

P.O. Box 471 Cooper Station
New York, N.Y. 10003
March 8, 1978

TO ALL ORGANIZERS AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION DIRECTORS

Dear Comrades,

Attached is a report adopted by the YSA National Executive Committee on the perspectives and organization of our work in building NOW on the campuses. It will be important to circulate this report among comrades involved in the work and to have discussions in chapter executive committees and business meetings about carrying through the projections. The spring organizational tours will provide an opportunity for further discussion.

Any questions or comments should be directed to the national office.

Comradely,

Cathy Sedwick

Cathy Sedwick
YSA Women's Liberation Director

THE YSA AND BUILDING NOW ON CAMPUS

By Cathy Sedwick

The women's liberation movement continues to suffer from a crisis of leadership. This crisis becomes more and more apparent with each attack on women's rights by the government.

The oldest, largest, and most authoritative women's liberation organization is the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW is the only national organization in the women's liberation movement, with 70,000 members and with chapters in 750 cities. Its leadership is considered to be a central part of the leadership of the women's movement by feminists, Black and labor figures, as well as the government. Thousands of feminists join NOW because they believe it is an organization that can help lead the fight against the attacks on women's rights.

However, the national leadership of NOW looks for political power, not from the masses of women and their allies organized in action, but from Democratic and Republican politicians-- the very architects of the attacks on abortion, affirmative action, and other gains. In addition, the NOW leadership has turned its back on those women most victimized by the government attacks-- working-class women and women of the oppressed national minorities. The consistent failure of the NOW leadership's strategy has prompted a major discussion in the ranks of NOW. This discussion is exemplified by the "Defending Women's Rights in the Second Decade" resolution that was hotly debated at the NOW national convention in April 1977, as well as by the Defending Women's Rights Newsletter that is currently being circulated in NOW. Both put forward the strategy of independent mass action by women and their allies based on the needs and interest of the most oppressed women.

The discussion on the best strategy to defend women's rights will probably intensify in the next few months. The national leadership of NOW has declared a state of emergency for the extension of the ERA ratification deadline. They are projecting stopping all other activities and campaigns to launch a major letter writing, post card, and lobbying drive-- in hopes of winning an extension. The debate between supporters of independent mass action and the lobbyists takes on an added importance.

NOW members who support the ideas of the Defending Women's Rights Newsletter plan to draft and circulate another resolution for discussion leading up to the NOW national convention in October 1978. These are political discussions which must take place if the women's movement is going to develop a leadership capable of meeting the government's attacks.

Building NOW on Campus

Since the NOW national convention in 1977, the YSA has projected trying to involve more campus feminists in NOW. We want campus feminists to participate fully in NOW's discussion, because we believe they can play a valuable role in building NOW into the kind of fighting women's organization that is needed.

We want to recruit as many campus women to NOW as possible. This includes women involved in general women's liberation groups, women's centers, in Black Student Unions, and in MEChAS, as well as women who are in no group at all. We have to explain to campus feminists that being members of NOW is important, regardless of whether they belong to a separate campus women's liberation group. Being a member of NOW means that campus feminists can be a part of a national organization with a big influence on the women's liberation movement both on campus and off.

From our experiences during the last year, it is clear that campus women will join and build NOW if a serious effort is made to win them to the organization. Many are attracted to NOW simply because it is the most well-known women's liberation group. Others may be hesitant to join because of NOW's conservative and Democratic party oriented leadership. We must convince them that the discussion taking place in NOW opens the possibility of changing the activities and orientation of the organization, and that they have a role to play in this important process.

Our goal is to win a majority of NOW's members to the perspective being put forward by supporters of the Defending Women's Rights Newsletter. To do this requires being a part of NOW, and participating in common discussions and common activities with NOW members. For the YSA, participating in and helping to build NOW activities should no longer be simply one aspect of the women's liberation work we do. As NOW members we want to participate and involve campus feminists in NOW chapter meetings, state and regional conferences, program nights, and all other NOW activities. These are important events in the women's movement which we want to be a part of.

This means all YSA members involved in women's liberation work should be members of NOW and should attend NOW meetings. We should urge NOW to carry out activities on the campuses-- panel discussions, forums, and etc.-- and to support the struggles of campus feminists. Likewise, we should help build NOW's off-campus activities among campus women. For example, the minority women's committee of NOW New York is having a special program night. The New York YSA plans to build this activity on the campuses to involve campus women in a NOW activity.

Where we are working with campus women's Liberation groups we want to strongly encourage them to begin working with NOW. This can start by organizing a joint activity with NOW on campus.

Organization of Campus NOW Work

How campus NOW members organize themselves will vary from place to place. However, our experience during the past year has taught us a few things that will be helpful in thinking this question out.

Campus chapters of NOW we have worked with have carried out some excellent work, but they also pose certain problems which should be weighed. First, campus NOW chapters entail a great deal of administrative responsibility. Secondly, in most cases the city NOW leadership makes little or no effort to involve the campus chapters in the city chapters' activities. These activities usually include letter writing and lobbying which most campus chapters don't do. This makes it difficult many times for members of the campus chapter to clearly distinguish the two opposing strategies. The result is that campus chapters tend to get isolated from the major political debate in the organization as a whole. This lack of contact can also limit the political outlook of NOW members to their own campus, rather than to citywide and national issues and struggles.

When discussing whether to build a NOW chapter on campus, it will be important to consider these potential problems. If a campus chapter is established, a priority should be placed on involving it in the citywide chapters' activities. This is the way members of the campus chapter will come into contact with the different points of view represented in the organization as a whole.

Another way of organizing campus women is through campus taskforces or youth committees. These have been set up by some citywide NOW chapters to carry out work at particular schools. These groups usually bring students together to plan their own activities, yet the student NOW members have the advantage of being part of an established city chapter. The February 1978 National NOW Times ran an article encouraging NOW chapters to establish youth committees to work with campus and high school women.

Collaborating with SWP

Carrying through the projections of the YSA convention and the perspectives outlined in this report will require careful discussion with the Socialist Workers Party. Joint YSA-SWP fractions can discuss out how to encourage campus women to join NOW and how to get NOW to do campus work. There are many experienced NOW members in the SWP. They can be helpful in working through many of the problems which will be encountered in building NOW on campus.