



vietnam veterans against the war  
winter soldier organization

in a time of struggle

AN OPEN LETTER TO  
ANTI-IMPERIALIST FORCES

AGAINST  
the  
WAR





**VVAW-WSO**

## **in a time of struggle**

### **AN OPEN LETTER TO ANTI-IMPERIALIST FORCES**

TO OUR SISTERS AND BROTHERS IN STRUGGLE,

An unusual course of events concerning political struggle is taking place within Viet-Nam Veterans Against the War/Winter Soldier Organization (VVAW/WSO). On April 12, 1975, at the Southern California Sub-Regional conference, five chapters voted to expel the rest of the California Region (9 chapters, including the elected Regional Coordinator). The serious nature of this attack requires us to make public our position on both this action and the events that led to it. Our position concerns some of the most basic issues within the anti-imperialist movement; the role of white people in fighting racism and in building a multi-national movement; the responsibility of men to combat sexism; the nature and abuse of democracy in a mass organization; the role of members of cadre organizations with mass organizations, as well as the relationship of cadre organizations to mass organizations. Our present struggle directly involves the Revolutionary Union (RU).

The recent struggle in VVAW/WSO has underlined the necessity for a clear analysis and full presentation of our political situation. This letter is written in the hope that our friends will come to understand our current situation and learn from our experience. This statement is the first step of an ongoing political analysis of our work. It covers the historical relationship between VVAW/WSO and the RU, our primary political differences with the politics of the RU as they affect VVAW/WSO internally, and the democratic process of VVAW/WSO.

In the anti-war movement VVAW focused the anger of vets returning from an imperialist war. The form of the organization was spontaneous and undefined. Our actions were dramatic and significant--from soldiers of the empire throwing back their medals in Washington, D.C. to forums exposing the role of the military in VietNam. We spoke with credibility; our anti-war views were believable--the vets were the children of the American working class and knew what the war was about. Masses of American people responded to VVAW. We helped the anti-war movement take a major leap forward. Never before had the veterans of a war openly supported the other side.

The addition of Winter Soldier Organization\* to our name in April 1973, showed our dedication to the struggle against imperialism in all forms--from ending all imperialist wars,

\*The idea from which the name, Winter Soldier Organization, comes, is a quote from Thomas Paine -- "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands now deserves the thanks of man and woman."

to smashing racism and sexism, to fighting for the rights of active duty service people and all working people. Winter Soldier was equally important in that it recognized the participation and leadership of non-veterans, especially women. Membership was opened equally to all who agreed with the objectives of the organization. Structurally we kept redefining and tightening up the organization. Our present objectives and working papers, while not perfect, do represent many years of struggle to develop a higher level of political unity and create a structure which would function on a mass democratic basis.

## The Practice of the RU in VVAW-WSO

Almost two years ago, members of the RU began to join chapters of VVAW/WSO, mostly in the midwest, and members of the National Office of VVAW/WSO (N.O.) began to develop close ties with the RU. VVAW/WSO was preparing for a major national demonstration in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1974. This demonstration was to culminate eight months of work around our organization's demands.

- ★ UNIVERSAL UNCONDITIONAL AMNESTY
- ★ IMPLEMENT THE AGREEMENTS-
- ★ END ALL AID TO THIEU & LON NOL
- ★ SINGLE TYPE DISCHARGE FOR ALL VETS
- ★ DECENT BENEFITS FOR ALL VETS
- ★ KICK NIXON OUT

THE ABOVE WERE THE NATIONAL DEMANDS OF VVAW/WSO FOR THE 4TH OF JULY DEMONSTRATION

We began to hear of chapters in the East that were being formed by the RU to build for our demonstration. We were pleased to have the help, but were distressed by a booklet passed out by the RU at the demonstration titled, "Build the Anti-Imperialist Veterans Movement" which contained recent articles from various RU newspapers. These articles defined a political program for VVAW/WSO that was foreign to our membership and that had never been discussed within our organization nationally. We were also distressed that the keynote speech, by a member of the N.O., was not addressed to our primary demands of ending the war and universal unconditional amnesty, but instead was limited to the economic problems of veterans.

