

The SWP At The NOW National Conference

The nearly 3,000 NOW members who took part in the 1978 National Issues Conference in Washington last month were a determined group of feminists. While dialogue was active, the strongest impression was one of unity, of working and planning together to achieve mutually understood and agreed-upon goals.

Most participants, however, sensed an underlying concern not directly related to any issue. The problem was one of which NOW has become increasingly aware, and it focused on the highly visible presence of the Socialist Workers Party and its youth group, the Young Socialist Alliance, at the Conference. Many people felt, and some publically voiced their concern, that our Conference and our members were being used to further the SWP's own agenda.

There is considerable evidence that the Socialist Workers Party was doing just that. According to the Congressional Record of September 7, 1978, during the SWP Socialist Educational Conference in Oberlin, Ohio, last August "...fraction meetings were held that were closed to all but fraction members and top SWP organizers for auto workers, building trades, rail workers, shipbuilders, transit workers, public employees, teamsters, teachers, *National Organization for Women (NOW)*, [italics ours] machinists, molders, postal workers, electrical workers, hospital workers, and printers," and plans were made for "full involvement in the national conference of the National Organization for Women. . . ." Many Conference participants also observed the SWP "command post" in the back of the room in which the plenary was held, where party leaders directed the strategy. Whenever an issue of interest to them came to the floor, SWP members also used the familiar tactic of stacking the mikes, often speaking from notes prepared by their leaders in the back of the room.

An example of such an issue was the SWP-generated resolution mandating three marches to be held simultaneously in three unratified states, all to take place on March 8, 1979. (Marches and other public mass actions are virtually the only tactic SWP endorses to effect change.) The response to the resolution, both on the floor and in ERA workshops, was strong and clear.

The reason the National ERA Strike Force was opposed to the resolution mandating three marches at a specified time, and that the Conference ultimately defeated it, was *not* that NOW members oppose marches — quite the contrary. The National ERA March in Washington was planned as a part of a total campaign with a budget and some advance thought for successful execution. The three-march resolution, on the other hand, was proposed in a vacuum from a total campaign. We could not, in October, before the November elections and without the new

ratification campaigns designed, decide on a date and three locations which might or might not be relevant. Nor was consideration given to the costs of such marches, either in terms of personnel or money. Why, then, the insistence on the march proposal? Surely NOW had shown its willingness and ability to put on mass marches. Was the reason for the march proposal the creation of a divisive issue around which SWP could organize the floor? For many NOW members who remember the SWP march proposal of the 1977 Conference, it had a remarkably familiar ring. The 1977 mass demonstration proposal was also used as an organizing tool. Throughout the Detroit Conference, whether the issue was relevant or not to the discussion at hand, SWP members pushed the mass demonstration resolution, called "Defending Women's Rights." Of course NOW is for defending women's rights, but it is against another organization determining its agenda and strategy. The 1977 resolution was defeated.

Instead that Conference voted for an ERA Strike Force to create a national ERA strategy. The National ERA March, developed as one part of the integral ERA extension and ratification campaign, was a smashing success.

In arguing against the 1978 three-march proposal, several NOW members, some of whom produced the monumentally successful July 9 March, appeared to be arguing against marches themselves. Of course, they were not against marches, just the particular inflexible strategy that was being proposed. One of the potential dangers when the SWP implements its avowed policy of "intervention" in other organizations is that members of the targeted organization, in resentment and anger, may overreact and change their own policies and beliefs to fight the intervention. The rigidity of the SWP in pursuing their agenda, in their use of strategy and in their style of rhetoric may elicit a similar rigidity in response.

On the other hand, to continue as if the SWP was not operating within our organization would be foolhardy. SWP intervention is for the benefit of SWP and not for the benefit of the targeted organization. When large numbers of SWP members belong to a NOW chapter, that chapter tends to decline in numbers and activity as it suffers from internal strife. This pattern has been reported in all regions and areas of NOW.

Two attitudes have helped NOW deal with the SWP intervention: our political idealism and our political independence. Both factors were operative at the 1978 Conference.

When, for example, a proposed bylaw change would have specified that a membership could be revoked for failure to adhere to NOW "policy" (as opposed to the present bylaw which requires supporting NOW's goals), the Conference clearly rejected it. Some SWP members, fearing

passage of that change, had viewed it as a means of removing them from the organization, as indeed it could have been. Many of them have opposed numerous NOW policies in the *Militant* and in other public forums. Besides, they are themselves accustomed to such strictures. SWP regulations require that once a decision or policy is reached, it is "binding upon members," and they must, even when functioning in other organizations, conform to "party discipline" or face suspension or expulsion.

