

WOMEN'S CAUCUS - A HISTORY AND ANALYSIS

I. The beginning - June, 1968 to February, 1969

Women's Liberation in Vancouver started at Simon Fraser University during a time of intense political activity by the left. Left-out female leftists started the Feminine Action League to deal with their exclusion from meaningful participation in the struggles on campus. At this time, women initiated, but not consciously as a women's liberation, an occupation of the Board Room at SFU which was turned into a child-care centre.

During the Fall semester, the group re-formed as Women's Caucus and began regular weekly meetings at SFU. Meetings involved both plans for publicity and action around projects and personal reasons for joining women's liberation. Our first project was getting birth control into the student health service. We did speaking in classes and tutorials so all discussion was a preparation for this work. The group included a large number of women who were involved in other left activities and a major point of discussion was the question of priorities.

The priorities question had a practical test in late November for the SFU administration building was occupied by students from three city colleges. W.L. quickly took second place and though efforts were made to have meetings, it was unsuccessful. After mass arrests ended the occupation, the entire left at SFU entered a period of quiescence. W. L. gradually revived and meetings were held off campus in women's houses. The question of priorities seemed to be resolved, for the time being at least, because there was almost no activity by the student left.

There were no actions organized, though we talked about ways of reaching working women. Publicity was sparse - word of mouth, talking in classes, and the odd hot line radio program.

II. March, 1969 to August, 1969

We began holding joint public monthly meetings in downtown Vancouver and the number off campus attending the meetings soon outstripped those from SFU. A program was drafted and printed in large quantities. Through the spring and summer we distributed perhaps as many as 20,000. The program reflected the limited experience we had in action for it simply listed the issues we saw as important - abortion and birth control, equal pay and equal work, child care and channeling in the educational system. It did not link the issues, provide an explanation of why they were key issues nor point out methods of organizing to overcome them. One meeting featured a report from a group - a workshop which had done research on women teachers and organized a public meeting for teachers at the UBC summer school.

By August, we had a downtown office (\$30 a month for a room in the Labour Temple) and were planning our first demonstration (around working women).

There are several reasons why our move off-campus was successful: 1. Women are suffering similar oppression 2. the weakness of the student left in Vancouver so that there was no competition from campus activity 3. the presence of several women who were out of the old left tradition, politically experienced, and had women's liberation as a priority. 4. the general labor consciousness of

Vancouver 5. the fact that the women in the group had always been action oriented.

III. August, 1969 to December, 1969

August seemed to mark a new stage - we were ready for action.

Although we had talked about organizing working women it remained abstract until working women in the group pushed for action around specific problems. Our first demonstration was outside the Provincial Office Building in support of a woman who worked there (discriminatory hiring and promotion procedures). We picketed the Engineer's Club which did not admit women members for discriminating against professional women. This was originated by a woman who's husband was an engineer. A brief to the Human Rights Commission with guerilla theatre outside and a picket of Trudeau around the abortion law quickly followed. At Christmas, we demonstrated in front of the post office to protest discriminatory job hiring (our first contact with unions, and a very disappointing one). During this period we were essentially doing propaganda work - the demonstrations and resulting publicity were aimed at letting women know we existed and trying to give some idea of our aims by the targets we picked.

One major effort in the fall was the Western Regional Conference - it was planned to allow reports in various areas on concrete activities with the following day open for discussion of theory developed out of our knowledge and experiences. Women from both Canada and the United States attended - and the differences between the two movements became very apparent.

Our meetings at the beginning of this period were divided into business sessions and educational sessions, particularly designed, we hoped, to help integrate new women into the group. We tried to develop decentralized workshops but we were not doing any actual organizing or long-term projects and they dissolved quite readily. The major problems continued to be a dominance by SFU women and the failure to effectively integrate new women. But during this period our mailing list grew to several hundred (there was no formal membership). We tried a series of once a week educationals with a formal presentation on a particular topic by one of the members. It tended to be a very passive situation. And the general meetings were no longer suitable for new members to become integrated for they became dominated by the plans for demonstrations, etc. We then turned to "orientation sessions" - calling new people and arranging a meeting - but not many women attended.

IV. December, 1969 to June 1970

At the end of November, 1969 a group of women proposed to start abortion counselling. We knew doctors who would do abortions, partly as a result of the Western Regional Conference. The goal of the abortion counselling was to give an immediate service and also to put pressure on local doctors. It was also decided that the service could be only one aspect of an abortion campaign; we had to plan demonstrations around it. We held a march in Vancouver, wrote to MPs and MLAs, disrupted parliament in Victoria, presented briefs to medical bodies and began the plans for the Abortion Caravan. A great deal of research was done on the law, hospitals, the drug industry, birth control and population control. Our propaganda attempted to link these things together - to show the racist character of birth control and abortion for Indians, Metis, and the people of the third world, for example.

The abortion campaign began to dominate everything.

Early in this period we again tried to organize workshops (mainly abortion, working women, teaching) on a decentralized basis to allow women to get involved in what interested them most and to ensure smaller groups which

Public speaking, educational work in the community

would encourage meaningful participation and decision making by everyone. We decided against an elected executive and against the general meeting having veto power over the workshops as long as they operated within the very general framework of the Caucus. We were attempting to eliminate elites and meaningless votes by those not necessarily involved in the actions.

But with the emphasis on the abortion campaign, the working women's workshop and the teachers workshop did not accomplish much. The Pedestal started to publish monthly - but even it sometimes concentrated almost totally on abortion.

The abortion campaign was highly successful and new women who came into the group found it easy to get involved. However, the Caucus offered little to women who were interested in areas other than abortion.

V. June, 1970 to November, 1970

A conference on strategy in June brought into the open the conflicts and differences which developed during the abortion campaign. About 15 women, now Vancouver Women's Liberation, split from Women's Caucus. They said they wanted to form a group of revolutionary women, working and living collectively. They emphasized working with young women - in high schools, on the streets, etc.

The two major positions debated at the conference were:
1) a continuing emphasis on abortion as a priority to build a mass movement. This position was put forward primarily by the YS/LSA women. 2) a shift from issue organizing to constituency organizing, with an emphasis on working women and women in the educational system.

The latter position was adopted by the majority, but the differences eventually led to the expulsion of the YS/LSA. (See the July/August issue of the Pedestal and the paper on the expulsion for more details).

The change in strategy revealed the change in our analysis - we now saw more clearly the oppression of women as an integral part of the capitalist system which meant that women must be organized and changes could only be brought about by dealing with the totality of the oppression we face in our day to day lives. Single issue campaigns could only bring about minor reforms, not our liberation. Although we talked about the links between abortion and the capitalist system, the profit motivation, and how abortion linked with child care, the role of women in the family, etc. - we only talked. The links were verbal. In order to make women understand those real links we had to act around the totality of women's oppression.

The workshops revived. The working women's workshop began to do research and discuss a women's union. We initiated a boycott of Cunningham drug stores to support the strike of women at one of Cunningham's subsidiaries, Hosken. We are now organizing an attack on the post office again this Christmas. The university groups are again meeting and planning actions around course content, etc. The Pedestal workshop has expanded and developed a more collective approach to writing, editing, layout etc. A child care group and a high school workshop are in beginning stages.

Each workshop discusses, analysis and plans actions. The workshop activities are co-ordinated through a committee with delegates from each group. Major policy decisions and general information exchange takes place at monthly meetings. To integrate new women, we have once a week general discussions of women's liberation - just sitting around and talking. It still is only a partial solution.

And we're still learning.

*More on workshops
More on why
women's union.*

*W.L.'s in Women's Caucus
Library series*