Just prior to our national meeting in August, 1974, we received a document from the N.O. It outlined the future of the organization as being the veterans and GI wing of a "United Front Against Imperialism". The document stated that GI's and veterans should be the primary mass base of VVAW/WSO, and that we should focus our work on their specific struggles. Very few of us had any problem in the literal meaning of this concept, as it was widely true in practice. However, in the context of the politics of the N.O. position (which virtually ignored work on Indochina and amnesty and reduced the role of women to what it was before the Winter Soldier days) we found the document intolerable. This document from the N.O. led to the present national program of the organization.

At the August, 1974, meeting a "sense of the meeting" vote of agreement was taken in support of the N.O. paper. This vote was not binding and was to go back to regions for approval. Nevertheless, the N.O. and our national newspaper "Winter Soldier", as well as RU publications including "Revolution", put forward an image of the whole organization as having firmly adopted the N.O.-RU position. (It should be pointed out that this document of some 25 pages was voted on by individuals who had it in their possession for only 48 hours and had received little or no input from their chapters of regions on its content).

During the period between the August and December national meetings, new chapters and regions of VVAW/WSO began to crop up in areas where VVAW/WSO had not been active recently, but the RU had been. In the same period RU supporters and members joined existing chapters throughout the country. These new members generally did not help in the existing work of the chapters, but spent their time arguing the politics of the N.O. document. The monthly internal newsletter put out by the N.O. began to glorify the work of the RU dominated chapters around purely veteran's issues while underplaying or ignoring the anti-imperialist work of other chapters.

## The National Program - A Step Backward

This leads us to the last national meeting in December, 1974, where, because of the RU's expansion within VVAW/WSO, the N.O. paper was approved by a majority of those present as a new national program. This came at a time when the heroic battles of the Indochinese peoples were coming to a peak--at a time when they more than ever needed the full support of the peoples of the world to crush US imperialism at its weakest link. The new program gave work around Indochina bare lipservice, claiming that issues like support for Viet Nam and Universal Unconditional Amnesty would "unfold" from a "war on the Veterans Administration" through the demand "Decent Benefits for all Veterans." The RU calls this "unfolding"--we call it economism. Given the history and practice of our organization we found their concept a step backward in our development.

We firmly uphold the ninth objective of VVAW/WSO--to smash racism in our society and ourselves and fully support building international unity. We see the need to build daily working relations with Third World peoples and organizations around issues of self-determination and issues which effect the entire working class. We feel our primary emphasis should be organizing white working class people around the importance of supporting struggles of Third world peoples for self-determination while pointing out the fact that maintaining racism is not in their class interest. We do not see the role of VVAW/WSO moving forward by trying to recruit Third World people under a political program defined by a predominantly white organization; instead, we must build ties with Third World struggles through our support and practice.

We feel that the program put forward by the N.O. calls for us to actually put aside struggles against racism in the US, which they call "the stirring up of racial division, a plot by the state to divide the working class." We find the RU position on the Boston busing situation outrageous. We believe that racism is the issue in Boston, not busing.

The place where our differences come clearest concern the question of building VVAW/WSO as a multi-national organization. In December 1974, under the guidance of the RU, it was decided by a vote that VVAW/WSO would "become" a multi-national organization. The way to do this, according to the program, is by educating black vets to understand that they should fight back as veterans and not as black people. We were to put forward truly multi-national demands such as "Decent Benefits for all Vets" and to educate Third World vets that these demands were correct, ignoring any issues of self-determination. A report from one RU-dominated chapter went so far as to say that a weakness in their work at the VA was the failure to educate black vets to the fact that they had a role to play in fighting imperialism. It seems to us that a small group of predominantly white men (the N.O. of VVAW/WSO and the RU ) has managed to define political struggle so that the major issue of racism is shoved aside under the illusion that racism is well taken care of by stressing "multi-national" organizing. This is grossly inadequate to deal with the material basis of racism toward all non-white peoples in the US. Never has the RU been able to explain why blacks organizing around their special oppression divides the working class, but organizing veterans around theirs does not.

