

Report on NOW Convention

by Nancy Brown, November 7, 1975

The National Organization for Women (NOW) held its national convention in Philadelphia, October 24-27. The convention was attended by more than 3,000 women and a handful of men.

One significant aspect of the convention was the change in composition of NOW since its last convention. Many of the women at the convention were young. There were more Blacks, college, and high school women than at any previous convention.

Noticeable from the discussions that comrades had with NOW members from around the country was the interest in socialist ideas and the wide range of activities that NOW chapters have been involved in -- the fight to ratify and defend the ERA; defense of Dr. Kenneth Edelin and abortion rights; the Joanne Little case; and the fight for lesbian rights.

There was a noticeable lack of red-baiting, and we had no problems selling the press or distributing campaign materials.

The convention started with a march of 1,200 people to Independence Hall. The march, called to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Susan B. Anthony's suffrage march, spontaneously became a march for the ERA. The spirit and militancy of the demonstration were similar to the WONAAC marches several years ago.

The response to our participation in the convention was fantastic. The tremendous receptivity to socialist ideas was reflected in both the literature sold and the other activities that we carried out:

1) Pathfinder sold \$830 worth of literature, including 127 copies of Woman's Evolution. Evelyn Reed attended the convention Sunday afternoon to autograph books and talk to women. The response to Reed's presence was excellent. A large number of women had heard Reed speak, had read her books, and were familiar with her. People actually bought her book on Saturday and then came back to have it autographed on Sunday.

2) We sold 400 copies of the Militant, 75 Young Socialists, and 25 Militant subscriptions. A large number of women were familiar with the Militant and remembered the coverage it had given to Joanne Little and the abortion rights movement.

3) The Socialist Workers campaign distributed the women's rights brochure and the Bill of Rights for Working People, and Willie Mae Reid addressed the convention for five minutes. All of the presidential candidates were invited to speak. Only two bourgeois candidates appeared -- the rest sent female representatives. Although most of the convention participants had left by Monday morning (there were 400 people left), Reid was warmly received.

4) A reception held for Reid and Terry Ann Hardy, the Socialist Workers party candidate for mayor of Philadelphia, was attended by ten NOW members who received leaflets at the convention site. (The reception was scheduled for the dinner break on Saturday, but the convention never broke for dinner. If it had, there probably would have been more people there.)

5) The Philadelphia branch of the SWP sponsored a forum Sunday night at the hall on "Feminism and Socialism." The talk was given by Linda Jenness. The convention was leafletted for the forum, and in addition to members of the YSA and Socialist Workers party, fifteen to twenty people came. (Again, the forum was scheduled for the dinner break, but the convention did not break.)

6) Three women asked to join the YSA or SWP during the convention.

7) NSCAR participated in the convention, selling \$45 worth of buttons and collecting the names of eighty-two women who are interested in working with NSCAR.

8) Although there were numerous feminist newspapers and groups represented there, no other political tendencies attended. The only visible indication of any tendencies was a small stack of Workers Power and a few copies of News & Letters. Twenty-five comrades participated in the convention.

The proceedings on the convention floor were contradictory to the rest of the convention. The leadership of NOW totally ignored the crucial questions facing the women's liberation movement. The entire agenda and discussion consisted of two points: procedural fights and the election of national officers and the executive board.

The convention brought to a head the factional fights that have been occurring in NOW for the last year. The first point raised on the floor was a procedural point challenging the voting credentials. The entire convention adjourned for three hours so that everyone could re-register.

The elections were bitter and revolved around personality and organizational disagreements. There was no discussion of the issues facing NOW. There was only one formal caucus, which called itself the "Majority Caucus." The "Majority Caucus," headed by NOW president Karen DeCrow, had a platform of sorts, which consisted of endorsing political candidates, and support to the ERA, abortion, and lesbian rights. After DeCrow mentioned these things in her opening remarks, there was no further discussion of political issues.

Most of the "Majority Caucus" candidates, including DeCrow, were elected by a slim margin.

The average NOW member attending the convention was confused and had no idea what the faction fight was about. The place where political discussion took place was the workshops and around the literature tables. Most of the convention participants were dismayed and disgusted at the factional atmosphere of the convention.

At this point, NOW has 70,000 members. This includes a large number of women who are interested in socialism and how it relates to feminism, and a large number of women who have been active in struggles around various issues. By joining NOW, working with NOW members in coalitions, having our candidates address their meetings, and doing whatever else we can, we want to work with and talk to the women in NOW.

In spite of the failure of the national leadership of NOW to launch a national campaign around the ERA at the convention, a lot of NOW members are interested in ERA actions, especially after the defeat of the state ERAs in New Jersey and New York. It is around the ERA that NOW can have its biggest impact.

Since NOW has decided to endorse political candidates, this will probably be a focus for many NOW chapters during the next year. We do not want to leave the field open for the Democrats and Republicans. We want to have our candidates, both male and female, attend NOW meetings and seek NOW's endorsement. Our candidates can explain why NOW should not support the Democrats and Republicans and why NOW should become involved in action coalitions around the ERA and other issues.

There were two other big women's liberation events that took place the same weekend as the NOW convention. One was the International Women's Year Festival in Cleveland. Estimates are that 30,000 people attended the event during the weekend. Pathfinder Press had a booth and sold several hundred dollars worth of literature.

Also that weekend, in Minneapolis, approximately 700 women attended a conference of women history professors. Pathfinder sold several hundred dollars worth of literature there, with Evelyn Reed's book topping the list.