However, they benefitted from the tenaciously democratic nature of NOW when the membership refused to impose similar restrictions on our organization.

Nevertheless, if the SWP had any illusions about our rejection of intervention in our affairs by other groups, they were relieved of them when another resolution did pass overwhelmingly. This resolution states:

WHEREAS, the National Organization for Women (NOW) has always been an independent feminist organization; and

WHEREAS, NOW and its subunits wish to remain independent and free from political party pressure, yet able to endorse individual candidates who support NOW's positions;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that no political party be allowed to use NOW or any subunit of NOW as a vehicle to further its political goals.

Why does NOW continue to be plagued with this unwelcome presence? The SWP, fulfilling its mandate to intervene in organizations that can further its agenda, insinuates itself into NOW chapters. Although their own party is highly disciplined, structured, and authoritarian, they take advantage of the democratic nature of NOW, with our easy access and full guarantees of participation in dialogue and activity. Their rhetoric is attractive because it appeals to the ideals that bring many of us to NOW: concern for the poor, the oppressed, the minorities. SWP members are accepted into the chapter as committed feminists.

Only later do we find that their rhetoric is often only that, and that their commitment is not to feminism first, but to the Socialist Workers Party. It is not our program they work for, that program which is created by the members through the National NOW Conference and by states and chapters, and which is implemented by our activists nationwide on a daily basis. SWP supports only those goals and tactics that the Socialist Workers Party deems appropriate for the women's movement in this country.

NOW members showed at the Conference that they would not be baited into overreacting when they refused to impose restrictions on individuals or segments of the NOW membership by refusing to pass the "policy" bylaw change. However, they also showed, by

passing the resolution on political independence, that they will not be diverted from their goals by another group.

Maintaining the balance of keeping our ideals while retaining our political independence from one political party's agenda is a challenge. NOW is not an organization likely to step back from such a challenge.

A NOW Member Comments . . .

by Barbara Timmer

I had the always interesting experience of being a "mike monitor" at the national NOW Conference this past October in Washington. From my vantage point on the floor it became clear to me that members of the Socialist Workers Party were actively involved as a party in an effort to have their party goals and tactics adopted in place of a NOW platform.

NOW is my political affiliation and I am as sensitive to having my choice disrupted in that affiliation as I am about my religious affiliation.

In this country and within the vast process we call the women's movement is a multitude of organizations and groups and individuals loosely related by our common goals. And certainly the movement for civil rights is large enough to encompass tactics and solutions of every description. Each of us who makes a political commitment to a particular group chooses the organization which most closely fulfills our personal need to be with each other.

Our particular affiliation is the personal choice we make to work primarily within one specific structure. We give more than time or energy — we enter into a relationship with our choice, and our most significant freedom becomes this freedom to associate. In return, we are tolerant. We do not demand that every other group or organization adopt our bylaws or our tactics. We simply ask that we be allowed to associate freely.

My own religious denomination would never send out members to other church services or annual assemblies in an attempt to rewrite another church's theology. Nor can I imagine a group of Republican women meeting at the Democratic Convention and trying to get the Republican platform passed. Perhaps these are examples of an American tradition which prefers the creative tension of pluralism to the order which dogma envisions. I suspect, too, that it rests on our deep respect for individual choice.

NOW is a political affiliation, and while it welcomes women and men from all political persuasions, the goals and tactics of the organization must remain true to those members for whom it is their primary allegiance. Sisters who have another political loyalty first — I only ask that you recognize my freedom to associate. If I want to join the SWP, that same freedom will allow me.

NOW - NJ

Newsbreaks

December 1978

EDITORIAL

By Barbara Goldblatt

Jo Freeman, in her brilliant analysis of the structure of NOW, "The Politics of Liberation," traces the development of NOW. The National Organization was initially a small cadre of activists, who intended to be a strike force, traveling to wherever they were needed. Local chapters developed as grass roots women recognized the importance of belonging to a strong national organization. Freeman contends that the two never fully merged into a cohesive unit.

Generally the two have worked together effectively; neither more nor less than the other. However, at this time there appears to be a strong movement on the part of the National Officers and Board towards concentration of power in a centralized organization.

Four resolutions and by-laws changes proposed by the National Board clearly demonstrate this trend - establishing national collection of dues, extending the ERA State of Emergency, granting the National Board members and officers the status of delegates at the National Conference, and the spectre of being drummed out of NOW for disagreeing with NOW policy (which, of course, is often set by the National Board.)