We see combating sexism in all forms as an important aspect of the anti-imperialist movement. Women's groups exist within chapters in Northern California. Here sisters come together to find strength in each other and begin to bring the issue of sexism to the organization in a way that it can be dealt with both politically and in practice. Women make up a large number of the membership of VVAW/WSO. They are in positions of leadership within the organization in Northern California because of their practice. The number of sisters joining VVAW/WSO here is on the rise. This can be attributed to the strong anti-imperialist practice of the organization, as well as the unity of our women and the willingness of our men to struggle against sexism.

The national program outlines that women relating to vets should be organized around the oppression that their men feel as veterans. This view continues to propagate the idea that a woman is defined in terms of her relationship to a man, and also continues to welcome women to work on somebody else's struggle, and not those struggles which concern women, or women and men equally. RU cadre working in VVAW/WSO have continually attacked feminism as bourgeois and call for women to drop the issue of their liberation in favor of uniting with men to overthrow the state. The N.O. and RU have opposed the rights of women and Third World GI's to organize caucuses or organizations around their special oppression. We totally reject this position, and fully support these caucuses. We feel the RU cadre in VVAW/WSO have shown through their practice that they are unwilling to deal with their own racism or sexism and use their politics to avoid the difficult task of remoulding themselves. Northern California VVAW/WSO does not agree that a revolution will magically remove racism and sexism and we are dedicated to making these two issues part of our daily struggle.

Northern California VVAW/WSO finds the RU's position on gay people politically depraved. We wholeheartedly reject that gayness comes from bourgeois decadence, and is a disease that socialism will cure. We welcome all sisters and brothers into our organization and the overall anti-imperialist struggle regardless of their sexual preferences. We feel that our present organizational objectives should be expanded to defending the rights of gays in society and in the military.

The national program puts forward the position that vets must initially be organized around their immediate economic needs, and that "Decent Benefits For All Veterans" is the primary slogan of our work at this time. The program states that organizing vets around better home loans is a politically correct way to "unfold" anti-imperialist consciousness from immediate economic needs. We see this as a major step backward from an 8 year history that organized thousands of working class people into anti-war and anti-imperialist consciousness. We believe that vets are rising up, as part of the American working class, around the conditions of all employed and unemployed workers. We think vets are rising up because of the continuing wars of aggression by the U.S. around the world. We do see the importance of organizing veterans, and all VVAW/WSO chapters in Northern California have ongoing programs around veterans needs and issues. The difference is that we emphasize organizing vets around their particular knowledge of the workings of imperialism, not just around their own special economic needs.

## **Democracy in VVAW-WSO**

Here we must point out some things about the structure of VVAW/WSO:

- A region is defined as an area where there is one or more chapters;
- Nationally, a chapter must consist of at least five people;
- And, regions have 5 votes each at a national meeting.

his leads us to a situation where a large region like California with over 200 active members can be continually outvoted by small, one or two chapter regions with one tenth or less of the membership of California.

The California region is divided into two sub-regions. According to our structure a chapter may expel a member and a sub-region may expel a chapter. But a sub-region may certainly not expel a chapter of another sub-region or another entire sub-region. "All proposals that change regional policy or deal with matters of similar magnitude (will) be returned to chapters to weigh their impact and be voted upon at the following regional conference." (California Working Paper)

At the April 12th Southern California Sub-regional Conference, contrary to both the regional and national working papers, a proposal was approved to expel all VVAW/WSO members in California who supported the Anti-Imperialist Caucus (AIC).<sup>\*</sup> They interpreted this to mean all chapters in Northern California and two chapters in the South. The National Office has supported this illegal expulsion of 200 people by 40 people. Similar acts of expulsion are beginning in other parts of the country -- Ohio, New York, and Missouri. These actions have been justified by claiming they put "politics in command" -- the politics in command belonging to the RU.

