

A POSITION PAPER:

THE POLITICAL STATEMENT
OF THE NATIONAL COLLECTIVE
ON THE FUTURE OF VVAW/WSO

AUGUST, 1974

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FOREWARD

(We had hoped to get this paper out to people sooner so that it could be discussed by chapters prior to the Buffalo National Steering Committee Meeting. Because of other responsibilities and the length of this paper, we regret that this could not have been done. We hope that people will not only read this paper, but that it will be studied. We expect to have good principled discussion around this paper and the nature of VVAW/WSO in Buffalo. We look forward to seeing many of you there).

VVAW/WSO is now undergoing an internal struggle around some very basic questions, questions which deal with the very nature of the organization and what will be its future. The National Collective thinks this struggle is a good thing, because as long as there is struggle, there is growth. This particular struggle is very sharp and this is also good since sharpness clarifies where people stand.

We believe that the struggle can be characterized into three distinct lines. One position would define VVAW/WSO as a veterans and GI organization working only on vets and GIs issues, exclusive of non-veterans. Another position holds that VVAW/WSO should be a mass, anti-imperialist organization period (having no base or focus). The last position holds that VVAW/WSO should be a mass, anti-imperialist organization with a veterans and GI base and focus, not exclusive of non-veterans.

The National Collective supports the last position: VVAW/WSO must be a mass, anti-imperialist organization with a veterans and GI base and focus. The rest of this paper is devoted to developing that position -- a POLITICAL analysis of the conditions we are working under, where we have been, errors in our work, and what the collective's position will mean for VVAW/WSO's future work.

UNITED FRONT

As we begin to define the nature of VVAW/WSO and our work for the future, it is important that we take into consideration the anti-imperialist movement as a whole and not regard ourselves in isolation from this movement. When, in 1972, we first began to consciously develop our anti-imperialist stance as an organization, it was clear that many of the national, anti-war organizations of the 1960's were folding up and we were left as one of the few organizations that took a conscious step forward to carry on the struggle. Now, however, the objective conditions of the struggle in this country have changed. We can now see that the struggle against imperialism has taken a sharp turn upward and is intensifying on many fronts. Student groups, community groups, black groups, Chicano groups, workers groups, womens groups, welfare-rights groups, groups composed of the unemployed, etc. have developed all around us and we can see these organizations being formed in consciously anti-imperialist directions. VVAW/WSO is not the only organization or group of people to see the life and death struggle that must be waged against imperialism. Therefore, it would be incorrect for us to look at our work in narrow terms; that is, isolated from the understanding that other anti-imperialist forces are arising and gaining strength.

Should we oppose the formation of these new groups? Obviously not. In fact, we should be supporting each other in a conscious way so that the fight against imperialism is broader and more united. These organizations did not arise because of an ideal -- they arose because the masses of people are bearing the brunt of the crisis that U.S. imperialism is undergoing. These groups arose from the needs of particular sections of the people to fight back against their oppression, not just to "bear witness" to anti-imperialism. We think that the formation of new, anti-imperialist organizations is a good thing, and something to be encouraged.

Because these organizations exist and new ones are and will be forming, we believe that objectively, outside of any plan or formal declaration, a united front against imperialism is developing. To understand what a united front is, we should look to history and the front which developed against fascism in the 1930's. Georgi Dimitrov, one of the greatest fighters of fascism, defined a united front by calling it: "A broad mobilization and unification of the masses from below, at the enterprises, around the united organ for struggle created by the masses themselves." Dimitrov stressed that a united front is a "unity of action" directed against the common enemy -- in our case, imperialism. In other words, there is unity between those people honestly fighting their oppressor. The focus of the work may vary (i. e. with student groups vs. organizations of working people) but the purpose of work will remain the same -- to struggle against imperialism.

In the above quotation/definition, the term "at the enterprises" is very important for us today. This refers to the idea that people should be organized around that particular contradiction in society which oppresses them. Anti-imperialists need not go searching for "contradictions" to organize people around; there are plenty of them already in existence. What we must do as an organization is find and advance those slogans and forms of struggle which arise from the vital needs of veterans and GIs in the United States. We must meet the concrete needs of these people and express the urgency of fighting imperialism. If we fail to do this, then we are

essentially talking about the concept of "anti-imperialism in the sky." Fighting imperialism will not mean much to the every day lives of people because it will not deal with the urgent questions and problems which face them on a day-to-day basis. Thus, these "united organs for struggle" grow out of the needs of people's every day struggles. For example, unemployed workers will begin to organize around the contradiction of being unemployed; welfare mothers will organize around the rotten conditions they face; workers will organize around oppression and exploitation in the work-place; women will organize around the exploitation handed down in a male-oriented society; GIs will organize around the repression and racism of the military and the contradictions within the imperialist war machine; and veterans will organize around the contradictions between themselves having fought an imperialist war and returning home to an imperialist society.

To further define a united front, it is important to realize that it is not a coalition of organizations. Rather, a united front is the uniting together of as many people as possible to fight against the common enemy. One individual may be part of the united front, as well as the various organizations which struggle for the same purpose -- to defeat imperialism. To refer again to Dimitrov, the united front is a "broad mobilization" of the masses around those contradictions they SPECIFICALLY have with the imperialist system. Without mobilizing people around these specific contradictions, a sense of urgency will be lost; but if an understanding of urgency can be brought forward and organized around, a fighting spirit and a militancy will develop which will make the struggle that much more effective. On top of this, if we fail to organize around the specific needs of the people, we will be letting them down, we will be dishonest with them, and more concerned with "paying witness" to anti-imperialism than struggling for the real needs of oppressed people.