Although the policies changes was soundly defeated and the consideration of centralized dues collection postponed, they portend no good for the grass roots sector of NOW. With centralized collection of dues, the National Officers and Board would have a stranglehold on local and state chapters. Cut off the flow of money to the state and chapters and you cut off their live.

Old time NOW members will remember when the Majority Caucus (spear-headed by Ellie Smeal) advocated escrowing dues to protest the illegal actions of the National Board. Local chapters must retain their autonomy and control of their dues money to remain viable. (Of course, dues money belonging to National must be promptly remitted.)

Extending the ERA State of Emergency, while possibly politically sound, also, empowers the National Officers and ERA Strike Force (we can only guess at the interlocks here) to make decision, set policy, and commit NOW monies outside of our system of checks and balances. As long as the State of Emergency is in effect, our by-laws are in a state of suspension.

The maneuvering on the part of the National Officers and Board to

(Continued on Page 6)

RED BAITING IN NOW

Last year, after the National Conference in Detroit, we were distressed by accounts of red baiting at the conference. When we called for unity - for not allowing a witch hunt to develop - we were roundly criticized. Red baiting does not occur in NOW we were told. Well, we've been to Washington, and we've seen it, and we are disheartened.

Issues were discussed, not on merit, but on whether or not they were supported by the Socialist Worker's Party (SWP). When one NOW member spoke strongly in favor of a resolution, another NOW member took the mike to tell the delegates that the first speaker was a member of the SWP and the chair did not call this out of order!

We thought that NOW National by-laws prohibited discrimination within NOW; we thought that NOW members were assertive enough to make their own rational decisions; we thought that an appeal to emotionalism and McCarthyism had no place in NOW. We were wrong!

Prominent in a Special Conference Supplement of The NOW Times, published by nine Southern California chapters, was an article proclaiming SWP in NOW: The Persistent Parasites. The unidentified author trotted out all the old anti-Socialist bug-a-boos that we heard in the 50's. Some NOW members are accused of having "hidden agendas". Some states and chapters, the author implies, are dupes of SWP "huckstered" resolutions.

Members of the SWP in NOW are quite open about their views and affiliations. We would do better to look for "hidden agendas" among those who maintain clandestine affiliations. Infiltration of the Women's Liberation Movement by the feds is well-documented. Who are they? And what is their "hidden agenda"?

Enough of this paranoia! Petty name calling and fear mongering have no place in NOW. In the struggle ahead, we need to establish ties with all people and organizations working on our goals - ERA, reproductive freedom, lesbian rights, battered women, sexism in education media and society in general. To do otherwise will lead to factionalism - and defeat.

become delegates at this conference was not to their credit. With all the crucial matters before the conference, why was this the first item for consideration? When the proposed change failed on the first ballot, what lobbying and pressure was exerted to have this reconsidered and to ensure its passing?

The delegate system is based on propositional representation. Chapters and at-large members send delegates to represent them. Often they instruct their delegates how to vote on key issues. Because the number of delegates is limited not every activist becomes a delegate. Since the National Officers and Board members consider it important for themselves to be delegates, and to vote, at the conference, they should, also, recognize the importance of making state co-ordinators and other state officers and task force chairs delegates. And while we are granting delegate status, and the vote, to some without a constituency, why not allow all NOW members to be delegates and to vote? Or, in NOW, are some members more equal than others?

When National feels challenged by grass roots NOW, paranoia reigns. A simple request from NY-NOW, for a NOW policy manual to be compiled by the Executive Vice President, threw them into a panic. According to one National Board member, if the National Conference (the Supreme Governing Body of NOW) is permitted to

assign tasks to a National Officer, it would "destroy the organization". Only the National Board and the Officers may determine how tasks and policy are implemented this reasoning maintains.

The behavior of the Chair during this transaction was curious. The Chair, always strong and in control, waffled on ruling whether or not it was in order for the conference to instruct the National Officers. The Chair opened the decision to the body. Following the vote, the Chair called for a division of the House. Claiming that she could not determine the result, she called for further discussion and compromise, disallowing a vote by ballot as too time consuming.

The conference delegates, unfortunately, did not assert themselves and demand that the Chair not cast aside the vote. Perhaps they were stunned and bewildered by the incomprehensible behavior of the Chair. Nevertheless it is incumbent upon the grass roots to maintain their prerogative. The grass roots are the heart and soul of NOW. The grass roots must not allow their strength to be usurped.

For NOW to continue its dynamic accomplishments, we must maintain a strong National Organization. However the National Organization can not afford to strengthen itself at the expense of the grass roots organization. A strong National presence supported by a strong grass roots presence will be an unbeatable team.

It is time for the National Organization for Women to unite.