We have found unity with the program passed in December, 1974, in so far as recognizing the need for systematizing our work and outreach. We are implementing the program where chapters are able, while continuing to develop our politics from practice and study. Between December and May, we have focused our primary work around Indochina, while continuing our work around veteran and community issues. We think our decision is politically correct.

Membership in the AIC is varied. In some parts of the country, entire chapters belong, in others only some members participate. The AIC is dedicated to rebuilding the mass character of our organization, as well as reaffirming our support and work for national liberation struggles both inside and outside the U.S. We want it clearly understood that we do not object to working with cadre organizations, nor do we quarrel with their right to have secret members. It is the practice of the RU cadre and the RU as an organization with which we have conflict and must criticize.

It is easier to take over an existing organization than to build a new one. VVAW/WSO has a rich and varied history; we have mass support and participation in our organization, and we are credible when we speak to the issues around which we organize. The form of VVAW/WSO, the name, the reputation, structure, and national newspaper are the important things to the RU. The content of the organization, its membership and varied political beliefs and work are relatively unimportant. Many dedicated and hard working people have left the organization because of the tactics used by the RU and N.O. in this struggle. The RU forces do not seem to give a damn how many people quit or are thrown out because of their need to control the form of VVAW/WSO and to use its credibility. We estimate that over 500 people have left or been kicked out since last January. In many areas where membership was in the hundreds, only 5 to 10 people, mostly RU supporters, are left in the organization. The National Office has said that this is a "good thing as it removes dead wood and moves the struggle forward." We find it inconceivable that any responsible leadership could find losing half or more of its organization a step forward.

Our struggle is directly tied to the RU calling for a founding Party Congress this summer. Their concept of a "United Front Against Imperialism" is a key element of their theory. From their point of view, little special interest groups fighting for their own needs are seen as the mass support for their party's line and revolutionary strategy. It

<sup>\*</sup>The Anti-Imperialist Caucus is the name taken by those members of VVAW/WSO opposed to the politics of the national program.

is important to them to have a vets and GI organization in their United Front. The RU would like to announce that VVAW/WSO supports their party. The only way this can be done is if all opposition to their line is either driven or kicked out prior to or during our next national meeting in July. Such further expulsions like the one in California would destroy what currently remains of the mass character of VVAW/WSO. What is already true in many parts of the country would become true of the organization as a whole. All the members of VVAW/WSO would have the politics of the RU, and hold dual membership with it or its affiliate groups (Revolutionary Student Brigade (RSB), Unempolyed Workers' Organizing Committee (UWOC), or numerous "Workers" newspapers). This dual membership is already common in chapters across the country where other forces have been driven out.

## Where We Are Now

Because we do not support the RU, because we find organizing veterans primarily around decent benefits to be economist, because we are dedicated to struggling against racism and sexism, and put forward our support for Indochina in our daily practice, we have been expelled from VVAW/WSO. We do not recognize this act. We are members of VVAW/WSO who uphold its objectives and democratic process. Although there are clearly two political factions, there is only one VVAW/WSO, and we believe that both sides are members of the same organization. However, at the Southern California Sub-regional Conference which expelled us, five members of VVAW/WSO (some were also members of the RU or RSB) were declared to be the real VVAW/WSO in Northern California and have been attempting to organize in our name and use the VVAW/WSO endorsement for actions and demonstrations. This is in violation of our organization's working paper which sees no need for individuals forming new chapters in areas where chapters already exist.

We will continue our work, organizing and working with vets and GI's and all poor and working people to build an anti-imperialist progressive mass organization. We intend to help rebuild VVAW/WSO in areas where it has been destroyed. We will unite with our sisters and brothers all across the country who have left in frustration because of the tactics of the present struggle. To do this, we fully understand that our unity must be built around concrete political programs, and not just opposition to the RU. These programs are being built slowly as we claim no easy answers to the question of how to organize people in this country.

