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November 19, 1976

TO ALL ORGANIZERS AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION DIRECTORS

Dear Comrades,

Attached is a report approved at a recent Political Committee meeting on the Socialist Workers party's perspectives in the next few months in the women's liberation movement. A full report and discussion on our women's liberation work is scheduled for the January SWP plenum.

Comradely,

  
Cindy Jaquith  
SWP Women's Liberation  
Work Director

## REPORT ON PERSPECTIVES FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION WORK

by Cindy Jaquith

Utilizing the climate of insecurity created by capitalism's economic problems, the ruling class has intensified its efforts to undermine and eventually reverse gains made by women in recent years. In the last few months, the attacks have centered on the right to abortion. The federal government has also proposed new guidelines that would cut back on affirmative action programs. Despite verbal support from both capitalist parties, the Equal Rights Amendment remains unratified. Child care programs continue to be cut. These attacks pose a challenge to which the feminist movement must respond.

### Abortion

The campaign to turn back abortion rights has intensified over the last year, receiving special impetus from the Catholic Church hierarchy. But it has been in the last three months that the anti-abortion forces have made their most significant gains, through a propaganda offensive around the elections, and especially through the passage of the Hyde Amendment.

The Hyde Amendment, barring Medicaid funds for abortions, is the most serious blow to legal abortion yet. If put into effect, it will sentence the 300,000 Black, Puerto Rican, and Chicana women who obtain Medicaid abortions annually to illegal abortions or forced motherhood.

There is also a steady erosion of abortion rights in the states (see article by Dianne Feeley in November 19 Militant) and there is now an escalation of anti-abortion attacks on local clinics and hospitals.

There are two important features about the new level of attacks on abortion. First, these attacks confirm once again the centrality of the abortion issue in the oppression of women. Restricting women's right to control their own bodies is so intertwined with the sex inequality inherent in class society that abortion rights will never be "safe" in this society. While the level of the abortion struggle may fluctuate, this will be a major issue in the class struggle until there is a socialist revolution.

Second, through the Hyde Amendment, the ruling class has chosen to chop away at abortion rights in a manner calculated to take advantage of class divisions among women. The Democrats and Republicans decided to make the most exploited working class women, especially women of the oppressed nationalities the main victims of this new attack, hoping in this way that other women's rights advocates would fail to rally to their defense. This strategy has met with some success.

For the time being, implementation of the Hyde Amendment has been blocked by a court injunction. A higher court could, however, uphold the amendment as constitutional. But whether or not this happens, the anti-abortion offensive has dealt a major setback to the

women's movement. The right wing has been emboldened to step up its attacks on abortion.

The chief factor in the success of the anti-abortion drive has been the absence of an organized counteroffensive by supporters of women's right to choose. While there have been some small abortion rights protests, the right wing has been able to virtually monopolize the issue. Polls show that the majority supports legal abortion. But without a visible campaign to mobilize that sentiment, the anti-abortion forces will make gains in chipping away at the support for legal abortion.

What is needed is a massive counteroffensive of women and their allies to publicize the danger to abortion rights and mobilize opinion to bring a halt to the anti-abortion attacks. We need teach-ins, rallies, speaking tours, press conferences, and demonstrations on a national scale.

But there is a big gap between the counteroffensive that is objectively needed and the current level of understanding of this question in the women's movement. On the one hand, the attacks have opened the eyes of many feminists to the danger that is posed. The protests that did occur this fall around abortion were modest in size but widespread. Many women, particularly students, are ready to move into action on this issue. They are looking for leadership in this fight.

But the largest and most influential women's rights group--the National Organization for Women (NOW)--has followed a bankrupt strategy. This is nothing new for NOW. During the fight in the early 1970s to legalize abortion, the NOW leadership adopted a policy of abstaining from this struggle. Today, intimidated by the right-wing gains, the NOW leadership has either relied on the promises of Democratic politicians or it has tried to back away from the issue altogether.

During the presidential elections, NOW leaders sought to bury the issue so as not to embarrass Carter. NOW President Karen DeCrow said that abortion didn't belong in the presidential debates, that it was "not a political issue."

Recently, at a NOW meeting to build the January 13 "women's state of the union" rally in Washington, D.C., local NOW leaders argued that the abortion issue should not be raised at all during the rally. They opposed our proposal that Dr. Kenneth Edelin, convicted of manslaughter for performing an abortion, be a major speaker at the rally.

Some leaders in NOW have tried to counterpose the ERA campaign to work in defense of abortion rights. They say that until the ERA is won, it must be NOW's "priority." They also raise political objections to allowing the demand for legal abortion to be raised at ERA events, arguing that it will split the ERA movement and "turn off" the legislators. This reflects the political confusion in the

movement as a whole over how to fight back on the abortion front, and it reflects the class bias of some of the pro-ERA leaders.

Similar arguments that abortion is "too controversial" were used to table a resolution at the October meeting of the National Executive Board of the Coalition of Labor Union Women. The resolution denounced the Hyde Amendment and reaffirmed CLUW's support for abortion rights.