A classic example of a working united front would be the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. It is important to see that the NLF did not develop in thin air, but grew out of the struggle that the Vietnamese had been waging since World War II. The basis of the united front developed out of the desire of the Indochinese people to be rid of foreign domination, that is, rid of imperialism. Their United Front was developed to unite every person who was (and is) opposed to foreign intervention in their affairs. That is their sole basis of unity within the context of the programme of the NLF. The NLF is not one, monolithic organization. It is composed of many independent organizations -- veterans associations, womens leagues, teachers associations, labor unions, youth groups, Buddhists, political parties, etc.. These groups have all united around the programme of the Front. Besides these separate groups, thousands of individuals take leadership from the Front without ever belonging to an organization. The major difference in their front is the centralized leadership that makes up the general staff of the NLF. However, before the NLF was founded in 1960, the united front was based on the Vietnamese's common desire to be free, while not formally organized into the NLF. It was only after years of struggle that the Vietnamese saw the need for centralized leadership in the form of the NLF, and only then this leadership was recognized based on the practice of the Viet Minh.

In short, a united front is like a fist. If the various fingers (or organizations) are clenched together in unity, the fist will be better able to strike an effective blow

against imperialism. If any of the fingers are missing or loose, then the blow will be weakened. Along with this, just as with a hand, the fingers are not one but are separate. They work together and they can unite to form a fist capable of dealing blows, but they can also work independently when that is necessary for the hand to be most effective. The same is true of the united front. Though a united front has a common purpose of opposing imperialism, all organizations within this front will not be involved in specifically the same work (i. e. women's groups will work with a specific focus on women's issues, students will work with a specific focus on issues affecting students, veterans will work with a specific focus on the problems of vets, etc). But they will all be working with a "unity of action," and even the specific areas and focus of work will be pointed in the one ultimate direction of defeating the enemy. Specific work will be conducted with independence (i. e. the focus and method of work of an organization will be the decision of that particular organization) but at the same time, the ability to unite to form the fist will always remain.

For a concrete example of how this "fist concept" operates, we should look at the recent demonstration we had in Washington. There, we put forward slogans that were anti-imperialist in nature, and which applied to the entire struggle against U. S. imperialism. We also put forward demands that spoke to the specific needs of veterans and GIs. In addition, we sought and received the support of many other anti-imperialist and anti-war organizations. These other groups joined with us and supported all of our demands because they felt that the raising of such demands was an attack against imperialism. We consider this a simplistic example of how the united front works and how important it was to the success of our action. It would be incorrect for us to try to organize the students that were there around THEIR needs, but it was correct for us to actively seek their involvement and unite together, with a "unity of action," to struggle against imperialism here and abroad.

Again, we should be aware that the united front is not an organization unto itself. It is not an easily define or specific grouping of people, but rather is a "broad mobilization" of the masses around their specific contradictions with the imperialist system. A united front is beginning to develop within the U. S. , and it is important that we fit into this development. Alone, we cannot, nor should we, be the organization which wages struggles against imperialism on all fronts. Our responsibility is to fit into the broader front, uniting with other organizations and individuals, and attack imperialism where we can be most effective, where we can best raise and serve the interests of the people, and where we can express the urgency and fighting spirit of a specific sector of our society with maximum effectiveness.

WHY ORGANIZE VETERANS IN THE UNITED FRONT?

As we see it, there are two reasons for organizing veterans: 1) They are an identifiable constituency; and 2) they have a special oppression which can be tied to imperialism. Fifteen percent of the population has been in the military and over 6 million of those have been discharged in the last ten years, which clearly makes them identifiable. Everyone is aware that there are veterans of military service.

The oppression faced by these millions of veterans is directly related to their experience within the U. S. military and the fact that they have returned to an imperialist country. The whole military experience has led to utter outrage at the whole system. For many vets, the time they spent in the military meant they lost several years of seniority at their job -- for many it meant they lost their job completely. If you went into the military straight out of high school, there wasn't even a job to build up seniority in; and on top of that, you lost several years time that could have been devoted to job training or college.

And then there were all those great promises about the benefits. All the promises about good medical care, a free education and a decent job turned out to be lies. They were promises that the system is totally unable to fulfill. Understaffed VA hospitals, inadequate education allowances and the public relations "Hire the Vet" programs are all real form of oppression for a veteran. What makes this situation even worse is a bad discharge or a bad SPN number. This organization is well aware of how bad discharges and SPN numbers effect vets. These are real problems that must be spoken to. They are real problems that result in our life under imperialism. And they are real problems that will take a fighting organization to effectively deal with, because the government has no intention of dealing with them, nor do the veteran pimps and careerists or the reactionary veterans organizations. All of this leads to the question of leadership.

The fact that veterans have real needs has led to a rising and largely spontaneous veterans movement. For example, the veterans that went to Washington, DC on March 29th were not part of ANY national, political organization. The fact that there is a spontaneous movement is an indication not only that there are veterans who can be organized, but that they must be organized. The question is, who is going to organize them? Who is going to play the leading role? It is certainly clear that someone is going to organize vets. History is clear on that. Everyone from the American Legion to AVM to college vets clubs are trying to organize vets. The problem is that they are all continuing the same reactionary trends started by groups like the American Legion when it was founded after World War I, which is leading veterans down a blind alley picking up a crumb or two here and there. The current situation of veterans and the lack of any national political organizations that are fighting for veterans (besides us) should bear this out. All of these organizations, whether consciously or unconsciously, are in fact serving the same interests -- the people who run this country who don't want vets talking about imperialism. If we, as an anti-imperialist organization, fail to provide leadership for this developing movement, we will not only be betraying what we stand for, but we will be leaving this spontaneous movement to the reactionaries and careerists.

Furthermore, VVAW/WSO has historically been, and still is, in the best position to lead and develop this veterans movement in an anti-imperialist direction. The organization was born on a base of veterans, and to this day, veterans are playing a primary role in the organization. Just as important as the history is the current practice of the organization. The growing nationwide focus in VVAW/WSO on veterans' issues like bad discharges, SPN numbers and poor treatment by the VA is a clear indication that we are ready, willing, and capable of organizing vets.

By providing leadership for the veterans movement, we mean just that. We are not speaking about organizing every vet into VVAW/WSO, although that would be great. We are talking about building VVAW/WSO into a fighting organization with an anti-imperialist outlook which veterans and veterans groups will look to for leadership. We are talking about fighting for our demands, not from a narrow, reformist perspective, but within the larger context of the struggle against U. S. imperialism.

