

A REPORT BACK TO THE SIMON FRASER LEFT ON WOMEN'S CAUCUS SUMMER ORGANIZING By Marcy Cohen and Jean Rands, September, 1969

NOTE: This paper was originally written for a conference of the Simon Fraser Left held September, 1969. We reproduced it for the Women's Liberation Regional Conference October 1969 because we felt it would be valuable for that discussion as well.

Last February, Women's Caucus in Vancouver was a series of discussion groups which were discussing organizing but not organizing. We had just begun to involve people other than SFU students and to move off campus. The Caucus was essentially a part of the Simon Fraser left, and divisions in the left as a whole were reflected in the women's movement though never clearly formulated.

Now Women's Caucus has regular monthly membership meetings, an office in the Labor Temple, a mailing list (membership) of over two hundred, most of whom are not students, and a newspaper. We still have many informal discussion meetings, but now they involve women who are not students and are new to the left, and the discussions about organizing are much more concrete.

Until now we haven't really integrated the work we are doing in Women's Caucus with the work of the left as a whole or had much discussion either in Women's Caucus or with the rest of the left on the relevance of women's caucus work to the left as a whole. This paper is a concrete statement of where women's caucus is at, and an attempt to provide some basis for continuing discussion.

I STRATEGY

A. Why We Were Able to Move Off Campus

The first moves off campus by women's caucus were made in the context of the frustration following the end of the occupation of the administration building and the arrests of the 114, and the "worker-student alliance" discussion, when the whole campus left was looking towards off-campus work. We were quiet unsure of our perspective at the time, but on hindsight it seems there were two basic reasons why the move could be successful.

First, we found that the common oppression of all women as women allowed us to quickly overcome the superficial differences in our experience. The definition of ourselves, whether as workers, students, or housewives, has a common basis in the role of women in the family.

Second, as women students we were never made to believe that we would be the future elite. Although the proletarianization of university education affects all students, in the sense that only a tiny minority of university students will ever be part of an elite, it is more obvious for women (both students and workers) than for men. The overwhelming majority of "professional" women are either teachers or nurses — essentially workingclass occupations — and 96.7% of all women professionals are wage or salary earners rather than self-employed (1961 census).

B. Women's Caucus: A Socialist Organization?

When we moved off campus we held a number of informal discussions around what direction women's caucus should take. We got hung up when trying to formulate demands. There was a tendency to accept the definition of any demand as reformist if it could be met within the existing system. We were uncertain as to whether or not we should advocate that women's caucus declare itself a socialist organization, and how we should function as socialist within women's caucus.

But being women we were super-activists and never seriously considered ourselves theoreticians anyway, so we didn't let this hold us up for long. Through our experience, and more or less consciously, we arrived at a number of criteria by which to evaluate demands:

1. that they pose the problems and solutions as social rather than psychological.

The necessity of finding causes in the social system than in the failure of individuals, is a problem that faces us generally in organizing. But the problem is even more severe with women, because of their atomization in the nuclear family. Even when women do social labor outside the home, that is only secondary — their primary function is the isolated, individual work within the home. Because of this, it is particularly easy for women to see their problems as individual; they are particularly vulnerable to psychologizing.

In talking to women, we have been very hard in raising the social causes for their personal problems. We have been surprised at how quickly women understand that the reasons for their nervous breakdowns are social; that the institution of the family and their economic dependence within it, not individual men, are responsible for their situations; that the position of women cannot be changed through putting individual women into positions within the power structure.

2. that all our demands be raised in the context of building a mass, extra-parliamentary movement of women.

From the recognition that the problems are social, it becomes easy to counterpose the building of a social movement to parliamentary kinds of action, be they lobbies or electing individual women to positions of power. Every woman can see that laws that are passed regarding equal rights are manipulated, and women in power are powerless to represent women, so long as there is not a real movement, independent of the parliamentary system.

This approach to the problem of parliamentarism has produced much more relevant discussion in women's caucus than would the abstract debate over whether or not the caucus is "socialist". The lessons of the black analogy are accepted readily by women who do not yet call themselves socialists, while NDP women (who consider themselves socialist) often begin from a more conservative position.

3. that as much as possible, the demands we pose around specific issues be for collective control.

So long as the discrimination against women in the work force and the educational system is linked to the role of women in the family, the demands of a women's movement cannot remain on the level of either welfare-statism or limited bread-and-butter trade union demands. The demand of working women for day care poses the issue of social responsibility for children, and the priorities of a system which puts sole responsibility for children on individual parents. The challenge to discrimination against working women is a challenge to role definitions throughout society, and links into a general workers' control strategy.