The failure of either CLUW or NOW to come to grips with the attacks on abortion is a measure of the success the anti-abortion forces have had in intimidating resistance to their drive. It is also a measure of the success of the capitalists' strategy of directing their fire on abortion rights at the most oppressed women, in the hopes that those women not immediately affected by the Hyde Amendment would fail to see this as an attack on the rights of all women.

We are at the stage now where an educational campaign around these questions is urgently needed. We need to begin to politically explain what is happening to women's rights. The Militant will step up its coverage of the abortion attacks and the general offensive against women. Branches should try to hold forums on abortion wherever possible. We should also initiate discussions in campus women's liberation groups, in NOW chapters, at union meetings, and in Black and Chicana women's groups.

Such a campaign can have an important impact in NOW. In the long run, NOW cannot duck the abortion issue. There are already many young activists in NOW who are looking for a course of action on the abortion situation. During the course of the debate that will eventually take place on this question in NOW, we can win many local chapters and leaders to our perspective.

At this time, however, there are no broad forces that are ready to mobilize in large-scale protests around abortion. But local teach-ins, picket lines, and rallies can set an important example of what needs to be done. The best date to schedule such activities is January 22, the anniversary of the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion.

The right wing in recent years has turned January 22 into a day for massive anti-abortion demonstrations. This year, we think the women's movement should show its determination to defend the 1973 abortion victory through local protest activities on January 22. We should explore the possibility of organizing such activities with other groups, making a special effort to involve Black, Chicana, and Puerto Rican organizations. Some of these groups have been active in fighting forced sterilization, an issue that is integrally tied to the abortion fight.

Activities around January 22 can be a jumping-off point for broader protests around March 8, International Women's Day.

(NOW originally called for January 13 "women's state of the union" news conferences around the country, but has made no attempt

to get these off the ground. Anywhere that these news conferences do take place, they can help publicize January 22 or March 8 activities.)

### Affirmative Action

The federal government plans to put into effect soon, new guidelines on affirmative action programs for federal contractors. These new guidelines amount to a significant retreat on affirmative action and will hit women and Black workers the most severely. The most active groups protesting these guidelines thus far have been women office workers organizations, such as Women Employed in Chicago and Women Office Workers in New York.

The federal government will hold hearings on the proposed guidelines on December 6 in New York and Atlanta, and on December 13 in Chicago and Los Angeles. The SWP and YSA have both applied to testify in each of these cities. The Student Coalition Against Racism also plans to testify.

We should work with women office workers groups, as well as NOW, the NAACP, SCAR, and trade unions, to organize further protests against these attacks.

### Equal Rights Amendment

The campaign to ratify the ERA remains a central axis of the women's movement. Especially in states that have not ratified the ERA, there is considerable momentum for further actions.

Under the pressure of the elections, some of the NOW leadership has begun to waffle on the ERA issue, as they have done on abortion. At the recent Pennsylvania NOW conference, it was rumored that Carter has promised to pull strings to get the ERA ratified in three states if NOW can get it ratified in the fourth. (Why Carter couldn't promise the fourth was not explained.) It remains to be seen how successful Carter's "promises" will be in convincing NOW leaders to sit back and wait for him to deliver.

A January 15 pro-ERA demonstration called for Indianapolis was recently cancelled by the Indiana state board of NOW, because the leadership felt enough pro-ERA Democrats had been elected to insure ratification. Through pressure from many other NOW members, however, the demonstration has been rescheduled, tentatively for January 9. Pro-ERA activities are also planned in Richmond, Va., in January and in Atlanta. Unfortunately there is no momentum at this time for another national ERA mobilization. But we should encourage actions in as many areas as possible when state legislatures reconvene.

We also want to encourage ERA coalitions to include at their events speakers on abortion, and to appeal to abortion rights groups for support.

### March 8 Activities

The ERA and the attacks on abortion rights should be the central themes we stress in activities planned around March 8. In states that haven't ratified the ERA, the largest protests will most likely be built around the demand for ERA ratification. In other areas, teach-ins, rallies or demonstrations around several issues may be possible. Rallies with the general theme of "Stop the Attacks on Women's Rights"--with speakers on abortion, the ERA, affirmative action, child care, and other issues--can be effective in some cities. We should also participate in the many other feminist actions traditionally held at this time, especially on the campuses.

Reports on January 22 and March 8 plans should be sent into the national office, and news stories submitted to the Militant.

### Coalition of Labor Union Women

In December, CLUW is planning to hold regional meetings which we should participate in. We would like to see these regional meetings discuss the issues of affirmative action, the attacks on abortion, and the ERA. In some areas, we may be able to help organize educational panels or workshops on these topics.

One purpose of the conferences is to decide whether the next national CLUW convention, tentatively set for late April in Washington, D.C., should be organized on a delegate basis. We favor an open convention, with all CLUW members having voice and vote. CLUW is too small an organization for a delegated convention system to work democratically at this time. Unfortunately, the last CLUW convention voted to have delegates at future conventions, but this decision has been reopened for discussion. An open convention, or one with the smallest possible ratio of delegates to CLUW members, is the most desirable for a democratic CLUW convention.

Reports on the outcome of the regional CLUW conferences should be sent to the national office.