

REPORT OF THE VANCOUVER WOMEN'S CAUCUS
(as seen through the eyes of Cleo & Hildebrand)

As comrades probably know, the Vancouver branch has a long, sorry history of intense crises, resulting in a relatively high turnover-rate (largely women) and systematic partial destruction or burn-out of individual comrades. We've come a long way in figuring out the political problems we had with wrong or non-existent perspectives, our disproportionate sense of self-importance, our inability to prioritize, to do contact work, good propaganda, etc. Recently, we have also made significant progress in transforming branch life in general, creating a more collective and creative atmosphere, and in understanding the oppression of women and gays in more than a mechanical and abstract way. The women's caucus has definitely played a leading role in this process.

(Some interesting data for those who are not familiar with the branch: the women numbered 5/13. On the whole, we are younger and newer to the F.I. than the men. We also have quite a high proportion of "heavy" male comrades. Unlike the rest of the organization, the Vancouver branch has more of a history of a patriarchy, where one or more leading male comrade would be the central authority figure holding the thing together with all ten fingers.)

The caucus began meeting sometime in March. It developed largely for the following reasons: the quantum leap in the level of consciousness of the women for various personal/political reasons around their positions in the branch and their lives; the difficult position of the one woman on the executive at a time when there was a barrier between the executive and the rest of the branch, the growing awareness in the organization of the need to take up the question of women's oppression both internally and externally, the relative depoliticization and feelings of helplessness, etc.

At our first meetings we discussed the need for a support structure for women, the need to struggle against sexism within the organization and branch, the particular difficulties of women in operating in the traditional modes of hard ("fraternal?") debate on essentially male terrain, the competitiveness, the intellectual gap between the men and the women (where often, some of the men will know for the purpose of intellectual intimidation, rather than collective enlightenment), the non-recognition of the kinds of skills and contributions that women have, authority structure, the negligent attitude towards women contacts, etc., etc., etc. We subsequently prepared a detailed report for the branch on the effects and symptoms of sexism in the branch and put forward some ways of dealing with this. We pressed for better education of all comrades in the branch, for division of labour which would always take into consideration the best ways for developing women comrades, for a practice in the women's milieu, for working out ways to have political discussions that don't intimidate and destroy comrades, for surfacing and cutting out the backstabbing, the ego-clashing, the moral pressure and histrionics, and for forcing the men to become more sensitive to these things and to take initiatives around dealing with their own sexism.

The caucus also discussed the particular pressure that we felt resulting both from the N.O.'s heavy perspectives in this period (fusion, pre-convention discussion, press campaign), and the branch's application of these. We all felt overwhelmed and unable to digest and fully appreciate what was facing us. Consequently, we suggested slowing down the fusion process and the bi-weekly campaign, not from the standpoint of uniform political position on fusion, but because we simply could not fully grasp the situation, and we felt unable to cope with the pace and depth of developments. We want to make it clear that we don't see the caucus as a substitute for branch political life, or as a place to submerge political differences. We want to clarify this in particular because we were accused of overstepping our rights and constituting a de facto tendency. Whether or not we overstepped our rights is an open question, as the discussion

of the rights of a caucus has not yet taken place. However, we are very well aware of the difference between a tendency formed by comrades who have particular political agreement on certain issues, and a grouping that is formed to deal with a common situation of oppression.

The results of our actions were very interesting.. There was initial turmoil among the women (and men), some real flack from the men which, in some cases, is still continuing. There was a real intensification of personal dynamics, both positive and negative. People actually began to hang out together -- to get to know each other, to talk politics, to try to figure things out collectively and to make this branch a better place to do political work. We made conscious efforts to support comrades and help them through this heavy period. We challenged the male comrades to take responsibility in this, and not to leave the emotional caretaking to the women. This worked amazingly well. On the other hand, of course, personal antagonisms, comrades' feelings of insecurity and isolation also intensified, so there were more freakouts initially. More concretely, we now see that the question of women's liberation and women's oppression is constantly raised and dealt with on all levels: division of labour, our public work, educationals, discussion, styles of intervention, etc. Two examples: the caucus proposed an alternate executive slate when we thought that the one being put forward by the outgoing executive was potentially disastrous for the women involved, and for the branch as a whole. We issued a statement from the caucus on norms for tendency debate when it was obvious that there was going to be one comrade (woman) in an isolated situation. And FINALLY, comrades, we have a practice, albeit limited, in the women's milieu.

