

RESIDENT NATIONAL COMMITTEE MEETING, December 11, 1971

Present: Full: Britton, Camejo, Garza, Horowitz, Jenness, Lovell,
Novack, Weissman

Alternate: Lipman, Morrison, Roberts, Scott, Seigle, Thomas,
White

Visitors: Boehm, Chainey, Chase, Foley, Frankel, Henry,
Jaquith, Miller, Oliver, Reissner, Rose, Seidman,
Shilman, Vidal

AGENDA: 1. Ireland Report
 2. Indo-Pakistani War
 3. World Movement Report

1. IRELAND REPORT

Foley reported.

Discussion.

2. INDO-PAKISTANI WAR

Thomas reported.

Discussion.

3. WORLD MOVEMENT REPORT

Sheppard reported.

Discussion.

Meeting adjourned.

14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014

December 11, 1971

TO ALL BRANCH ORGANIZERS, WOMEN'S LIBERATION WORK DIRECTORS,
AND MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE

Dear Comrades,

The following report on the November 20 WONAAC actions by Comrade Carol Lipman, National Women's Liberation Work Director, was approved by the Political Committee at its meeting of December 3, 1971.

The branch membership should be made aware of the contents of the report.

Comradely,

Barry Sheppard

Barry Sheppard

NOVEMBER 20 REPORT

by Carol Lipman

In the five months of the abortion law repeal campaign, which culminated in the spirited marches and rallies in Washington, D.C., and San Francisco on November 20, WONAAC has (1) clearly established itself as the central coalition organizing around abortion law repeal in the country; (2) developed a clear mass action alternative both to the reformist perspective of support to the capitalist parties in the 1972 elections as a substitute for mass action in the streets, and to the ultraleft and counter-institutionists' perspective of nonaction and sectarianism in the women's movement; and (3) helped to make abortion a national organizing issue for the women's movement around the woman's right to choose, not around population control.

The favorable reportage of the demonstrations, both in the daily press and on network TV, as well as the underground press, indicated the spirit and character of the demonstrations. The Great Speckled Bird of Atlanta and the Quicksilver Times of Washington, D.C., both hostile during the preparations for the demonstration, gave favorable accounts of the action, as did the Guardian.

The rallies were high points of the demonstrations. (See The Militant for reports on the actions themselves.) In Washington, D.C., over 900 Militants and 80 subs were sold and 75 endorsers of the SWP election campaign were obtained.

Through one WONAAC international mailing, greater international response was galvanized for the November 20 call than expected. Demonstrations were held in France, England, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Italy. What WONAAC has done in the United States has had an impact on the women's liberation movement around the world.

In response to WONAAC's pro-abortion campaign, right-wing forces around the Catholic Church have escalated their countercampaign for the "rights" of the "fetus." Counterdemonstrations were held in New York, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Ohio on November 20. We can expect that this will be a continuing feature of the abortion struggle.

In initiating this campaign, WONAAC aimed to involve two major groupings: (1) the activists in the high schools and on the campuses and (2) the forces around NOW and the Political Caucus, which we knew, as was the case on August 26, 1970, would play a decisive role in influencing the size of the demonstration. Their support and participation would be a large factor in making these actions as large as objectively possible.

WONAAC was successful in reaching out to large numbers of activists in the high schools and on the campuses for this abortion campaign. A broad endorsement list on a national scale gave WONAAC substantial authority within the abortion movement, but it was unable to make substantial breakthroughs into support from NOW and the Political Caucus. Between six and eight chapters of NOW endorsed the abortion campaign, and a few influential figures, including Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan and Lana Clarke Phelan, the new Abortion Task Force head of NOW, supported WONAAC. A unity plea from WONAAC urging the Political Caucus and NOW to cancel its conflictingly scheduled meetings, netted support from the Ohio Women's Political Caucus, but a number of large meetings went ahead as scheduled, in conflict with

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the demonstration.

In every major metropolitan area, even where we have no branches, such as New Haven and Baltimore, intensive activities were carried out around the abortion issue because of WONAAC. Large speak-outs, debates and local demonstrations were utilized as building tools for the November 20 demonstrations.

If there had been no abortion action strategy concretized over the past five months, on a national scale, there would have been no viable action alternative for women around the country to participate in.

Just compare these last few months with the fall and spring after the August 26, 1970, demonstrations. Without this national campaign, each area was left to try to develop action perspectives city by city. Most of the activities local areas did get involved in were around abortion, but it was the establishment of the national campaign that enabled the movement to make significant strides forward. In some areas, we found it difficult to develop outward reaching mass-action oriented activities, particularly where the ultralefts dominated much of the women's movement. Through the WONAAC campaign, we were able to move rapidly ahead and build viable activities around the abortion issue in Atlanta, and other cities which faced similar problems with regard to ultraleftism.

And through the participation in this campaign many women, including Blacks and Chicanas, have decided to join our movement and we can expect that this will continue.

