

POLITICAL COMMITTEE MEETING, No. 3, March 29, 1974

Present: Barnes, Breitman, Britton, Camejo, A. Hansen,
J. Hansen, Horowitz, Jenness, Jones, Lovell,
Seigle, Stone, Thomas, Waters

Consultative: Dobbs, Kerry, Novack

Visitors: Boehm, L. Jenness, Hermes, Miah, Scott, Stapleton

Chair: Camejo

AGENDA: 1. Conference of Labor Union Women
2. SWP Suit
3. World Movement

1. CONFERENCE OF LABOR UNION WOMEN

L. Jenness reported on the Conference of Labor Union Women and our participation in it. (See attached.)

Discussion

Motion: To approve the report.

Carried.

2. SWP SUIT

Seigle reported on response to government interrogatories.

Discussion

Agreed to run a major article in the press.

3. WORLD MOVEMENT

Waters reported.

Discussion

Meeting Adjourned.

Report on C.L.U.W. -- Political Committee Meeting
March 29, 1974 by Linda Jenness

On March 23-24 the founding conference of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) took place in Chicago.

One of the most significant things about the conference was its size. 3,338 women registered, which was half again as many as anyone expected. The organizers of the conference had clearly not expected such a large turn-out--the rooms were too small, they ran out of literature, hotel rooms and food. It was also much bigger than we had expected.

A variety of women attended the conference. On the one hand, there was a layer of women that had been bussed in by their unions. The United Auto Workers, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and American Federation of Teachers were among the unions that had big contingents. On the other hand, there seemed to be about as many women who just came on their own. They had gotten a letter from their union, or a leaflet, read about it in the newspapers or their union publication, and decided to attend.

Over half of the women in attendance were older women-- women who had been in the union movement for many years. Significant, however, was the layer of younger women in attendance-- perhaps one-quarter of the conference. The younger women included some who were recently out of college and had gotten a union job; some right out of high school; and some active militants who have been involved in strike support activity and organizing drives.

Approximately 20% were Black, with very few Puerto Rican or Chicana women. In my opinion, a majority of women at the conference were rank-and-file.

Through the discussions that took place it also became obvious that there was a wide variation in political consciousness. Although some women had previously been involved in the feminist movement, or the antiwar movement, the majority of women present had not thought out or discussed most of the issues raised. For many this was their first national conference.

The most important thing accomplished at the conference was the adoption of a statement of purpose and a basic structure. These provided the framework for a national organization with local chapters to become involved in activity.

The statement of purpose is a thumbnail sketch of some of the major problems facing working women and a broad suggestion for solving them. The issues include child care, passage of the ERA, maternity benefits, equal pay, full employment, and others. The solutions include organizing the unorganized, affirmative action plans, political action and legislation, and participation of women within their unions.

The structure is a little rigid, but liveable.

A National Coordinating Committee (NCC) and State Conveners were also elected. The NCC is to consist of 4 representatives

from each major union, preferably geographically distributed. This body will have between 200 and 300 women on it and is to be the decision-making body between conferences. Three State Conveners were elected from each state. The State Conveners are not part of the NCC but have responsibility for calling meetings and organizing in their states.

The NCC is to elect a Steering Committee of 15 members. This will be done through mail vote.

There were certain frustrating aspects to the conference which flowed, primarily, from the way it was structured. Because of the amount of debate and time consumed on the statement of purpose and structure, substantive discussion on issues and action was precluded. A lot of women had come to the conference specifically to discuss the issues and propose actions around them. The workshops and plenary session scheduled for that purpose were canceled because of lack of time. The resolutions on specific issues and actions, as well as many structure amendments, were referred to the NCC.

There was also frustration at the way the discussion was allowed to bog down in endless points of information, points of order, etc. The biggest offenders in this were the Spartacists. They played right into the hands of those who preferred to keep the discussion on structure and procedure and not allow time for discussion of issues and actions.