Veterans are in a very unique position in America. From their experience in the U. S. military, they have seen both sides of U. S. imperialism. They have seen the one side that is the U. S. military involved in all parts of the world, and they have come home to see the other side of U. S. imperialism exploiting the working people here. It is a position from which veterans can attack not only the foreign involvement of U. S. imperialism, but also the effects that it has on working people -- both veterans and non-veterans -- here at home.

The current poor treatment of veterans is only one of the cracks in U. S. imperialism. But the cracks are no accident; they are the inevitable result of the widening crisis of U. S. imperialism. By building an anti-imperialist veterans movement, we have an opportunity to unite yet another segment of society in the growing front against U. S. imperialism.

WHY ORGANIZE G. I. S IN THE UNITED FRONT?

What is primary in understanding the necessity of developing an anti-imperialist GI movement is both the role that the military plays under imperialism and the special oppression that GIs face. The military is a primary tool of imperialism, both at home and abroad. Here in the U. S., the military is fully prepared to act as a strike-breaking force or to back up local police forces in the event of a "civil disorder." It remains equally ready to support foreign, U. S. -backed dictatorships.

Imperialism dictates the role that the military will play, and as long as the system of U. S. imperialism remains intact, the military will continue to be used against people all over the world; and it will continue to oppress the GIs who make up the U. S. military. The role of the military, then, and the oppression that it breeds calls for a fighting movement of GIs who can combat their own oppression and the roles they are forced to play.

The oppression that GIs face is very real. The problem, however, with organizing solely from within the military is that it is comparable to trying to organize within a prison, since GIs are forever at the whim of their commanders. Unlike most other jobs in civilian society, they are prohibited from either striking or quitting; instead they face the constant harassment of both judicial and non-judicial punishment whenever they fight back. Such a situation calls for outside support.

The class background of GIs make them a natural ally for all the other groups struggling against imperialism; and with the advent of the all-volunteer army and the growing economic crisis, the percentage of working class people in the military, especially third world people, is steadily increasing.

VVAW/WSO should be building the GI movement within the united front, both by building the GI membership within our organization and through the leadership that we can exert through our practice. We should be doing this work among GIs, not only because of the oppression of the military and the class background of the GIs, but also because there is already an existing, spontaneous movement among GIs in the military. The actions of sailors aboard the USS MIDWAY and the USS LITTLE ROCK are but the most well-known, recent examples of GIs fighting back. But these actions, as with the MIDWAY, were either spontaneous and not part of any coordinated effort against conditions in the Navy, or they were, as with the LITTLE ROCK, reactions to situations that the GIs had no control over, i. e. a racial attack. For the GI movement to become a strong, fighting movement, it will be necessary to do more than "react" or spontaneously walk off a ship; it will be necessary to develop a unified approach with a common direction and firm leadership that puts GIs on the offensive. Spontaneity will lead nowhere.

Just as with the veterans movement, the fact that GIs are fighting back is a clear sign that GIs not only can be organized, but must be organized. The current state of the GI movement shows even more reasons to begin a serious organizing effort. With the exception of a few projects, the energy level is very sporadic and

the identity with the anti-imperialist movement as a whole is limited. The reasons for this are that there has been a serious lack of both political and programmatic unity among the GI movement; and among other people and groups on the left, a real lack of understanding for the need for a fighting movement for GIs. For those who do understand the importance, it has been difficult to find a way to plug into the GI movement. Those people who have remained in the GI movement have done so either because of a deep theoretical commitment and a long attachment to the struggles of GIs, or they are veterans. But as with any movement, the people that provide the momentum must be those who are most directly affected by a particular issue. Not that people with a theoretical understanding of the importance of GI organizing should be discouraged; quite the contrary. They should be welcomed with open arms! But in developing a movement, regardless of the issue, we have to look to the people most directly effected by the issues.

As an organization with a high percentage of veterans and GIs, we are very much effected by the issues. We also have the greatest experience of any national, anti-imperialist organization in organizing GIs. Not only do we have veterans in the organization, but we are the only national anti-imperialist organization with members in the U. S. military all over the world. For the GIs in the organization, the oppression of the military is a fact of life; for veterans, it is an unforgettable experience. And for us to ignore this historical relationship within the organization to military service would be to ignore not only our duty as an anti-imperialist organization, but it would be ignoring our historical roots.

As we said earlier, there is a need for leadership. And just as with the veterans movement, we are not talking about getting every GI to join VVAW/WSO, although that would be ideal. What we are talking about is becoming a consistent force in the GI movement that GIs and GI organizers will respect; we are talking about raising GI demands in a non-opportunist, anti-imperialist manner that is obvious in our practice.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964 marked the beginning of the major escalation of the war in Vietnam. Under the phoney pretext of defending an American naval ship, the imperialists poured military hardware, advisors, money, and American troops into Vietnam. At the same time in the U. S. thousands of Americans were actively working in the civil rights movement, exposing the racist conditions in the American system. Soon there was a clear connection between this racism in the U. S. and the imperialist war of genocide in Indochina. Millions of Americans became active in struggling against the war in Vietnam.

By 1967, the movement for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam was involving all sectors of the American people. Just as the Vietnamese were fighting imperialism, so too were millions of Americans. Fighting against the system was also the task of GIs stationed in Indochina and the task of veterans who returned from Vietnam having seen first hand how the system of imperialism operates abroad. It was only natural that these veterans would organize into a group that actively made the connections between the war aimed at maintaining the interests of US corporations with the imperialist system at home. On June 1, 1967 six Vietnam veterans formally began the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. The organization soon expanded throughout the Northeast, uniting behind the common experience of having served in Vietnam.

During its first years, VVAW members spoke at many meetings and rallies and participated in the large anti-war demonstrations under the organizational banner. As it grew, VVAW began organizing its own demonstrations, recognizing that Vietnam veterans had the potential to fight against the war in Indochina by showing the American people just how the war was being conducted. In September of 1970, over 100 veterans marched from Morristown, New Jersey, to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania conducting a mock search and destroy mission, Operation Rapid American Withdrawal.

