

Report on Formation of New York City-Wide Women's Liberation Coalition,
October 28, 1970.

After the large-scale success of August 26 in New York, several of the strike leaders approached members of the SWP and YSA with the idea of continuing the coalition. Initial discussions were held, attended by the August 26 strike leaders, leaders of New York NOW, Phoenix Organization of Women (POW: a group of Black and Puerto Rican women from a complex of drug rehabilitation centers), women from Gov. Rockefeller's office, women from professional groups, Women Strike for Peace, women who are probably from the Communist Party (there are no open CPers in the New York women's liberation movement) and the YSA and SWP.

Our goal from the start was to aid in calling a mass meeting of women to establish an on-going coalition, which would call another action around one or more of the three strike demands of August 26: free abortion on demand - no forced sterilization; free, 24-hour child-care, community-controlled; equal pay for equal work and equal access to education. We envisioned the structure of this coalition to be similar to the old Peace Committee, the New York city-wide antiwar action coalition, with action subcommittees, and a steering committee composed of one representative from each group which supported the coalition. We saw that the huge turnout on August 26 warranted the establishment of such a coalition, to provide a focus of action for the many women's liberation groups in New York.

At these initial meetings, some of the strike leaders began to voice doubts about the three demands - whether they really related to all women - and about mass action as a valid method of struggle.

Through the actions of a small clique of about 25 CP members or sympathizers, supporters of the Bella Abzug campaign and anti-mass action women, the differences took on a new form, that of attacking the SWP and YSA for "trying to take over the movement." We were accused by these women of wanting to ram through a coalition when there were " obviously too many issues that divided us". These attacks took the form of banning a coalition planning meeting from the New York Women's Center and refusing to allow leaflets about the coalition's first meeting to list the Women's Center as a return address. The Women's Center, which has degenerated into a faction of the women's liberation movement in New York and has lost the respect of broad sections of the movement, became an organizing center of this anti-SWP and YSA campaign.

Despite these problems, we reached agreement to call a mass meeting on October 12 to launch the coalition.

The October 12 meeting drew 300 women, by far the largest gathering of New York women ever to plan an action. The women included members of campus groups, professional groups, NOW, Radical Feminists, YWLL, lesbian groups, the YSA and SWP, 50 Black and Puerto Rican women from POW and independent women. The meeting voted overwhelmingly to 1) establish a New York women's liberation coalition, around action, open to all women; and 2) make the initial demands of the coalition the three August 26 demands.

The strategy of our opponents in this meeting was to claim that we had too many differences to unite around anything. They also questioned the non-exclusive nature of the coalition - a thinly veiled opening gambit to exclude the SWP and YSA. The vast majority of women present were strongly opposed to both concepts and the meeting reaffirmed the right of all women to be in the coalition. POW played a key role at this meeting, speaking to the relevance of the three demands to Third World women, to the importance of non-exclusion, and to the need to begin working on an action.

The second meeting of this coalition, held October 12, was attended by 150 women, with a similar broad representation. It voted to call a demonstration against Mayor Lindsay on December 12, calling for free abortion on demand, no forced sterilization, and for free, 24-hour childcare, community-controlled. Our opponents had escalated their red-baiting tactics previous to this meeting. A motion had been passed at the Women's Center to exclude the YSA and SWP, as well as any political candidates or women who support any candidates, from holding any positions at the Center and from distributing their literature there. We and our allies answered by passing out a leaflet explaining non-exclusion at the second coalition meeting, which set the tone for that meeting and isolated our opponents (copy enclosed.) After the vote for an action was taken, about 20 opponents walked out, claiming that the meeting was packed by the SWP.

The group which walked out reconvened at the Women's Center, where they were met by members of the CP and others. These women talked about building an alternative coalition, whose first and main "action" would be to "expose" the SWP and YSA nationally through the women's liberation media.

Comrades must understand and be prepared to answer these attacks on the SWP and YSA. At the same time, we do not want to make these attacks the axis of discussion; rather, we want to discuss how to build the women's liberation movement. Our sectarian opponents, the CP, ultralefts, and assorted "community organizing is contradicted by mass action" women, would like nothing better than to see faction-fighting replace the constructive work coming out of the coalition. This would serve to validate their thesis that women are too divided to unite and would also tend to demoralize many healthy women.

The chief attacks against us at this time are 1) that the SWP and YSA want to "take over the movement;" 2) that we should be excluded because we are from a "male-dominated" organization; and 3) that we are anti-lesbian, because we do not allow lesbians and homosexuals to join the YSA and SWP. Clearly these charges are a way of covering up the real reason why these women oppose us--because of our politics. They are opposed to us because we want to build a mass women's liberation movement, through action, whereas they fear mass action and the entrance of new women into the movement.