Based on this experience, some of us have come to certain conclusions about the necessity of women's caucuses and the role that they play. We don't see a caucus as something which we assemble only in times of extreme crisis or when there is some gross incident of sexism. We are not so much confronted with particular acts of gross sexism as with a whole way of operating which is based on sexist notions, styles, and assumptions where, in fact the sexism is very subtle and implicit. We have to remember that we live in a profoundly misogynist society, where the oppression of women is the most widely accepted form of oppression. It is so much a part of our lives (after all, most of us were raised in families!), that the nuances are often unnoticed or tacitly accepted, both by men and women (and revolutionaries). So when we talk about the necessity of a functioning women's caucus, we have to look beyond the actual statistics of how many women occupy which leadership positions. We have to look at our own socialization in capitalist society and recognize honestly and candidly how it carries over into the revolutionary organization. Without having utopian illusions, we can work towards a process of change that does more than just eradicate symptomatic behaviour. We found that our caucus unleashed an incredible dynamic that resulted in a general humanization and supportive effort in the branch. There is no reason that organized attempts to perpetuate this transformation should occur only in periods of extreme crisis.

Unless we have a visible, organized support structure for women (this also applies to the gay comrades), where we can figure things out collectively and deal with them collectively, we will be forced to seek the horrible individual solutions such as: a) pull-yourself-up-by-your-boostraps-get-in-there-and-sock-it-to-'em syndrome, characteristic of women who # make it" b) wilt and fade into the mist, characteristic of women who don't, c) "typical hysterical female freakout", characteristic of all and d) leave, without any clear differences, as so many already have. While we may have different needs and different ways of getting support, our problems are common, and we can't deal with them alone.

If we are serious about recruiting from the women's movement, we have to make sure that our organization does not reinforce the fears and suspicions of the "male-dominated" left, and of Leninism. We cannot have an external style of intervention that is repulsive to these women who have been operating in a very different fashion to say the least. We cannot be in a situation where we are hesitant to draw them closer to the organization, for fear that they will be disgusted when they see that the organization as a whole is insensitive to the problems of women. For women who have not had to deal with the particular problems that arise when working in mixed organizations, a women's caucus is an absolute necessity for their very survival, not to mention political integration and development.

It is also important for us to remember that we are not always going to be recruiting men who have had sufficient exposure to women's liberation to really understand it. When we reach the stage of rapid growth, it will be important for us to have had experiences with women's caucuses so that the women (and the men) will be prepared to deal with the problems of sexism and lack of understanding that will inevitably arise. We can't wait until it's too late to establish the tradition.

So what does it mean when we talk about the need for an "ongoing" women's caucus? Obviously, we can't have artificial, contrived regularly scheduled weekly meetings to ~~make-it-~~ make it "ongoing". The actual structure and frequency would vary from branch to branch depending on the what the comrades felt was best. But it does mean that we have a certain consciousness of a collective structure to help us deal with problems -- a structure that is there when we need it. It means that we do not have to agonize over whether a situation is "crisis-worthy" enough to merit a caucus meeting; it means that we don't have some sort of arbitrary threshold of acceptable sexism which, if overstepped, merits a caucus meeting; that we don't have to reach "crisis level" in order to begin dealing with the question of women's oppression.

Ultimately, the test which will prove the worth of a women's caucus is how far we have come in making the branch organization as a whole understand and deal with sexism. If, after a period of time, the women are isolated and are carrying the entire responsibility of fighting sexism, then we will have failed. But as we saw in the Vancouver branch, the women's caucus can play the vanguard role in initiating the process. (Warrior men who were previously passive are actively challenging other men, and are recognizing their own sexism.) Many comrades, mainly from the USA, have told us that the problems of sexism should be handled by the organization as a whole, and that on that basis they do not think that a women's caucus is necessary. While it is, of course, true that these problems should be handled by the organization as a whole, it is not the same as saying that these problems are in reality being handled by the organization as a whole. We want to see the new organization start off making this ongoing effort.

We hope that this contribution will start off the discussion on the role and function of women's caucuses in the new organization. We know that there does not seem to be any controversy over the abstract "right" of women to form a caucus. Using the Vancouver experience, we have tried to indicate how they are both necessary and helpful to the organization as a whole. We think that to say that women's caucuses are permissible but not necessary indicates a shallow understanding of the manifestations of sexism and women's oppression in the organization. And besides, as long as we take our own program seriously, we have a certain understanding of the needs of the oppressed to get together to deal with their own oppression.

commie greetings and all that

Cleo & Hildebrand