

Women Trade Unionists Organize

Lois Weiner

OVER 3200 WOMEN TRADE UNIONISTS from the length and breadth of this country met in Chicago, March 23-24 to form the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) and for the first time in modern labor history, the union movement and women's fight for equality were united.

One of the conference organizers, Addie Wyatt, explained in her keynote address that CLUW had been conceived by a very few women trade unionists many months before. What she did not mention was that most of the women who had initiated the conference call and structured the regional meetings that preceded the Chicago convention were top-ranking women in the AFL-CIO and UAW bureaucracy.

Despite their best efforts, they were only little more able to contain the political content than they were the size. Originally 800 women had been expected in Chicago, but by conference time attendance had swelled to well over 3000. Politically, the leadership had expected to limit criticisms of the labor bureaucracy to those it was willing to initiate. By conference end, oppositionists had forced them to identify CLUW with the United Farmworkers (UFWU), decidedly against their will.

Three women typical of the leadership were Addie Wyatt, head of the Women's Division of the Amalgamated Meatcutters, Olga Madar who holds the same position in the UAW, and Myra Wolfgang, a Vice President of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees. That so few women are among the highest ranking in labor officialdom is in itself an indictment of the sexism in unions. In all but a handful of international unions, even those with predominantly female membership, the bureaucracy is overwhelmingly male. Where women do gain rank, they usually do so by heading women's committees or divisions, until recently little more than paper structures.

For these women and their peers in the lower echelons of the labor bureaucracy, harnessing the fight against sexism and bringing it into the unions could produce great career advantage, but only if they can channel and control it. A movement for equality and democracy which becomes too aggressive, too independent, could take their heads too.

Whether consciously or unconsciously cautious of this danger, CLUW's leadership resisted open criticism of the labor movement. In one speech Myra Wolfgang did announce that CLUW's formation should be a message to Meany, Woodcock, and Fitzimmons, but she

never explained what that message was or why we needed to send them a message at all.

The leadership had, however, from the start, implicitly challenged the sexism and conservatism of the AFL-CIO. The conference call had specified as one major goal "organizing the unorganized." For women workers, 87% of whom are denied the advantages of higher pay and better working conditions which union membership brings, unionization is a vital step toward economic equality. Meany has said and the AFL-CIO has demonstrated that they are unconcerned with organizing the millions who so desperately need unions; they are content to supervise their present fiefdom.

The CLUW's goal of organizing the unorganized was a demand, implicitly though never explicitly, directed to the labor bureaucracy. It was a rebuke for the unions' conservatism and passivity.

NO SINGLE ADJECTIVE describes the conference better than "enthusiastic." Even during long plenary sessions, the excitement never flagged. From the first hours Friday evening when women waited in line to register, the air was electric. People eagerly shared descriptions of their own union experiences, how they had heard of CLUW, how they had financed their participation. Meeting delegates from different unions and different states fueled the excitement. Over 100 international and independent unions were represented. Teachers from California met New York City hospital workers, electrical workers from Texas questioned garment workers from Massachusetts. Who would have guessed that women were steelworkers or that so many thousands of women were machinists at IBM? For the first time, my mental picture of the labor movement was changed; it was more than the gray-suited, middleaged white male leadership. Encouragingly, about 10-15% of the delegates were black.

The conference call permitted anyone who was a member or retiree of a bonafide collective bargaining agency to attend. Any estimate of the conference's social composition must be vague, but probably only 30% of the delegates were full-time staffers or functionaries. As was to be expected, more of the older women tended to be full-time officials. The conference was fairly evenly divided between women under and over 35. Revealingly, most delegates sported Farmworkers buttons although none could be bought at the conference. Obviously these delegates comprised a sizeable chunk of the left-wing of the labor movement.

CLUW's structure and rules were, as a whole, quite democratic, so democratic in fact, that the leadership could not contain the opposition bureaucratically, to the extent it wished, without exposing and discrediting itself. Delegates were recognized on points of order, points of personal privilege, points of information and other points which would

have been laughingly ruled out of order at even small union meetings, let alone massive conventions. Only once did the chair flagrantly misrule in the leadership's interest, at the very end of the conference.

AT ANY CONFERENCE, IN ANY ORGANIZATION, the leadership is always organized, by virtue of being the leadership. An opposition must, therefore, be organized to win, to replace the leadership. CLUW was no exception. While enormous opposition sentiment existed, those who challenged the Madar-Wolfgang-Wyatt leadership were too inexperienced, too disorganized to unseat them. Thus the roster of elected CLUW officials at the conference's conclusion was almost identical to the list of those who had initiated it. But a loose group of about 100 activists were able to parlay widespread sympathy for the United Farmworkers Union and suspicion of conference leadership into a significant victory. Support for the UFW became the central challenge to CLUW's leadership.

The planning committee for the Chicago conference had been plagued by a controversy over whether this new, fragile organization could withstand discussion of the UFW. Meany's disgraceful public criticism of Chavez and the secondary boycott just days before, large newspaper ads placed in mid-western cities by the Amalgamated Meatcutters and Retail Clerks denouncing the UFW's secondary boycott of stores (and resultant lay-offs), and participation of Teamster women officials on the committee, compounded the leadership's natural resistance to allowing such a hot potato to come to the floor. They opposed any CLUW support to the UFW, despite protestations of their personal sympathies for "la causa."