We must point out how the oppression of women affects all women, and that to cut any woman off from participation means that we cannot grow into the kind of mass movement necessary to win our demands. To concentrate on differences between us rather than on how we can unite

is to put differences on other issues above the need to create a broad, powerful women's liberation movement.

On the question of lesbianism we should point out that it is the exclusionaries, not us, who want to dictate who will and who will not be in the movement. We support and defend the right of lesbians to be part of the movement. The task of the coalition is to bring as many women as possible into action, not to lay down membership policy to each organization that wants to take part in the actions.

Many women new to politics may be initially confused by these attacks on us. For example, some women in New York who agree with our position on the need for mass action have been disoriented by the recent attacks on us. We must realize that many new women will be entering the movement having had no experience with socialists or communists other than the attacks made on radicals by the government and press. Just as in the antiwar movement, we have to do an educational job to explain to them what red-baiting is and how it is a diversion to our real struggle. The best way to counter these attacks will be in building the December 12 demonstration into as massive an action as possible. In New York the coalition has already begun to draw an impressive number and spread of groups into support of the December 12 action.

Enclosed are copies of some of the attacks on us and the statement on non-exclusion. The Off Our Backs article indicates that our opponents are attempting to whip up anti-SWP sentiment in other cities. In addition, the Women's Center has mailed out distorted minutes from the meeting which voted to exclude the SWP and YSA. We can assume that wherever possible, they will use similar tactics to prevent the development of broad, action-oriented women's liberation coalitions.

Cindy Jaquith
YSA Women's Liberation
Work Director

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At the October 12 meeting to initiate an ongoing women's coalition a number of women raised a question as to whether or not all women should be welcome in the coalition. At that meeting the overwhelming sentiment was in favor of welcoming and seeking the participation of all women in the new coalition.

In contrast to this, at the October 15 meeting of the Women's Center two motions were passed which introduce for the first time in the women's liberation movement a policy of excluding some categories of women from full participation in the Women's Center which has in the past been open to all women. The motions which were passed stated 1) that no women who is running for political office or actively and openly supporting any candidate for office in this system shall be allowed to be on the leading bodies of the Women's Center; and that no political party or its literature shall have the use of the facilities of the Women's Center; and 2) that no member of the Socialist Workers Party or the Young Socialist Alliance or any group that they "control" shall be allowed to serve on any of the leading collectives of the Women's Center.

While the undersigned women are not necessarily affiliated with the Women's Center we do oppose any attempts to introduce exclusion into the women's movement. In particular we want to ensure the continued working of our new coalition as a group open to all women-- Democrats; Republicans; communists; socialists; anarchists; and women with no political outlook; lesbians and "straight" women; Black; Puerto Rican; Native American; Oriental-American; Chicana and white women; working women and housewives; union members and professional women; high school women and retired women; Catholics; Moslems; Protestants; Jews; and atheists; conservatives and revolutionaries; in other words; all women.

This kind of unity and diversity, which we had on August 26, is crucial to the type of movement which can bring our sisters together in action and win our goals.

Organizations listed for identification purposes only:

Harriet Zilner--Columbia Women's Liberation
Barbara Buoncristiano--Columbia Women's Liberation
Ivy Bottini-- [President, New York NOW]
Ann di Leo-- [Board Member, New York NOW]
Cynthia Kanty--Phoenix Organization of Women
Betty Friedan
Ruthann Miller--Socialist Workers Party

Reply to a letter from Alice Woznack, Washington, D.C. YSA. Alice's letter stressed the gains made through the August 26 demonstration and the importance of unity in the movement.

October 25, 1970/off our backs

reflections on august 26

strength in change

Dear Alice,

We acknowledge our failure to adequately report the events of August 26 across the nation, but in our book it was simply not a "fantastic success." The political dynamic of the coalition D.C. Women's Liberation was involved with and the politics of the day it created were confusing and debilitating and painful to write about. Our newspaper collective wishes to make this response to the politics in your letter.

The analysis of your "Power in Unity" echoes that of the coalition, revealing the same view of American society and the same set of priorities. We feel that coalition was an energy sapping alliance with organizations that risked the integrity of the women's movement by a timid process of organizing around the lowest common denominator. At first reading, your approach to the coalition and the events of August 26th sounds like a humane egalitarianism. The coalition meetings however, showed N.O.W. often willing to sell out large parts of the female society who were not media image wholesome; white, heterosexual, middle class; and Y.S.A. not giving them any opposition.