To make this point clearer, VVAW held the Winter Soldier Investigation early in 1971 in Detroit, Michigan. This investigation presented over 150 Vietnam veterans who testified about their roles in Vietnam, systematically exposing the role of the military. It clearly emerged that the military was conducting a genocidal war against the Indochinese peoples, not defending democracy as we had been told.

As a result of this investigation the anti-war movement looked at veterans in a different light. At first, all veterans and GIs were looked at as "war criminals" for participating in the war. But with the important step taken by VVAW in exposing the role the military played, this view was changed.

Shortly after the WSI, in the latter part of February, the first national steering committee of VVAW held a meeting. At this meeting, the present structure of the organization was formed, recognizing that we had become a national organization. Also formulated at this meeting was the idea of holding a national action in Washington DC. This action was called Dewey Canyon III.

Dewey Canyon II named after the illegal militia operations into Laos, drew national attention as a result of the actions that occurred in Washington--the throwing away of medals, defying the Supreme Court by staying on the Mall and marching to Arlington National Cemetery. The major aims of the demonstration were to influence both the American people and the US Congress; the former was successful, and the latter proved to be a dismal failure. As a result of this action and subsequent actions during this same period, the organization came to understand that its actions should be directed towards the American people and not the U. S. government.

While the organization maintained its identity as a Vietnam veterans organization, it soon became apparent that other veterans wanted to join and participate in the activities of the group. This was readily accepted and we became a veterans organization, recognizing that because of our base, we were the perfect vehicle for all veterans to protest the war.

While we were predominantly concerned with the war in Indochina, we recognized the links between racism in the US and racism with which the war in Vietnam was being conducted. The national organization took a big step forward in June of 1971 by voting at a National Steering Committee Meeting to support the struggle being waged in Cairo, Illinois by black people who were boycotting white-owned stores while withstanding armed attacks from white racists. In August of that same year we organized, at the request of the Cairo United Front, a convoy of food and supplies to aid the black people of Cairo. Thus, on a national level, the organization made its first step in recognizing the links between imperialism abroad and at home.

At about the same time we began to see an opening up of the membership to include non-veterans, both men and women, who saw the organization as an important one through which to struggle against the war in Indochina. The tactics of the organization also changed. In December of 1971, when the US bombed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with B-52s, members of the organization took over the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial, the Saigon Consulate in San Francisco and other places around the country. These actions clearly pointed out the increasingly militant mood of VVAW.

The organization was now officially only one year old. At the Denver NSCM in February of 1972, a group of self-proclaimed anarchists saw fit to dismember the national structure in favor of "regional autonomy," which in fact was a repudiation of a national cohesion. This error was the result of a lack of an organizational understanding of the nature of imperialism and of the necessity for working together in a strong organization with a cohesive national focus. But the overriding concern of the mass membership for a strong national organization paved the way for the realization that the Denver meeting was a grave error. What was needed was a growing program of work on a national level.

During the remainder of 1972 this occurred. At the Houston meeting in April of 1972, when the organization was saved from the Denver errors, the organization voted to participate as a national unit at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions in Miami Beach, Florida.

While plans for this demonstration were in progress, the government slapped

eight members of the organization with a series of false charges basically saying that we were planning to violently disrupt the conventions. These eight members stood trial, but in reality the entire organization was being attacked. The government had come to see our potential and felt that it was time to crack us. For over a year, the organization exposed this tactic and finally in August of 1973 these ridiculous charges were thrown out by the jury hearing the case.

The Republican and Democratic conventions drew members from around the country. The strong militant actions of VVAW once again proved that we were a major force in the anti-war movement. This was also the first time that all members of the organization marched together, rather than having the "supporters" march in the rear behind the veterans.

At the next NSCM, in Palo Alto, California, one of the major discussions was about the future of the organization. It was at this time that the Winter Soldier Concept was introduced. This concept envisioned transforming VVAW into THE mass organization in the US; one that would unite all who were opposed to the war in Indochina and who were opposed to the imperialist system. It would, in other words, become the united front.

There were many concrete reasons given for moving the organization towards this concept. We were looked at by other movement groups as the prime force in the anti-war movement; we had the ability to draw in a real mass membership of veterans and non-veterans alike; we were one of the few national organizations that were still actively organizing; we were held in esteem by a wide number of international organizations and political parties; we had a number of non-veterans particularly women in leadership positions; and we were looking to the day when the war in Indochina would be over and were searching for a program to take up at that time. A concrete proposal outlining how this transformation would take place was presented at the Chicago NSCM held in early January of 1973.

This meeting occurred shortly after the saturation bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong in December of 1972. A result of this bombing was that the organization voted at the Chicago meeting to have another national demonstration in Washington on Inaugural Day, January 20. This was the largest turnout the organization had ever amassed to that time. Just several days after this demonstration, the Peace Agreements on Ending the War in Vietnam were signed; the result of 11 years of the Vietnamese people fighting against the U. S. ; and winning; and the result of as many years of struggle by the American people who opposed the war there.

In February and March it became clear the U. S. was not going to abide by the agreements. The organization began searching for ways to continue to struggle against the Indochina war while recognizing that imperialism was the enemy. The result was that the Winter Soldier concept took root. In April of 1973 at the Placitas, New Mexico meeting the organization voted to become VVAW/WSO.

While we had now created a structure which reflected the actual membership of the organization, we did not yet understand how to use that structure to build the organization or the struggle against imperialism. Our national action in Gainesville, in the summer of 1973 reflected an unfocused organization. In fact, the trial in Gainesville provided the only national activity which the organization had at that

time, and there was only a partial unity around that issue. This was reflected in the turnout in Gainesville; the fact that other organizations did not participate in that demonstration further reflected our lack of understanding of our obligation to help build the united front.

