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September 23, 1970

TO ALL SWP AND YSA NC MEMBERS, ORGANIZERS AND
WOMEN'S LIBERATION WORK DIRECTORS

Dear Comrades,

Enclosed are copies of a report given to the Political Committee of the SWP September 22 which discusses the significance of August 26 and the tasks ahead of us in the women's liberation movement.

Extra copies of the report are also enclosed. Please see that these are passed along to comrades active in the work.

Comradely,

Betsey Barnes

Betsey Barnes
Women's Liberation Work Director

REPORT ON WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

by Betsey Barnes, September 22, 1970

Since the Oberlin conference, there have been a number of developments in the women's liberation movement which have made more clear to us the explosive way in which this movement is growing. The most important of these was August 26. But, there have also been other developments -- the increased national attention being given to the debate around the Equal Rights Amendment, and the tremendous response by women to the various initial fall organizing efforts, especially on the campuses.

Caroline Lund pointed out in The Militant that August 26 represented an historic day for women's liberation, a day on which we saw the emergence of this movement into the politics of this country as a mass force.

There were a number of aspects about August 26 which were particularly significant. The most obvious, of course, was the size of the demonstrations, the fact that they were bigger than any of the planners had anticipated. This was despite the fact that there was very little time to build the demonstrations in most cities, and despite the fact that the date -- August 26 -- was at a time when large numbers of people were on summer vacation.

The second impressive aspect of the action was the geographic spread of the demonstrations. In this respect, August 26 was somewhat like the Moratorium, on a smaller scale, where we saw actions in cities and towns across the country, occurring spontaneously, in areas where we played no part in the planning. The initial estimate in The Militant of how many cities had demonstrations was 40, and the reports that have come in since then would indicate the number was even higher. Perhaps the most dramatic indication of this grass roots-type participation in women's liberation day was the action in Indianapolis -- one of the most traditionally conservative cities in the country -- where over 3,000 women demonstrated August 26.

A third aspect of the demonstrations which we should take note of was the composition of the demonstrators. According to reports from comrades, as well as from the media, there were thousands of women taking part in August 26 who had never demonstrated before. And they came from a wide variety of backgrounds. There was a higher percentage of Black participation than we've seen, for example, on the antiwar marches. There was also impressive general working class participation -- secretaries, nurses, some industrial workers; also, women from groups as varied as the YWCA, airline hostesses, and the Phoenix Organization, which is an organization of ex-drug addicts in New York. One thing which the press often does in its coverage of the women's liberation movement is to characterize it solely as a

white middle-class movement. August 26 helped to show clearly for the first time that this is not the case, that the movement is already beginning to attract women from other layers of society.

Probably the clearest indication of the impact of August 26, and also of the general growth of the movement, was the serious reaction of the press, and much of the public, to the demonstrations. That is, for about a week in many cities where demonstrations occurred, the attention of the public was focused on the actions. Everyone was discussing women's liberation -- on the radio, on TV, in the newspapers. The serious way in which the press approached the demonstrations was important in helping to build them. Many papers carried banner headlines about the demonstrations. The conservative N.Y. Daily News carried a huge headline on the day of the march which proclaimed "Woman Power." The media treatment of the actions helped to set a tone whereby the question was posed quite seriously to women, "Are you going to demonstrate or not." In many of the press interviews, women reported being asked this by others in their offices, or by their husbands. It was assumed by a large number of people that because this demonstration was about women, that every woman in the city should at least be concerned about it.

In many cities, YSA and SWP comrades played a leading role in initiating August 26 and in putting together the coalitions which built it. Most comrades are aware of the role we played here in New York. There was even an article about Ruthann Miller in the New York Times Magazine describing her as a leader of the radical wing of the women's liberation movement. We also played a similar leading role in many of the other cities. For example, in Boston, we played an important role in building the demonstration and three comrades spoke at the rally there of 7,000. In Philadelphia, two comrades spoke at the rally of 8,000, and Maren Jasin was coordinator of the march.

It's very significant that we were able to play this kind of role, because the number of comrades that we were actually able to put into the work of building these coalitions was relatively few. This fact is an indication of the tremendous potential for building this movement. Also, the success which we had is a reflection of the degree to which the movement is open to our participation. That is, there is very little prejudice in the movement against socialists. There have been relatively few instances of attempts at exclusion. As a matter of fact, many women are extremely anxious for us to participate and contribute our energies and knowhow to building the movement. Rather than feeling a prejudice against socialists, many women respect us for being socialists and are interested in our views.

One thing the comrades found in New York was that independent women would actually come to us and ask us to help in the fight with Betty Friedan for democracy in the movement. And even though we were taking on Betty Friedan on a lot of different points, even she felt that it was important for the SWP and YSA to be in the coalition because she recognized that we had the organizational capacities to help carry off a big action, and she wanted a big action.

Another reason why we were able to build successful actions with a relatively small number of forces stems from the newness of the women's liberation movement. There are not as yet any strong established women's groups which can play an effective role in preventing the development of a mass movement and mass actions. Even in the case of NOW, which has conscious reformists in the leadership, the rank and file are not hardened reformists by any means. And we found that many of the NOW leaders are willing to go along with us in mass actions, and that we can work with many of them very well in the coalitions.

Another thing we should be conscious of, and which we have learned through our experiences in these actions with NOW, is that NOW is changing. Under the impact of the rise of the women's liberation movement, NOW is dropping a lot of their old approaches and formulations. Whereas they used to put forward the simple perspective of equal rights, and moving women into the "mainstream" of society, -- they now talk about women's liberation, and a complete change in both male and female roles.