As reported in The Militant, a number of conflicting meetings were scheduled by the reformists. The National Board meeting held on November 20 by NOW in Atlanta was a conscious slap in the face to the demonstrations. Regional NWPC (National Women's Political Caucus) meetings were held around the country attended by 860 women in Minnesota, 500 women in Massachusetts and a sizable number in Texas.

WONAAC set up a table at the Minnesota Political Caucus meeting and what they found was not surprising. A majority of women present were not fully aware of the WONAAC demonstrations and were surprised to find that the meeting had been called, quite obviously, on the same day. WONAAC received a good response from many of these women.

The conscious opposition of the leadership of NOW and the Political Caucus does not necessarily reflect the attitude of a large number of NOW members, who do not see the contradiction between being involved in supporting the WONAAC campaign and simultaneously supporting candidates of the Democratic Party in the elections.

This makes it particularly important that we continue efforts to reach these women and not take the fatalistic attitude that they could not be involved in the abortion campaign. By involving activists from these organizations, substantial pressure will be placed on the national leadership of NOW to support this campaign.

Size of the Demonstrations

The demonstrations were smaller than projected. And there was an important problem that WONAAC faced in building this action. The reformist pressures around the 1972 elections hit harder and earlier

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than expected. The larger and more influential groups within the women's movement, NOW and the NWPC, did not support the demonstration and their leadership attacked and undermined it where possible. The support of those chapters of NOW and individuals in this milieu did help build the demonstrations, but their vicious and hysterical red-baiting campaign against WONAAC, even at the NOW convention itself, laid the groundwork for the national leadership (with the exceptions like Betty Friedan) to pressure local chapters into viewing the WONAAC abortion campaign as too "controversial" for them to take up.

The opposition from the ultralefts was entirely expected, and was nothing new. They didn't like August 26, 1970, and we didn't expect them to be happy about the abortion action either.

"When we attract thousands of women, we can expect that either the content of what we have been doing has been diluted or that the established purveyor of reality has legitimized the women's movement." The ultralefts have departed little from this statement which appeared in an analysis of the August 26, 1970, action by Washington, D.C., Women's Liberation in Off Our Backs, one of the more influential women's newspapers in the country.

It was following our participation in the August 26 action that the first major red-baiting attack on our participation in the women's movement was initiated by the ultralefts. And this continued through building WONAAC and the abortion law repeal campaign.

The Red-Baiting

WONAAC had to confront one of the most vicious and hysterical red-baiting campaigns recently faced in the mass movements. The red-baiting was carried out by the ultralefts, reformists and anticommunists of the liberal and reactionary stripe. And it did have some effect.

Shirley Chisholm's attitude toward the abortion campaign reflected both the potential WONAAC faced in organizing this campaign and the effect of red-baiting in an election year.

At a New York Political Caucus meeting, Shirley Chisholm announced two weeks before November 20 that there were two important political events that happened in 1971: the formation of WONAAC and the formation of the Women's Political Caucus. After receiving an anonymously written, right-wing, red-baiting press release on a WONAAC letterhead two days prior to the demonstration, she used it as an excuse to back out of her support.

This red-baiting must be answered head on. There are a whole layer of people who are new to the abortion movement, to any radical movement for that matter, and have never faced red-baiting and do not understand its implications. Many have never heard of the SWP before.

The fact that much of the red-baiting comes from anticommunists will make it all the easier to explain what it represents. We must have an educational approach with the new people around this movement on both the red-baiting and the political questions that will develop in the course of this campaign.

Some new activists tend to think that the red-baiting is all a

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mistake. They have enjoyed working with the SWP and the YSA and will think that all you have to do is convince everyone else how great we are and then we can all get together and work on abortion. We have to show that there are political issues involved.

If our movement were a mass organization, the red-baiting would be expected, but it wouldn't have that much effect. But for a small organization like us, particularly in the election period, it will have some effect.

There is a political basis for the red-baiting on the part of NOW. Mass-action-oriented movements, in the streets, run counter to their "political caucus" organizing oriented toward the Democratic Party. It is the NOW leadership that sees an action campaign as a diversion from their class collaborationist perspective and will seize on any method to attack it, including red-baiting.

They obviously can't oppose working around abortion law repeal -- it is an issue which they support. It is part of their program. They have to find another rationale for their membership in not supporting WONAAC, and they use red-baiting.

We should press NOW and NWPC to make good on their stand in favor of abortion law repeal, to support WONAAC, and take the red-baiting head on, explain how it is damaging both to the abortion law repeal campaign and to their own organizations. We will get support from some forces in these organizations if we are persistent.

Abortion as an issue

In building the next WONAAC conference we can expect that a number of questions will be raised about the abortion campaign. The conference will be sizable and a large number of women who participated in building the demonstrations in the high schools and on the campuses will want to come, particularly as the right-wing anti-abortion forces escalate their anti-abortion campaign. The ultralefts will be there, including International Socialists, Progressive Labor (who have been involved in WONAAC in a few areas) and assorted ultraleft groupings in the women's liberation movement. WONAAC will aim to involve as many women from NOW, the Political Caucus and more traditional abortion organizations as possible.