The steering committee meeting in St Louis in August 1973 looked for something --anything--which could serve as a national focus for the work of the organization, understanding (though not always on a formulated, conscious level) that a national organization needed a national program. We turned to the program we knew best, the Indochina War, and formulated plans for Indochina Solidarity Week; to keep the continuing war in the eyes and minds of the American people. Organizational discipline was not adequate to create actions by every chapter; mass support for actions around Indochina was not mobilized; the necessary preparation for this kind of national action had not been done. Some chapters carried out a week of activities; many chapters carried out some kind of action, but there was not a clear national action around that week; many chapters did nothing at all. Still, the Indochina Solidarity Week did provide a minimal focus for the organization.

What the period from Placitas until the NSCM in Yellow Springs showed was that we needed a national program which would focus on the concrete needs of people, and which would be something more than a week's worth of activity. As early as the Placitas meeting we had passed a position paper on amnesty; local chapters had done some educational work around the issue, and through that practice we had begun to see amnesty as a national issue. The result, at the NSCM at Yellow Springs, was the adoption of an amnesty program which gave an overall focus to the work of the organization for a 7-month period, building toward a national demonstration to be held sometime in late spring or early summer of 1974. This demonstration would be the beginning of another campaign at a higher level of struggle.

Through this national focus, most chapters began work around amnesty--some began DUP, some began with petitions or talks or leafletting. Whatever the tactic used, there was a national program. There was also an amnesty movement made up, for the most part, of groups or individuals from the anti-war movement. Within this grouping, we pushed for a strong political position on amnesty, a position which would concentrate on the issue of the continuing war and present a class analysis as part of the amnesty issue. Most important, however, was our push within that movement for recognition of people with less-than-honorable discharges as the leading sector of the resisters deserving amnesty. In short, we had found a group of veterans, some of whom were already members of our organization, whose immediate needs for relief from the oppression of a bad discharge could be met by our national program.

Because we had a national program did not mean that local chapters or regions stopped work on a number of other projects. In fact, the beginnings of organizational unity which came from a national focus began to show through national work around the Lawton/Gardner trial, a 2-year-old national project which had never before received any serious national attention from the organization outside of the publicity in the paper. Throughout the country we were able to support the primary work being carried on by the Riverside Political Prisoners Defense Committee through sponsoring speaking tours, getting the Lawton/Gardner story out to the people and, in the process, educating ourselves around the racism and repression of the American justice system.

We put that education to use by tying it into the other projects we worked on locally, regionally, and nationally.

One of the results of the national focus around a clear program was the success of the demonstration in Washington, DC on the 1st through the 4th of July 1974. The demonstration was prepared for carefully with the original plans made 7 months in advance. More important, however, it represented a target for day-to-day consistent national work. As the demonstration grew closer it was broadened from an amnesty demo to one which included five demands, all of them set in the context of anti-imperialist politics. Concrete demands spoke to the problems facing veterans, and the war in Indochina and amnesty were the focus of other demands--with the final demand, Kick Nixon Out, focusing on the most visible representative of the imperialist US system.

Understanding that we were not the only organization working against imperialism, we went to other organizations asking them not only to support the demonstration by coming to it, but actively build for the demo--not because they had the same prime interest that we did in the issues around veterans, but because we felt the direction of the demonstration was anti-imperialist and thus deserved their active support. The result was the militant, spirited success which took place in DC and which was, as mentioned in the section on the united front, an example of how that united front concept can work in actuality.

Through the period since we became VVAW/WSO one fact has shone through our practice: those chapters which continued to grow and strengthen (numerically and politically) have worked around a specific organizing focus, and, in most places, no matter what the composition of the chapter in terms of veterans or non-veterans, this focus has been around amnesty with particular emphasis on vets issues.

The practice of individual chapters underlines an important lesson: chapters with a clear focus of activities around the real needs of the people have grown. With growth these chapters have been able to add effective support work for other struggles in their communities. Chapters which have not grown or have shrunk fall into two categories. First, there are the chapters whose focus has been primarily internal; whether that focus has been around dissension among the members, or providing a base for social activities, or working primarily around the individual needs or wishes of the specific membership of the chapter, those chapters have not grown. Second, chapters which have diffused their activities, working on prisons one week, in-plant organizing the next, and Indochina the third, etc etc have not created a solid base of membership and have not grown. Chapters whose work takes place mostly in coalitions--which do not attack the problems of a specific segment of the population--have also remained stagnant in terms of membership.

What is true on a local level was also demonstrated on a national level through the actions in DC; when VVAW/WSO had a national program and a national focus designed to meet specific needs, and when we worked as part of a united front against imperialism, we could pull off a militant national action. Through that focus, through programmatic unity as well as the unity of being anti-imperialist, we could attract new members and grow.

The following section deals with some of the major problems seen in the future development of VVAW/WSO. These problems manifest themselves today in general concepts, attitudes and tendencies that will increasingly impede the development of the organization and hold back the anti-imperialist struggle if they are not combatted. Undoubtedly, VVAW/WSO has made many errors in the past and will make others in the future. The point is not that we make mistakes, (to think that we won't is utterly unrealistic!), but that we must analyze these mistakes and learn how to correct our practice in the future. We cannot allow errors to go unchecked until they have grown into major problems. In terms of the larger question of arriving at a clear understanding of the nature of VVAW/WSO and its future, it is important for all of us to achieve an understanding of these problems.

Fighting imperialism is certainly not just confined to the US. The struggle against US imperialism has been going on since the early 1900s. In terms of constantly analyzing our own practice, continually correcting our mistakes and improving our future practice, there is much we can learn from the history of these struggles. The lessons of such struggles against imperialism as Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Korea, Cuba, etc., can be of invaluable assistance to us in continually strengthening our own movement and avoiding needless mistakes. From our own practice and from the lessons of our brothers and sisters around the world, we must constantly be recharting our own course of action in the struggle against US imperialism if we are to defeat it.