We do not ask others to take sides in our internal struggle. We ask that you investigate the politics and practice of those who come forward to you as VVAW/WSO before uniting with them. We, in Northern California, are resolved to prevent this internal struggle from obstructing our primary task of combatting racism, sexism, and imperialism.

We would like to hear from you about this letter (preferably in writing), and will provide more information if it is requested.

## a luta continua - venceremos



## NORTHERN CALIFORNIA VVAW-WSO

East Bay (415) 658-7806  
San Francisco (415) 922-5940  
San Jose (408) 988-4210  
Santa Cruz (408) 426-8200  
Marin County (415) 454-6761  
Mid-Peninsula (415) 322-3182  
Fresno (209) 485-9091

## the objectives of vvwaw-wso

1. To demand an immediate cessation of fighting and the withdrawal of all American troops, planes, and military and economic aid from Southeast Asia.
2. To demand the immediate termination of all other operations by the United States Government, its agencies, and American business interests that are designed to suppress the rightful struggles for liberation and self-determination of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America. This includes the maintenance of dictatorial governments, economic domination, and the theft of the natural resources of other countries. The United States should make reparations in a program acceptable to the Indochinese for all of the damage done by the United States.
3. To demand that all active-duty servicemen and women, reservists and national guardsmen be afforded the same rights that are guaranteed by the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights that are presently denied by the Uniform Code of Military Justice.
4. To support all military personnel refusing to se-ve against their conscience in wars at home and abroad. We demand that Congress enact legislation for the immediate repatriation of those brothers and sisters who are in prison or in self-exile by reason of their refusal to serve in the military. It must also involve an end to all repression and a freeing of all political prisoners.
5. To demand there be no distinctions as to types of discharge and that a single type discharge be issued, and that this be retroactive. We also demand all veterans receive all rights and benefits under the VA; and that compensation for disabilities be based solely upon the degree of disability for veterans and their families, without regard to sex, race, rank or length of service.
6. To make clear that the United States has never undertaken an extensive, open investigation of American war crimes in Indochina. In its war in Indochina, the principles of Nuremberg have been violated. As active-duty and former GIs, we recognize the responsibility and guilt of the individual soldier to refrain from committing war crimes. We also recognize that the responsibility and guilt of war crimes committed in the name of America lies with our policy makers at all levels.
7. Resolved to fight racism, to show Americans that our society is permeated by racism, which manipulates whites into viewing non-whites as inferior or less than human. This racism pushes Third World People through inferior schools to inferior jobs and into combat arms. Thus Third World People are sent off to die in disproportionately high numbers as we kill Asians indiscriminately. We also demand the US military recognize its complicity in America's domestic and international racism.
8. Resolved to fight sexism, to show that sexism plays a major part in promoting war. We must show Americans our society is permeated by sexism, which forces an inferior status upon women, reducing them to subservient sexual objects, and which robs both men and women of their natural growth. This institutionalized sexism channels women into unfulfilling, lower paying jobs which are servile in nature and purpose; it exploits their bodies for sex and profit; and it degrades and dehumanizes them by a double standard of morality wholly dependent on the myth of male supremacy. This sexism is exploited by the military, officially defining servicewomen as subordinate and thoroughly subjugating them to servile work and the role of a sexual object. We resolve to fight sexism within our society, withi@ our own organization and withi@ ourselves.
9. To support the democratic right of Americans to unionize and strike to protect their income and safeguard their employment. We consider all legislation designed to suppress these rights, including mandatory arbitration, to be illegal and not in the interests of the American working people. We also demand full employment for all Americans, including free educational and vocational training for all who need or want it. We refuse to participate in the efforts being made to separate us from other working people, making veterans enemies by giving us the charade of employment priority. We condemn this as a method of encouraging enlistment by the false promise of employment after service. We also condemn the use of active-duty GIs, reservists and national guardsmen as strikebreakers.