Although the conference was structured in such a way as to preclude any real discussion of the issues, the women who came to the conference were very sensitive to democratic procedures and wanted a democratic discussion. Any strong-arm tactics attempted by the conference organizers were met with strong opposition. Even the Spartacists, who many of the rank-and-filers present began thinking were abusing all democratic rights, were tolerated in the interest of allowing anybody to speak who wanted to. Another indication of the interest in a democratic organization was the fact that many rank-and-file women were elected to the NCC and as State Conveners, partly because they were rank-and-file.

The only political fight around which there was extended discussion that took place at the conference was around the United Farm Workers. This issue had been debated within CLUW for many months leading up to the conference. The Teamster officials had threatened to walk out if a resolution in support of the UFWU boycott was passed and had lined up a couple of other unions to agree that it was "a jurisdictional dispute" and "divisive."

It was clear from the very beginning of the conference that there was overwhelming support for the UFW and sentiment in favor of passing a resolution in support of the boycott. Unfortunately, the debate did not revolve around the UFW per se, but around a point in the structure which stipulated that CLUW should not become involved in jurisdictional disputes. This point was seen as the obstacle to supporting the UFW and the debate centered around whether or not to delete it. The point was finally deleted and most people then expected a resolution in support of the UFW to be passed.

The following morning, however, after a show of unity between the UFW delegates and Teamsters delegates, and after a UFW speaker was given a standing ovation, it was announced that the UFW, Teamsters, and conference organizers had come to agreement that a formal resolution in support of the UFW was to be postponed.

Electoral Politics

There was very little discussion at the conference of electoral politics. In a few of the workshops on the statement of purpose, impeachment of Nixon was discussed. But impeachment was never mentioned in the plenaries. With the exception of a few workshops, there was no discussion of the Democratic and Republican parties or candidates.

An amendment to the statement of purpose was passed calling on women to run for office in all levels of government, but this was passed routinely along with several other amendments. It was not a focus of the conference. Some of the reasons for this were that this is not a national election year; many women saw it as a divisive issue and did not come to the conference to discuss electoral politics. And, Watergate has also had its impact.

CP

The Communist Party had a lot of its members there. We do not know how many, but we do know that they came from many places in the country. The Daily World had played the conference up in its pages and urged people to attend.

The only time we saw the CP make an intervention--that was clearly theirs--was around the question of the Equal Rights Amendment. They put a motion on the floor to attach the Women's Bill of Rights to the ERA. This motion was overwhelmingly defeated, for several reasons. Most people had never heard of it and didn't know what it was. The CP did not explain what it was. Secondly, the women saw it as an obstacle, no matter what it was, to getting the ERA passed.

Our participation

The most important thing we did was build the CLUW conference. For the past several months our comrades have been building for the conference. In fact, we helped initiate most of the planning meetings that were held--Philly, D.C., Cleveland, Detroit and Boston.

We also played a role in the overall planning of the conference. Our comrades participated in the discussion that took place in the workshops, and several were workshop leaders.

We participated very little in the plenary sessions. There was no one or two things that we felt were particularly important to argue for in the plenary, and, for very different reasons, we agreed with the organizers of the conference that the most important thing was to get the statement of purpose adopted and a structure established. Our main interest was moving the conference along and holding it together.

We sold 300 Militants, 100 ISRs, 20 subscriptions, and very quickly ran out of the 50 ERA pamphlets that we were hawking. People were very friendly and open towards our literature.

A number of comrades were elected to the NCC and as State Conveners. In addition, a significant number of women that have a perspective of working hard to get CLUW working were elected.

Future of CLUW

The real test now is to see if the statement of purpose and structure can be brought to life with some kind of activity on a local level that can involve new women.

It's clear that there are now no national issues around which all the local CLUW chapters can orient. It will vary greatly from area to area.

Some preliminary ideas that have come up, however, give us an indication of some possibilities. In Philadelphia the CLUW chapter is trying to speak to as many local unions as possible about CLUW and get their support and endorsement. In the week following the conference they spoke at 6 union meetings, and most significantly, got the endorsement of the Pennsylvania AFL-CIO at its recent convention. That seems like an obvious first step and one all the areas should think about.