One problem we faced in building these demonstrations was that many of the radical women who have come out of the new left were so suspicious of NOW that they completely dismissed them, and refused to work with them. So not only did we have the task of winning NOW to the perspective of having the demonstrations around concrete demands, but we also had to convince some of the more hesitant radical women that they should come into the coalition.

As a result of our work on this, August 26 stands as a very good example about how we can bring together a broad coalition of women's groups for mass actions around agreed demands. In the process of convincing various groups to participate, we won many new people to mass action, including some of the ultra-lefts, some of those who have concentrated mainly thus far on building "counter-institutions," and even some of the reformists. One example of this was the experience we had in Boston with Bread and Roses, which is one of the largest ex-new left-dominated groups in the country. When the women in Boston NOW proposed a Republican Party woman to speak on August 26, the leadership of Bread and Roses withdrew from the coalition, and refused to participate. But, on August 26 the rank and file of Bread and

Roses came down to the demonstration, and when they saw how big and spirited it was, they were angry they didn't have a speaker and that their leadership had taken this sectarian position.

Of course, we can still expect that we are going to have to continue to fight for a mass action perspective; that there will continue to be forces within the movement which will oppose the building of a mass movement. We can expect, for example, that as a result of seeing the size of August 26, the Communist Party will begin to pay a little more attention to the women's liberation movement.

But, I think we can say that in general, now, as a result of August 26, we are in a very good position to move ahead.

There is surprisingly little feeling of any "post-demonstration let-down." On the contrary, there is a tremendous sentiment on the part of many women that we should continue the fight we began on August 26, that we should continue the coalitions. In New York, the comrades are working to continue the coalition with the perspective of basing it on the three demands of August 26 (1) equal education and employment opportunities, 2) free abortion on demand, no forced sterilization, and 3) free, 24-hour child care centers, controlled by those who use them).

The idea we are putting forward is that August 26 proved that masses of women can be won to the women's liberation movement on the basis of the three demands, and that that is a good starting place for the various groups and individuals in the movement to unite and begin to fight. There are quite a number of women who already agree with us on this, and who are helping us to build broad coalition meetings which would begin the job of planning activities and future actions.

One of the important immediate issues which the coalition will be taking up will be the recent attack on the new abortion law in New York. At the first meeting, we will be trying to get across the concept that the coalition has the potential power to really take on Lindsay on this and to even win some of our demands.

Another important indication of the mushrooming nature of the women's liberation movement has been the very good response to initial fall organizing efforts, both on and off campus. At New York University, for example, 90 women came to the first women's liberation meeting in response to the posting of some leaflets. In Boston, preliminary efforts in building Female Liberation have resulted, even before school started, in getting troupes of approximately 70 women to their first introductory meetings. In addition, 100 women at Boston University signed up as wanting to come to the first Female Liberation meeting there. We just received a report from the Cincinnati YSA that 200 women have signed up for Cincinnati Women's Liberation, a group which we are in the leadership of.

Another reflection of the rising interest in women's liberation has been the debate around the Equal Rights Amendment, and this is an issue we have to give more attention to. It is becoming more clear that this amendment is going to be an important focus of discussion and action within the movement. The way we should look at it is that right now, public attention on the question of equality for women is focused on the debate in Congress, and the women's liberation movement must be part of that debate. What happens to this amendment will have an affect on all the struggles which we carry out for legal equality and whatever decisions are made on the ERA will effect all other laws which have to do with equal opportunity, including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

As the debate on the ERA continues, the meaning of the debate is becoming more and more clear. And we are seeing more people beginning to take our position. This is reflected in the UAW testimony at the ERA hearings, in the testimony of others, including some of the lawyers who have spoken out, and it can be seen in the growing clarity on the question within the women's liberation movement itself.

What we have to do now is to continue to wage an aggressive educational campaign around the ERA, holding forums, carrying articles in The Militant, etc. In the very near future we will have a pamphlet giving our basic position. In the course of this educational campaign I think we will be in a very good position to expose some of our opponents who have taken a blatant anti-feminist position, including the Communist Party, some of the labor bureaucrats, and the ultralefts within the movement. The more you read the CP literature on the ERA, the more it becomes clear that it is their basic opposition to the building of an independent women's liberation movement which underlies their position.

Our main emphasis in supporting the ERA still is on an educational level, but, in addition, steps should be taken to carry out some actions around this issue. In New York, for example, the comrades organized a press conference where women from a very broad spectrum of organizations spoke out in favor of the amendment and against the unfair treatment the ERA got during the Senate hearings. Our comrades have also been among the initiators of a demonstration in Washington this week in support of the ERA.

In summary, I think that the main conclusion we have to draw from the rapid growth of the movement as reflected in these various areas is that if we are going to stay on top of this movement, and if we are to fulfill the vast potential that exists, we must allocate more forces to this work. We must have the perspective of assigning more comrades to the area of women's liberation -- both on a national

level to give direction to the work and to keep our literature up to date, and in the locals and branches. One example of the opportunities we are missing because of insufficient forces was the very poor sales of our literature on August 26. In many areas we simply were not organized and prepared to benefit from the tremendous sales opportunity.

It is very important that we move on this question of putting more comrades into this work because there are tremendous advantages to getting in on the ground floor of a new movement. We must think in terms of working toward having fulltime women's liberation fraction heads in the larger locals, and the fractions must be beefed up so that they include more comrades, and more comrades who are experienced.

We have to keep in mind that the movement is growing very fast, and that we can look forward in the next year to the need for more coordinated national action and organization. If we are to build a really solid basis for this, we must first lay the groundwork on the local and regional levels, by getting comrades into this movement, and by giving leadership to it. If we can lay this groundwork now, the opportunities we have in the movement are unlimited.