One of the primary problems inherent in some members' conception of VVAW/WSO today is the notion that VVAW/WSO is the movement, in its entirety, or that it should develop into such. Particularly at a time when the people's movement is gaining strength by leaps and bounds, (as witnessed by the rising number of strikes, increasing strength of the struggles of Third World people against national oppression, the resurgence of the student movement, etc.), this attitude presents an increasing threat to the development of VVAW/WSO and also a hindrance to the development of the general anti-imperialist movement.

In the section on the united front it was pointed out that there is a developing united front against imperialism in the US. We cannot overemphasize the fact that VVAW/WSO is not the only organization in the anti-imperialist movement: it cannot be all things to all people. VVAW/WSO cannot try to be that united front in and of itself!

There are a number of very good reasons for this statement. First of all, a united front goes far beyond an organizational form. It is a much broader grouping than the sum of all those organizations in it. Many people who aren't in any organization whatsoever will take leadership from the general program of the front. Secondly, VVAW/WSO, like any effective organization, must have a basic organizational focus. It must have primary tasks that define the nature of the organization --- the goal people are being organized towards in the context of bringing masses of people into the anti-imperialist movement. Otherwise what will inevitably develop is an escalating confusion and lack of clarity among the people whom we are trying to organize about what the role and tasks of the organization really are. The less clear

the organization's role and tasks are, the greater will be the ineffectiveness of whatever tasks are undertaken. While VVAW/WSO must link up with all progressive forces in the developing anti-imperialist united front, if it tries to be that united front itself it will confuse its own tasks beyond recognition.

Finally, as was stated above, there are many other organizations already in existence. These other groups have special constituencies with special demands to fight for: welfare recipients, the unemployed, students, farmworkers, etc. In addition to these special demands, there is also an overall responsibility to push forward the anti-imperialist struggle. Such groups are far better prepared to represent these constituencies than VVAW/WSO is. Imagine how ridiculous it would be for vets who want to fight oppressive conditions in the VA to join the United Farm Workers to do so. Imagine how ridiculous it would be for farmworkers to join VVAW/WSO to fight oppression and exploitation in the lettuce fields or grape vineyards! These other organizations have no intention of structurally joining with VVAW/WSO nor should they. Aside from the fact that we, organizationally, lack the practical experience necessary to organize these various groups, the truth of the matter is that we simply couldn't handle such an enormous task anyway.

The question that logically follows is, where do these incorrect ideas come from? The answer is found in a number of sources. First of all is the confusion of the nature and the role of a mass organization as opposed to that of a cadre organization or political party. As was pointed out in the National Office Report to the 12th NSCM in the section on mass organizations, VVAW/WSO is not a cadre organization, it is a mass anti-imperialist organization. (It should also be pointed out that this National Office Report on VVAW/WSO and Mass Organizations neglected the question of the nature and focus of VVAW/WSO as a particular, mass anti-imperialist organization. That question is being addressed in this paper.) Certain members in VVAW/WSO, however, feel that VVAW/WSO is or should be a cadre organization, that it should assume the vanguard of leadership in the anti-imperialist movement. They feel VVAW/WSO should be the vanguard organizational form to lead workers, students, the unemployed, etc., as well as vets and GIs. In short that VVAW/WSO should assume the responsibilities of a political party! This incorrect analysis of the nature of VVAW/WSO can be called 'vanguardism'.

It is a progressive thing for people to desire an even greater level of discipline and commitment to the anti-imperialist struggle; that is certainly needed. In the context of VVAW/WSO, however, 'vanguardism' takes our basis of unity, anti-imperialism, and incorrectly replaces it with a complete world view. The truth of the matter is that there is no such level of political unity within VVAW/WSO. It is in the very nature of a mass organization that there be widely divergent political outlooks. It does not have the political unity to achieve a complete world view, nor should it. Secondly, it is in the very nature of a cadre organization, of a political party, to demand a very strict discipline. Membership is not open in a cadre organization. It is only open for those that have proven they can adhere to that strict discipline. Again, that is certainly not the case with VVAW/WSO. We would be fooling ourselves to believe we had such a degree of discipline.

Finally, there is the question of a programme. A cadre organization must have a programme to lead the entire people in their struggle if it is to be such a vanguard form. VVAW/WSO does not have such a programme. VVAW/WSO, as a organization, isn't equipped politically, structurally or any other way to be a van-

guard, cadre organization and would botch the job if we tried. VVAW/WSO is, however, admirably suited to be a mass anti-imperialist organization with a vets and GI base and focus.

A second major reason for this concept in VVAW/WSO of 'we are the whole movement' or of VVAW/WSO developing into some new type of 'vanguard form' stems from a general attitude we can term 'imperialism-in-the-sky.' As was pointed out in the discussion of the united front, organizations in the anti-imperialist movement do not develop as real peoples' movements because of some abstract desire on the part of the organization's membership to 'bear witness' against imperialism. Rather they develop out of the concrete conditions affecting the day-to-day lives of their constituencies. People don't organize against something merely to complain about how bad it is; they don't want to shine a light in the face of US imperialism to prove how ugly it is. Rather, they want to smash it and end the particular oppression it is causing them. As the crisis facing US imperialism inevitably intensifies, the oppressive conditions facing working people in this country will correspondingly increase. It is around those particular conditions facing a given group in society that they should be organized around; that point that the system oppresses the most. The GI movement developed out of resistance to the war and the racism and repression of the military. The rising workers' movement develops from exploitation at the work-site, and on and on it goes.

If using Dimitrov's words, these "united organs" for struggle do not grow out of people's daily lives, "at the enterprises" or around that primary contradiction of the imperialist system which oppresses them, they simply will not have the endurance and militance necessary to see the struggle through to completion. Rather it will become diffuse, halfhearted and inevitably falter. The enemy will forever be hazy, nebulous and illdefined. To those organized around their own point of oppression by the imperialist system, this is much less likely to happen. It's hard to forget who the enemy is when you are forced to face it every day of your life.

