and to organize a meeting of the new Steering Committee, in order to ensure that the coalition building continues. Recommendations about where we go from this point will need to be developed by both groups of women, with particular attention to the following points:

- to develop a provincial voice
- to develop a statement of unity
- to organize an action for International Women's Day
- to develop an effective press strategy
- to ensure that all sectors and regions are represented on the steering committee
- to develop links among special groupings of women (e.g., regional meetings of trade union women)
- to organize sectoral meetings (e.g., health care, education)
- to continue being represented in the Sask. Coalition for Social Justice.

Much of the organizational work of the conference was facilitated by SAC Provincial Coordinator Marj Brown. SAC has agreed to have Marj available as a staff person to assist the steering committee in carrying out its tasks, if committee members decide they would like to have this assistance.

The Connections conference was the crucial first step in building a provincial women's coalition. This conference report is the second step in the coalition building process. The work has only just begun, as we move closer to our goal of having a strong, united voice for women in Saskatchewan.

In order for the Steering Committee to continue to mailout information to the delegates of the Connections conference we must resort to the distasteful task of begging for money. The first mailout cost \$1.11 for each person who received a package. The cost of this package will be approximately \$50. each. Our funds are dwindling rapidly! If you have a few dollars to spare we would really appreciate donations.

In an attempt to keep our costs down we will be attempting to utilize already existing newsletters and publications to print Connections material. Watch for Connections articles in the Network magazine put out by the Saskatchewan Action Committee and in the Saskatchewan Coalition for Social Justice Newsletter. If you have newsletters that would publish Connections materials please let us know.

We hope to see you at the Connections meeting on April 8, and at the Peoples Congress. Please help us build our network by returning your information forms as quickly as possible. If those of you who can't attend the meeting have any suggestions please include them on your forms.

Have a happy spring!

In sisterhood:

Marj Brown

Marj Brown for
the Connections Steering Committee

March 15, 1988
2149 Albert St
Regina, Sask

Dear Connections Participants,

Greetings from the Connections Steering Committee. I hope everyone received our first mailout which included the conference sum-up and information on the event we planned in support of the Pineland Co-op workers in Nipawan.

The Steering Committee is continuing to meet regularly. We are working on developing a Statement of Purpose and long and short term goals for Connections.

We now have regular representatives from the Steering Committee attending meetings of the provincial Coalition for Social Justice. Enclosed is the newsletter from the provincial coalition as well as a pamphlet describing the Peoples Congress, a conference which will be held in Saskatoon April 9 and 10.

We would like to encourage women who attended the Connections Conference to register for the Peoples Congress. It will be a valuable opportunity to get together with individuals and groups from other sectors in the province and to extend the work we began at Connections.

Billets and subsidies will be available for the Congress. For further information please call Nancy Carmichael in Saskatoon 242-1560 or Jacqui Barclay in Regina 347-0680.

We are also using the opportunity provided by the Congress to hold a Connections meeting. The Steering Committee needs to receive feedback and to gather ideas for activities. We are suggesting that women who have been or are interested in being involved in Connections meet on **Friday April 8 at the Bessborough Hotel at 8:00 P.M.**

Enclosed in this package of information is a form which we hope you will fill out and send in. The Steering Committee is looking into possibilities of developing a Connections phone tree so we are asking you to include your phone number. To assist us in networking by sectors we have asked you to indicate what your areas of interests are.

In addition to the above mentioned materials we have also included material from the Reproductive Rights Coalition of Saskatchewan. We realize that Connections does not have a policy on reproductive rights at this time, however we thought some of you may be interested in taking the suggested actions.