In Denver there is a large organizing drive of women office workers going on. That is something that the Denver CLUW may want to get involved in.

There are many strike support activities that CLUW could participate in including the Sears strike, the District 65 strike of Concord Fabrics in New York, the hospital strike in St. Louis, and others. CLUW could also help with UFW boycott activities.

In San Francisco, CLUW could try to get union support and involvement with the Child and Parent Action coalition for child care.

In Detroit just in building for the conference several women's rights commissions were initiated in local unions. CLUW could be involved in that process.

In the weeks and months ahead we will want to have some serious discussions about the possibilities for building local CLUW chapters and the kinds of activities that union women can get involved in.

The entire development is a very significant one which opens many doors and provides many opportunities for our movement.

Camejo: Maybe I misheard you, but could you explain, were there men there? (incredulity in voice)

L. Jenness: The conference organizers said that it was illegal under Title VII to set up an organization that excludes men, and so they didn't even want to talk about it; they just said that their lawyers had advised them that it was illegal. So most of

the people kind of accepted that because it was so clear that out of the 3,300 there, there was just a handful of men. So there never was any big fight on it, because everyone saw that it was going to be a women's thing. That's how people saw it and that's how the conference organizers dealt with it. They said, well, let's just not write it in. It's in writing in the name of the organization. As you could guess the one man who spoke was a Spartacist. It was counter-productive.

Stone: One thing which came up at the conference, mostly in the corridors, was the question of democracy at the conference and the role of the officials who organized it. A factor in this, of course, were the sectarian groups who saw their main role as that of trying to "expose the bureaucrats". They attempted to do this by seizing on various issues, such as the question of democracy, to use them to discredit the officials who called the conference.

But, it was not only the sectarians but also many new independent women who sensed that the conference was not organized in the most democratic manner who raised with our comrades questions about the officials organizing the conference. For example, almost the whole delegation from Denver--which was a very inexperienced but militant delegation--began to take the view that they wanted to have nothing to do with CLUW, since it seemed to them Olga Madar of the UAW was running it with an iron fist.

Many of these women who questioned the motives of the conference organizers were those women who potentially are the most serious builders of CLUW. They are among the people who have been closest to our efforts to build local CLUW chapters. (By the way--this was one of the most inspiring things about the conference, that is, there was this layer of mainly younger women--women in their 20's and 30's--who were representative of a group which can be an important factor in the union movement in the future. These women were very militant. Their attitude was one of confidence that something can be done to change the situation of women. And they were very anxious to make it clear they thought that women like themselves, that is, rank and file women in the union movement, have a role to play.)

We discussed some of the ways to deal with the question of democracy and the question of the trade union bureaucracy. We discussed how it is important to help these women understand the stage CLUW is at, that the first thing is to try to bring it into being. We also discussed how it is through the process of building CLUW, through involving large numbers of women, that women can best help change those things which they see as wrong. And there were some examples of this at the conference. For example, the sentiment at the conference was so strong in support of the Farmworkers that it would have been hard for the conference organizers to stick to their original plan of excluding the Farmworkers because they were not a "bonafide collective bargaining unit."

There is a lot of education we can do in talking in informal conversation with women who come around CLUW, starting with the ABC's.

Kerry: Our concern should not be so much with "changing CLUW", but with building it. That's the first problem. The question is whether you are going to have an organization.

Now, there will be all kinds of controversial questions. The moment a national election comes along, or even a congressional one, we'll have this business of supporting Democrats which will be our first big confrontation. Outside of that, I think a correct way to view it is we're dealing with a potentially very progressive, very revolutionary development. A responsible attitude would not be to look for issues over which we can disagree, of which there are a plethora, but to avoid secondary or tenth-rate issues and subordinate these to a later stage for the building of the organization.