Their tactic to forestall a public fight and, in their mind, a disruption of the primary task of establishing CLUW as a national organization, was to include in the guidelines a measure, rule #14, prohibiting CLUW involvement in any inter-union dispute described by any party as jurisdictional. Rule #14 could, therefore, be used effectively to outlaw any support to the UFW in its struggle against the Teamster-Grower alliance.

Friday evening a knot of delegates drafted a petition which demanded that CLUW show its commitment to organizing the unorganized by supporting a union which had, with great heroism, done exactly that. The petition called on CLUW to support UFW's boycotts of grapes, lettuce, and Gallo wine. Hand-copying the petition on borrowed paper, a dozen women set out to gather signatures and support.

They argued that the UFW needed CLUW's support, especially in light of Meany's action; that as women, fighting to democratize the labor movement, they had a personal stake in the UFW's success because it too was working toward that goal. To fears of disruption, of

splintering, they answered that they were willing to fight and lose; the other side should be too. Silence was complicity, they said, to fail to speak out for the endangered UFW was to accede to Teamster blackmail and condone it. Finally, they used the petition to challenge the leadership's role in this controversy and the need for an organized opposition.

AFTER CIRCULATING THE PETITION FOR TWO HOURS, the original group met again, with over a hundred signatures and its ranks swelled ten fold, now including several rank and file teamsters. Again petitions were copied and plans made for a floor fight the next day.

Workshops preceded the plenary on Saturday, and in virtually every one, participants discussed rule #14, in light of supporting the UFW. By the time of the plenary session that night, excitement had reached fever pitch. After considerable parliamentary maneuvering, pro-farmworker elements won their first victory; rule #14 was deleted by a sizeable margin.

The fight on rule #14 crystallized the opposition and steadily educated delegates to the leadership's foot-dragging and timidity. By Sunday afternoon support had snowballed so visibly that complete victory seemed assured. Indeed, the final plenary session started with the chairwoman requesting the UFW delegates to address the convention. Amid tumultuous cheers of "VIVA! VIVA!" and one standing ovation after another, a woman farmworker thanked the delegates for their display of solidarity. Next a Teamster official from the planning committee expressed the Teamster delegation's "support for the women who worked in the fields." The two women embraced for a final standing ovation.

Unfortunately, the head of the UFW delegation failed to use the podium to move that CLUW endorse the boycotts. Moments later, when a delegate did so from the floor, over the cheers of support, she was told by the chair that an agreement had been reached by representatives of both unions to spend no more conference time on the question. While no such bargain had been struck, the UFW leader, wrongly fearing a defeat, vacillated and ultimately refused to take a microphone to ask for a motion of support. At that point, the pro-farmworker activists appeared to many delegates to be violating the UFW's wishes and when they pressed the chair they were quickly ruled out of order and quelled.

Despite this final defeat, the opposition achieved a great deal. They demonstrated that the farmworkers and other controversial subjects could be raised without destroying CLUW. They explained the importance of allying CLUW with militant, socially conscious forces in the labor movement to reinforce the struggle for women's equality. Names and addresses were recorded, along with tentative plans for a full-fledged caucus the next year.

The conference accomplished only a fraction of its anticipated tasks. The only substantive questions decided in plenary sessions were the goals, statement of purpose and the structure. But a momentous decision had been made: to bring the women's movement into the unions, to forge a Coalition of Labor Union Women.

LOIS WEINER is a member of the American Federation of Teachers in Hayward, California and of Socialists for Independent Politics.

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Chile: Terror for Capital's Sake

Morris Morley and Betty Petras

EVEN THOSE WHO HAD ANTICIPATED the imminence of the coup in Chile were stunned by the savagery of the military fascists' attack on the population September 11. "The Armed Forces declared war on their own people. The people have put up a truly extraordinary struggle, [fighting] with practically no weapons . . . against 100,000 men from the four branches of the Armed Forces. Battles were waged in the countryside, the mines, and the cities, [and] the loss in human lives was appalling. The terror unleashed by the junta defies description. There's no end to it. In fact it increases with every day." So said Carlos Altamirano, leader of the Socialist Party, who left the country clandestinely rather than seeking asylum. But terror and repression was not applied indiscriminately; it had a *social* direction. It was essentially directed against those sectors—geographic and social—identified with the Allende government. Altamirano described the attacks against population centers: "By chance, I was in one of the towns that was bombed, and I was able to see for myself how horrible all of that was. They came with their helicopters; huge balls of light would illuminate a tremendous area, and then the bombing would begin. These were the towns which they felt contained the most staunch supporters of the Unidad Popular [Popular Unity Party]."¹

The economic policies of the junta were elaborated following the initial repression of the working class and the destruction of its organizations. Within a few months, the military has abolished the reforms for which the Unidad Popular and workers' movement had fought: all trade union rights have been suppressed along with all forms of workers' and peasants' participation in the country's economy. Salaries and wages have been frozen, work hours increased, and restrictions in price increases removed, with the result that inflation has risen 800% during the first four months of the dictatorship. Meanwhile, the process of renegotiating the terms of the nationalization of the copper industry with U.S. multinational corporations has been initiated. Policies designed to elicit loans from the U.S. and international financial institutions signal a reversion to dependence on foreign investment, and give the coup its specific social character: pro-capitalist and pro-United States.

But only with their weapons trained on the people (and after

¹ Carlos Altamirano, speaking at a Havana press conference, January 3, 1974. *Gramma*, January 20, 1974.