The logic of why VVAW/WSO shouldn't try to recruit everybody naturally flows from this understanding. If we do, we will end up drawing people, (or attempting to), away from where they should be; from the struggle closest to their lives, from the one they would be most effective in. If we encourage all people to join the same mass organization, by definition, they cannot be organized around their particular source of oppression under the system. Instead of creating a tight organization with a readily identifiable constituency that really fights for what its members really need, this will blunt the struggle, make it flabby, less militant and fragmented. This is not to say that workers or students, etc., should not join a veteran's organization. But it is to say that it is not always best for the general anti-imperialist movement that they do so. Depending on the particular conditions, it may, in fact, be best for the movement and for the individual that they organize not as veterans but as workers, students, etc. around worker or student issues--as the case may be.

The final source of this problem stems from the status of the movement today. It is comparatively young and underdeveloped, without numerous organizational examples of how a united front develops and works. VVAW/WSO, in many areas developed in a virtual political vacuum where we were the only progressive political organization in a given area. In other cases, VVAW/WSO was forced into an attitude of 'going it

alone' due to the opportunistic maneuverings of such groups as PL, SWP, etc. Also there is a source for this idea of 'we are the movement' or for 'vanguardism' in organizational chauvinist attitudes that many VVAW/WSO members formerly had. As sort of a superstar in the anti-war movement in our early days, we were told by everybody that we were the greatest, and could do no wrong. In a few cases at least, members ended up believing such nonsense. Hopefully, we have grown far beyond such chauvinistic attitudes by 1974.

Another tendency within VVAW/WSO that must be struggled against is the idea that doing any work around bread and butter veterans' issues is incorrect. Partially this position may come from certain guilt feelings many members have about having served in Vietnam. (While it's one thing for Vietnam vets to feel ashamed of having been manipulated and used in the government's genocidal war in Indochina they should not feel guilt-ridden; the war was not their responsibility. While much less than the Indochinese people, the Vietnam vet was also very much a victim of that war.) More frequently, however, the position put forth against any work on bread and butter veterans' issues is that it would 'separate veterans from workers and other people.'

In either case, this is an incorrect position. If followed, we would be failing to take up the very real fight veterans have around their special needs and link it with the general anti-imperialist movement. Whether or not we work in it, the veteran's movement does exist; it is an objective fact. It is spontaneously developing, around the VA, around discrimination at the job site due to bad discharges, etc. on an almost daily basis. Not to go to this struggle and fight for the bread and butter demands that veterans rightfully deserve would be a grave error. Not only does it isolate anti-imperialists from the vets' movement and fail to bring that struggle into the overall attack on US imperialism, but it leaves the field wide open for the opportunist and professional careerists to take the vets' movement up one blind alley after another: the American Legion, VFW, AVM, etc. It is no less correct for us to lead the struggle of vets fighting discrimination caused by a less-than-honorable discharge or for better medical treatment from the VA than it is for workers to demand higher wages or social security benefits. It is simply a matter of making the anti-imperialist struggle relevant to people's lives; not some nebulous concept off in the clouds.

The flip side of this ultra-left position of not dealing at all with bread and butter veterans' issues, is that of wanting to deal exclusively with them. This position holds that the veterans' movement must be strictly limited to the particular needs of veterans as a 'special interest group.' It holds that the veteran's movement should be 'apolitical', not linked up to the anti-imperialist struggle; not linked to anything but purely veterans' issues. It holds that any demands other than purely 'veterans demands' will weaken the chances of winning any reforms around vets' real needs. Obviously, this position has attracted swarms of cold-blooded opportunists, like so many maggots clinging to overly ripe meat. (See the August WS editorial on this.) But there are also many honest people that have not seen where such a position ultimately leads; how strictly reformist demands can only deal with the symptom and not the real problem. Speaking to these honest elements, the June-July editorial in Winter Soldier stated:

"The issue of the many problems facing veterans in the United States has been given a great deal of publicity. Unfortunately, all too often the solutions put forth

to solve these problems are ones that view the struggle of veterans for a better way of life in utter isolation from the rest of the American people. VVAW/WSO feels that this is a very serious mistake. Veterans, and the problems facing them, are not separate from the rest of society. While vets clearly have particular needs and demands, we cannot allow the fight to obtain them to be carried out in isolation from the fight to solve the many problems facing the whole country.

"Indeed, the problems facing the American people today, veterans and non-veterans alike, are directly a result of the system of imperialism we are all forced to live under. If it were not for our involvement in Indochina, there would be no Vietnam veterans in need of vets' benefits in the first place. Thus, demanding veterans' benefits without tying these demands into the struggle against imperialism and the root cause of veterans' problems, is like putting a band-aid on a cancerous sore. Veteran reforms can be won and should be fought for; but the struggle must be carried out in a united effort with the rest of the American people against the common enemy-- US imperialism:

"Advocating strictly veteran reformist demands that do not tie the issues into the larger struggle of the American people against imperialism will lead the veteran's movement up the same blind alley that traditional veterans' organizations have followed for over fifty years. We cannot put the so-called 'interests' of veterans ahead of the interests of the rest of the people in this country: Veterans are an inseparable part of US society and their interests and welfare are the same as the rest of the American people. Reformist veterans demands are not going to stop another war in Indochina! While we must continue to struggle for a solution to the very real problems facing vets ...for the right of decent medical care, disability compensation, education, jobs, housing, and so forth--the struggle must be carried out with the understanding all people in the US have these same rights."

Proof of the position that veterans' issues cannot be raised in a strictly reformist manner separated from everything else comes from our own experience in discharge upgrading projects. Here is a clear example of how a strictly service-oriented mentality will achieve next to nothing in the way of results. If all we are doing is preparing appeals for badly discharged vets we may as well forget it. We know beforehand that the boards only hear a handful of cases each year and that only a fraction of these are ever upgraded. Unless the approach to discharge upgrading is thoroughly political, raising the demand for amnesty and a single-type discharge, the project makes no sense whatsoever. It will neither help the half million badly discharged veterans or advance the anti-imperialist struggle.