This is just a beginning, a very promising beginning, because it indicates the strength of the feminist movement as a whole. This, I'm convinced, is a by-product of the national feminist movement. It's a reflection of our line, which was to carry over into the labor movement. This conference is a manifestation of that. We should hail this as a tremendous achievement, but recognize that we're dealing with a very beginning. It's very easy to destroy such developments at the beginning. It's much harder later on when they achieve some experience and size, a certain development and a certain standard.

Even now this type of an organization, even with its small membership, can have a tremendous impact on the thinking and on the action of a left wing, or of a progressive development, in the trade union. Don't underestimate the effectiveness of a representative of CLUW appearing before a union. You could get into practically any union in the area. I can't imagine the most conservative union that would say "no" to a request from a woman from CLUW to speak on any issue.

You're starting at the very beginning. Now is the time, wherever we have any influence, to develop actions that will serve as a model--not too ambitious or "left" actions, but actions which are calculated to appeal to both men and women trade unionists to indicate that this is not just another wild or extreme formation but a very serious organization of women who have real grievances, both as women and as trade unionists. That's how we'll get somewhere.

The only movement of this kind that I can recall is the movement in the 30s that developed, almost spontaneously, what they called the women's auxiliaries.

Now since that time the women's auxiliary idea has disappeared with the conservatization of the unions. The women's auxiliaries were a manifestation of the radical period of unionism. So you can view this as sort of a recurrence, a resurgence on a higher plane of the active participation of women in the dynamic transformation of the unions into revolutionary instruments of struggle. That's how we should view it.

Dobbs: I agree that it's very important for our women to familiarize themselves with the women's role in the union struggles in the 30s and 40s. You'll find that there are many examples from that period. They are extremely advantageous to look at, because you can show

women the history of their forebearers. They had a lot of clout when the chips were down, when the movement was really bucking the bosses, and when it wasn't just a matter of meatheads and college-educated lawyers acting and pretending that they're the labor movement. And it's very, very useful to give people confidence in themselves.

Barnes: I think in retrospect our approach was entirely correct. We had some very simple, very initial goals, along the lines of the stage this is in that Tom just outlined. The goals we were concerned with were: (1) preventing this from being a very narrow conference and excluding people. We had some very concrete things in mind, would the Shankerites succeed in excluding NEA women? Would the right-wingers succeed in excluding the farmworkers or blowing up the entire thing? Well, that was solved.

(2) We wanted to prevent any right-wingers or anyone from turning this into programmatically a narrow thing, some kind of electoral vehicle that would make it impossible to draw rank-and-file women to it; that would tie the hands of the state and local groups.

(3) We wanted to prevent the ultralefts from totally messing it up and turning it into a "labor party now" thing so that either they'd blow up the conference, or, anyone connected with the labor movement would walk out and denounce it and close the doors of the labor movement to the coalition of labor union women. That was accomplished.

If we were able to accomplish these three things, or help to ease the way to accomplish them, we were satisfied. In addition, we managed to accomplish a few more things, especially on the state level. That's a bonus we didn't know would happen. In addition, many of our comrades who participated were at their first national union conference. That was a very important experience.

What we want to do now is very simple. CLUW activists have an open door in various states and cities to do things.

CLUW will now be defined largely by what CLUW chapters begin to do. There are many important things for CLUW to do within the framework of the statement of purpose. The leaders of CLUW will be those women in cities and states that start doing CLUW actions. That's how we should look at it.

Waters: It strikes me that this thing is much more legitimate in the trade union, there was much more openness to it from the beginning, than has happened in terms of Black trade unionists. I'm not that familiar with the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, but is that impression correct? I'm also interested in the degree to which this might also provide a little bit of an impetus for similar activities taking place among Black trade unionists.

Thomas: Just on the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. It's different in that it's considered to be an organization of trade union officials, rather than the way CLUW appeared to have organized it, in that CLUW includes rank-and-file unionists who can just join it and not just officials, so there's a big difference and a good example.