Questions will be raised on whether abortion is an issue that should be organized around or whether the demand should be for free abortion rather than repeal of abortion laws.

We should recognize there is no specific women's issue at this time that has the same impact that an issue like the war has. The war is a central issue in American politics and there is no issue in the women's movement that has that impact.

All the basic reasons for originally projecting the abortion campaign around the abortion issue -- an issue that has come to the fore in the struggle itself -- are still valid today. Our experience across the country and for the past year has been that it is this issue which has brought women into struggle more than any other.

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Abortion is the easiest issue around which to build a campaign. Because there are laws against abortions, the fight becomes very clear. And in those states where there have been partial victories, like in New York, concerted campaigns are being waged by the right wing to set back the struggle for a woman's right to choose. The fight in New York to defend and extend the New York partial victory will be a particularly important one.

Other issues, like child care and equal pay are more difficult to organize action campaigns and coalitions around at this time. The fact that there is a deep disagreement and debate over the question of abortion in this country, between those for and those against abortion law repeal, enhances the possibility of uniting the pro-abortion forces in action against the right wing. Abortion has become an issue of national politics. This also means that part of the abortion fight is an educational fight around both why abortion is a woman's right to choose and why mass action is the way to win.

Precisely because there is the thrust on the part of the reformists to substitute electoral Democratic Party activity for mass action, it is even more imperative that a nationwide action campaign be continued on an issue of women's oppression.

To attempt to organize the abortion campaign around the demand for free abortion, rather than repeal of laws restricting a woman's right to choose, would narrow the campaign. Ultralefts who think that actions can be larger with the slogan of free abortion with all the problems this campaign has to handle are not facing reality. It is simply not true that to make the slogan more "radical" would result in a larger demonstration. Maybe WONAAC would have had support from a few more ultraleft groupings with the slogan of free abortions on November 20, but a lot more other people would have been lost, and effective coalitions would have been much more difficult to build if not impossible. Most important, this would orient the movement away from the perspective of attempting to win the masses of women by raising those slogans which appeal to women at the level the struggle is actually at.

What next?

Tentative thinking in WONAAC presently focuses around organizing the next nationally coordinated action campaign in regional and local areas for the spring. A week of abortion activities, culminating in local or regional demonstrations would give WONAAC, for example, the opportunity to focus on the campuses and high schools -- holding speak-outs, debates, films -- where the largest support can be obtained for the campaign at this time.

We should not expect that the demonstrations this spring are going to be massive. There may be more women involved in these actions than on November 20, simply because it will be easier to involve women in local actions and demonstrations than a single, national action focus as in the fall. But we should not expect a qualitative change in the size of the actions, especially as we go into the election period.

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The high schools and the campuses have provided WONAAC with the most fruitful arena for our women's liberation work and the abortion campaign. The types of campus groups vary from area to area, but they basically fall into three categories: (1) where there are healthy women's liberation groups already established, the abortion campaign has tended to become a central focus of its work; (2) where campus women's liberation organizations are dominated by the ultralefts, which is the case in a few areas, good abortion groups were set up and functioning separately; (3) and where there are no women's liberation groups, particularly where we had no or few comrades on campus, local WONAAC coalitions were instrumental in setting up viable abortion groups which still have the perspective of continuing.

There are a number of activities that can be carried out on the campuses and the high schools around the abortion and contraception issues. Fights can be waged for abortion on demand on campuses where medical and health facilities are free for students; campaigns can be waged to obtain adequate gynecological facilities as well as abortion referral information. These issues can be effective on the high schools where the attitude of administrators on these issues is particularly repressive.

WONAAC is also investigating the possibility of introducing national repeal legislation on abortion in Congress in the spring, to help maintain a national focus of the abortion struggle.

Our major task in the coming two months will be to build the WONAAC national conference. Participation from campuses, high schools and the women active in NOW and the Political Caucus will help ensure the success of the conference.

WONAAC is also holding a National Coordinating Committee meeting to plan for the conference and decide where the national office will be located. The meeting will take place in Washington, D.C. on December 18, from noon to 5 PM at the George Washington University Student Center, room 410. GWU is located on 21 St. N.W. between H and I streets. Local coalitions should attempt to send one or two representatives to the meeting. A fraction meeting will be held at 10 AM at the Washington, D.C. branch headquarters, 746 9th St. N.W., second floor. Phone: (202) 783-2363.

In a previous communication from the national office, we suggested that one or two comrades be assigned from the branches to join NOW, attend their meetings, and where possible help get NOW involved in the abortion campaign. These efforts should be continued, although we should recognize that it may be harder for us to have a lot of room to work as the organization gears to the elections.

We also want to urge WONAAC to intervene at large Political Caucus meetings, particularly regional conferences. WONAAC should continue to go to these meetings, get support for the abortion campaign and build the conference.

Reports should be sent into the national office on both NOW and the Political Caucus.