Our priorities include neither working for the passage of an equal rights amendment nor seeing how many women we can get to wear our buttons. We unfortunately became part of a political dynamic which dictated "keeping the coalition together" at the expense of black and poor women.

Frequently you refer to "our movement," insisting on its growth as "our" highest priority, but the experience of the coalition made it seem that Y.S.A. women were

working towards the growth of Y.S.A. as "our" highest priority. You back up your claim of fantastic success with phrases like, "thousands of people witnessed the size and scope of our movement," "the numbers of women we reached," and "T.V., radio and newspaper coverage which widened our audience." The television coverage was notable mainly for the smirking hostility of most of the male newscasters. At best their attitude was something like, "isn't that interesting, they seem to take themselves seriously." We missed the Today show you refer to but we caught most of the other token programs staffed by women and realized sadly that they were people we'd never seen before and will never see again. The networks allowed their female workers a harmless "ladies day" and won't easily allow them anything else. It seems to us that quantitative criteria are superficial in gauging the "success" of the women's liberation movement.

In the terms of the brutal, sexist society in which we live, women's liberation is a threat and an outrage. When we attract thousands of women (official sanction) we can suspect either that the content of what we are doing has been diluted or that the established purveyors of reality have legitimized women's liberation. The mass media is a whole network of fantastically powerful sexist institutions that are intent on projecting whatever image of us will suck the strength and the threat out of women's liberation and fashion us into the plastic

American dream. America has for decades successfully defended herself against radical onslaught not by direct counter-attack but by gobbling up potential forces for change with official acceptance and the rhetoric of liberalism. When you call upon the mass media to publicize an event you are begging them to use you, to define you, to put you in your place, to make you palatable...

The stand we're taking against the coalition politics is in the interest of our movement's survival. In our experience women are not radicalized by the passive process of attending a rally or watching T.V. People get the impetus to change themselves and the conditions they live in only when their eyes are forced open, when they are confronted directly with reality. So now we will try to concentrate our energies on how we understand and how we respond to the world especially in close personal contact with other women. And our strength will be reflected in the changes we find in our daily lives.

Excerpt from article distributed at N.Y. Women's Center meeting at which SWP and YSA were excluded from decision-making bodies of the Center. The author is a member of the Radicalesbians.

SUBVERSION IN THE WOMAN'S MOVEMENT: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

by Martha Shelley

The Socialist Worker's Party

The Socialist Worker's Party is highly attractive to male-oriented women who have swallowed the line that a socialist revolution will automatically bring about the liberation of women. Any careful examination of the status of women in nations that have already gone socialist will give the lie to this pleasant fantasy. In such nations, women's roles are defined by men, and restrictions on political activity make it much more difficult for women to achieve liberation. When the Party decides that an increase in population is desirable, heroic mother medals are awarded. When women are needed in the factories, heroic working-woman medals are minted. When women are needed to nurse soldiers, as in the USSR after the Second World War, the medical profession is opened to them—at least on the lower levels.

The Socialist Worker's Party, whose membership is 75% male and whose leadership is almost entirely male, has moved with frightening success to infiltrate and take over sections of the women's movement. They have moved full-time workers into the women's centers of New York, Boston, Baltimore and Los Angeles, attempting to take over jobs, moving in SWP literature and moving out feminist literature. Check it out sister, if you live in these cities.

The SWP has a policy of infiltration, which is described in their handbook—a handbook issued only to loyal party members. I am attempting to get hold of this handbook, which was described to me by a disillusioned ex-SWP woman, and will publish it as soon as possible.

The SWP is also backing the Equal Rights Amendment, a deceptive piece of legislation which will strip away protections from working women. So this is a Socialist Worker's Party?

At the Women's Strike in New York, control of the speakers platform was in the hands of Ruthann Miller, a long-time member of the SWP. A lesbian, who was attempting to tell her sisters in Bryant Park about the pig harassment coming down on gay women in the streets, had to get permission to speak from Ruthann—since the Socialist Worker's Party has a long term policy of expelling gay people from its membership, our gay sister found this a humiliating experience.

SWP has considered gay people to be counter-revolutionaries and a "danger" to the party. Seems like it's bad enough to be called a Commie without being called a Commie Pinko Queer to boot. Some of the expelled gay people are now in Gay Liberation Front; and sadly enough, some of them are wistfully trying to get SWP to change its mind and readmit them now that they have proved they can be "revolutionary." Maybe Huey's seal of approval will cause the SWP to have a change of heart.

It's difficult to place one's faith in a so-called vanguard—whether it's a black vanguard or a white vanguard—when the members can't think for themselves, when they can't even notice your oppression until it is spelled out in blood on the streets and cleared by the Central Committee.