In sum, to advocate strictly reformist veterans' demands, separated from the overall anti-imperialist struggle makes several mistakes:

A. It is objectively lying to the masses of veterans about what is really going on. While opportunists such as AVM may rant and rave about a so called, 'national veterans' crisis' there is in reality no such thing. There is, however, a very real crisis facing US imperialism. It has lost in Indochina just as it is losing in much of the Third World. As imperialism continually loses ground, it correspondingly increases the repression of all working people here inside the US. The very real problems that veterans do face in this country are but one facet of this growing crisis of imperialism. The real struggle must be waged against the problem--imperialism

and not its symptoms.

B. It is a position that separates vets from their real allies: working people, the unemployed and all people struggling against US imperialism. As a 'special interest' group only dealing with vets' issues, veterans cannot link up their struggle with these allies. But as part of the united efforts of all people struggling against imperialism veterans can incredibly strengthen their movement.

C. A strictly reformist position inevitably ends up failing to rely and concentrate on the primary strengths of the veterans' movement: the united, militant mass action of the people. Instead this position will see the Congress, the VA, etc. as the primary focus of activity and it will see mass action as only serving as a pressure factor on these institutions. Not only does this fail to build the people's movement, it can never achieve any real victories either. Real victories in the veterans' movement can only be won by fighting for them. We must force the implementation of veteran's demands, not ask or try to pressure the VA or Congress to grant them to us.

This section of the paper deals with the questions of what becoming a mass anti-imperialist organization with a veterans and GI base and focus would mean.

1. Should we stop recruiting non-veterans or throw non-vets out of the organization? No. We are saying that we should focus our organizing work on vets and GIs; people who see the need for this work should be welcomed with open arms. Being a veteran is not a prerequisite. In the GI movement, for one example, many of the most effective organizers historically have been people who were neither GIs nor veterans.

We are not saying that the organization should regress to its pre-Winter Soldier days; we should have learned from the mistakes of that period AND from the mistakes we have made since the change to VVAW/WSO. And we should consolidate what we have learned. The majority of new members, under this concept, would probably be veterans and GIs since we are speaking to their concrete needs and interests. But we want--and should recruit--non-vets who want to join in the anti-imperialist struggle through work around vet and GI issues.

2. Would this change cause us to lose members? Yes, it probably would. It would cause us to lose some honest members whose primary interests are not with the struggles of vets and GIs; although these people would be "lost" to VVAW/WSO, they would not be lost to the anti-imperialist movement, because they would either find or develop those organizations which could best fight imperialism around their particular needs. Because they would be part of the united front against imperialism, they would not, in a larger sense, be "lost" to VVAW/WSO at all.

We would also lose those people for whom the struggle against imperialism is the vague "imperialism in the sky" without direct relation to the everyday real struggles of the masses of people. For these present members of VVAW/WSO, urgent, vigorous, militant struggle around immediate issues has no appeal and they would leave the organization.

3. Isn't this change just what the Revolutionary Union wants us to do? Yes, to a great extent. But the RU is not the only organization which sees us as an organization with a veterans and GI base and focus--so does Nixon, the Democratic Party (remember the attempts to get us to organize "vets for McGovern?"), the National Council of Churches, the CPUSA, NCUUA, the PRG, the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea, and on and on. What is primary, however, is not who supports the veterans and GI focus of the organization; what is primary is whether that direction will move VVAW/WSO and the anti-imperialist struggle forward in the most effective possible way. In short, it's not who puts a line forward, but what the line is.

The position advocated in this paper is the position of the VVAW/WSO national collective; we advocate these changes because we believe they point the direction the organization should move, for the reasons given throughout this paper. We feel the important questions about this paper are political--is the analysis of our organizational history correct? Have we drawn the right lessons from our past practice? Have we accurately identified bad tendencies in the organization and would these

tendencies, if continued lessen or destroy our effectiveness? We believe that it is around questions such as these that the future of the organization should be discussed.

4. What does this mean in terms of national projects of the organization?

First, it means that we make a clear distinction between projects and those issues which we support (along the lines of what we called an endorsement at the Milwaukee NSCM). A national program or project which focuses on veteran or GI issues, in the context of anti-imperialism, should be organized by VVAW/WSO. As with the demonstration in Washington, we should ask other anti-imperialist organizations to support and build these projects and programs, but not ask other groups to take such projects on as their primary organizing responsibility. At the same time, we should support (endorse) those anti-imperialist struggles organized by other groups--for example, the struggle of the Farmworkers. We should also support, on a national basis, struggles which, though they are organized on a local basis, need national support--for instance, the Lawton/Gardner trial or the Leavenworth Brothers.

As exemplified by Operation County Fair, we should not undertake projects which diffuse the focus of the organization; OCF showed that we do not have the capability of organizing a project around poor healthcare in the rural south--nor should we take on that kind of project. If a community group in Bogue Chitto were organizing the project, strong chapters in that area of the country could and should support such a project which grew out of the needs of the people. The national organization could be asked to support the project through sending equipment or doing publicity. But it is not the task of VVAW/WSO to organize such a project.

With a clear organizational focus on veterans and GIs comes a limited scope for national projects and programs. Active support of other projects or programs should continue as part of the united front against imperialism.

5. Does this mean we work only on veteran and GI issues? No. It means that our organizing work would be done around these issues. To do this work in the context of anti-imperialism means that we would also work on and support other anti-imperialist struggles. Specifically, it means we would continue to actively support the truckers, or the Borden strikers, or the Harlin County coal miners, or the Attica Brothers; we would not organize these struggles. In terms of our prison project, we would continue to do veterans' work in prisons (DUP's, for instance) or GI work in the case of Leavenworth Disciplinary Barracks, and we would continue to help in the struggles of prisoners around the country to organize and unify inside their prisons.

It certainly does not mean that we would give up our active support of the peoples of Indochina nor does it mean that our support would in any way lessen. As one of the few organizations which continues to stress the fact the war is still going on, we would not stop in our struggle for final implementation of the agreements, and for the freedom and independence of the Indochinese. Again in the context of anti-imperialism, we would continue to support the struggles of people around the world for liberation from U. S. imperialism.