But this process requires our conscious intervention as socialists. Our work around abortion must concentrate on the class bias of abortion legislation and attack the laws as one example of the lack of control by ordinary people over their lives. We must consciously challenge the relationship between parents and children, the institution of marriage and the nuclear family, counterposing collective responsibility and control, around the issue of day care. On the job, we have to cut across the separation of "economic" demands from the social problems of women which has been perpetuated in the trade union movement, raising issues like day care, educational channelling, and sexual objectification, in the context of demands for equal pay and equal job opportunity.

Demands in themselves are not revolutionary proposals. At this point, our demands are mostly tools for raising discussion, and general consciousness, to a higher level. These same demands can soon become tools for actually mobilizing people in confrontation with the system. No single demand can be revolutionary, whether or not it can be met within the system. Demands are valuable if they generalize individual problems, pose the necessity for collective action, and link the various aspects of women's oppression so that only social solutions are possible.

We see the women's movement as a legitimate part of the movement against capitalism, not as a tactic or an arena from which to "recruit" women to something else (although because of the nature of the constituency, many members of women's caucus will be members of other organizations). Women's issues themselves lead to a Marxist analysis. Only a movement with that analysis can challenge the bourgeois family, the role definitions and structure of work inside and outside the home, as is necessary for the solution of even the most immediate problems of women.

II SHORT TERM STRATEGY — 'SOWING SEEDS'

The work of women's caucus over the summer has been primarily general educational work, and we have had considerable success in reaching many people, and raising debate and discussion of the issues in many new areas. The result of this emphasis has been that while we have not yet established caucuses of women in work-places or neighborhoods, the women we have involved in women's caucus are those who are already militant organizers, and can be part of the nucleus for these groups in the future.

Women's Caucus is just beginning to be the focus for the propaganda and organizing that these women do on the job, particularly through The Pedestal. In spite of the fact that women's caucus off-campus was initiated by students, our tactics off-campus have generally been determined by working women, those who are immediately involved in the situation.

A. General Educational Work

Our public educational work has been carried on on several levels. We have had quite a bit of coverage in the media. We have sent speakers to meetings of all kinds of groups from NDP clubs to high school unions to YWCA. We have distributed thousands of leaflets, mostly to working women.

We have also carried on more concentrated propaganda around the education system. We considered teachers particularly important not only because they are oppressed as women, but also because they themselves perpetuate the myths in the school system and participate in the channelling of women through the school system.

This summer we decided to concentrate on the 5000 teachers at UBC Summer School. Our work included discussions in classes, public meetings and leaflet distributions. The women generally understood what we were doing, the response was good, and women committed themselves to do organizing, but no functioning group was formed.

General educational work will likely continue to be the main focus of women's caucus for some time. Assuming similar success in the future, the results of this work will be to bring to women's caucus those women who have been fighting alone for years, who must be the core of the future mass movement.

B. Analysis, History, Strategy

One of the problems we face in building a women's movement is the almost total lack of information and analysis of the social situation of women and its historical development, particularly in Canada.

Research and discussion of these problems are an essential part of an effective follow-up on our general educational work. We are still quite weak in this area, but have made progress over the summer. Considerable research has been done on the history of women in B.C. We are also beginning to understand more concretely the way that women are manipulated in and out of the work force. The discussion and writing that took place around the first issue of The Pedestal, in which several new women were involved, helped to begin the process of translating statistics into reality, and into a basis for action.

Some written discussion on problems of long-term strategy has begun, but not nearly enough. We hope to carry this further, and generalize the day-to-day organizing experiences of the activists, at the Western Regional Conference.

C. Militancy

In the spring we considered initiating demonstrations around discrimination in the work force, considering this an organizing tactic. But as we developed contact with working women, we recognized that this would be a case of students "organizing" workers from the outside, dealing with the problems of working women on the level of abstractions.

We concluded that, in general, any militant (i.e. that may lead to confrontations) action by women's caucus should be directly related to concrete on-going organizing work. The first women's caucus demonstration, the picketing of the B.C. Civil Service Commission, was in support of the members of women's caucus who work for the provincial government. It was their enthusiasm that decided whether we would have the demonstration, and they were consistently involved in it (they developed the slogans, etc.)

Our organizing and confrontations (as SFU people) have to take place on campus, because that's where we are. Off-campus, we participate in women's caucus as a coordinating organization, along with other women who are organizing where they are. Our objective is to integrate the struggles as much as possible.

III ORGANIZATION

The role of women's caucus off campus is to coordinate the work of women who are organizing on the job, at school or in neighborhoods; to do general educational work; and to develop a serious analysis of the situation and a strategy for the movement as a whole.

These functions have produced a flexible organizational structure, held together by the regular monthly meetings. The role of these meetings has been mostly to involve new people, rather than to make decisions on our day-to-day work. People are involved in decision-making through stressing communication on a regular basis, and organizing each activity through wide-open work meetings. Most discussion of strategy and analysis has also taken place in these informal work meetings, directly related to concrete problems. But we hope to raise this to a higher level around the regional conference.