

Women's Movement: Alive, Well, Fighting



Photo by Betty Lane

By Nancy Shier

ABOUT ONCE A YEAR, THE ESTABLISHMENT media treat us to an analysis of why the women's movement has failed. Focusing on Phyllis Schlafly, conflict between women and divisions within women's organizations, the stories generally conclude that the movement is dead.

In 1978, the annual post-mortem was especially embarrassing, coming as it did a scant month before some 100,000 women and men marched on Washington, D.C., on July 9th to demand that Congress extend the deadline for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Some months later, when Majority Leader Robert Byrd refused to place the extension measure on the pre-adornment Senate calendar, an outpouring of 100,000 telegrams from across the country

forced him to change his mind.

We won! On October 6, the U.S. Congress extended the deadline for ERA ratification until June 30, 1982. When the National Organization for Women (NOW) launched the extension drive in October 1977, observers who looked at the composition of the House and Senate committees that would consider the measure and assessed the plight of other progressive legislation (e.g. labor law reform, Humphrey-Hawkins) in Congress predicted that success was impossible. In fact, the extension drive provided the focus for the most sophisticated and significant mobilization of grassroots and national organizational forces in the resurgent struggle for women's equality that began a decade ago.

The extension campaign involved thousands of new women in that strug-

gle, and at the same time solidified previously tenuous ties between the women's movement and other progressive forces, including civil rights and labor organizations. Grassroots strength and activism coupled with the support of national organizations made the impossible a reality. It also proved that the drive for women's equality is long-term and depends on the successful development of organizational forms and resources to meet the challenges ahead.

The women's movement has clearly come of age. Women's organizations are stronger in numbers and resources than they have ever been. NOW has more than 100,000 members—ten years ago, it had only hundreds. Another important long-range development is the increasingly cooperative relationship between women's groups and organized labor. Women's organizations testified and lobbied in 1978 for key labor priorities such as minimum wage legislation, labor law reform and Humphrey-Hawkins. Labor lobbyists were visible and helpful in the ERA extension effort. Although the new alliance is currently confined to the national level, the development of a working relationship at the state and local levels could be critical in the next few years. A United Auto Workers representative in Illinois told a Humphrey-Hawkins rally: "The fight for ERA, labor law reform and Humphrey-Hawkins are not three separate fights. They are one fight against a common corporate/right wing enemy."

Targeted by Right Wing

The women's movement has been the target of a focused right-wing attack for the past several years. The Right's activity has been extraordinarily well-organized and well-funded. The battle is at a stalemate. Although we were unable to win ratification by any additional state legislatures, the success of the extension drive was a serious defeat for the right wing. The Right was more successful, however, in its attempt to restrict abortion rights.

The anti-choice crusade, which began after the Supreme Court's 1973 landmark decision legalizing abortion, has gained momentum, and has more recently been joined by the right wing, anti-ERA forces. As a result, an increasing number of states have enacted restrictive abortion statutes (many of them clearly

unconstitutional), and proposed legislation has been successfully amended in the U.S. Congress to curtail federal spending for abortion services. Three major factors seem to be involved in this trend.

Women's organizations have been forced to devote almost all of their energy and resources to the ERA fight. As a result, grassroots organizing on reproductive freedom has suffered.

Abortion is basically a civil liberties issue, involving as it does questions of separation of church and state, and a woman's right to control her own body. Support for civil liberties in general has been on the decline in recent years.

The major political fights on abortion have been over funding issues (payment for Medicaid abortions, inclusion of abortion coverage in public employee health insurance plans, etc.) — not over constitutional issues. While all polls show increased support for the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, in a period of budget cuts and fiscal conservatism the class discrimination that these funding fights reflect are even harder to counteract. After all, class discrimination is not only *not* prohibited in this country, but is the basis of our political system. Groups concerned with the rights of low income and working class women must join with feminist organizations in unified opposition to the right wing assault on *all* women's right to choose.

Victories on Other Fronts

The women's movement has always been involved in many issues in addition to ERA and abortion. Work continued at some levels in most areas in 1978, with some notable progress. Congress passed several pieces of legislation fought for by women's rights activists. The Civil Rights Act was amended specifically to preclude employment discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth and related conditions; CETA legislation provides support for training for displaced homemakers; farm widows were relieved of inheritance tax burdens; a bill was enacted increasing the use of flexi-time in federal agencies. At the state levels, rape and the plight of battered women received increased legislative attention. Last November's elections also increased the number of women holding office at the state legislative level to 10.2% of the total.

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Overall, the women's movement has changed the lives of millions of people across the country. Nevertheless, massive sex discrimination is still very much a reality. Working women still earn only 59 cents for every dollar earned by men; the number of women and women-headed families in poverty continues to grow; violence against women on the nation's streets and in the nation's homes is still the order of the day; hundreds of laws and government practices discriminate against women in countless ways.

The struggle to change this reality, to turn the tide of institutional sexism, will not be won easily or quickly. The past year has been a crucial test of the women's movement's ability to survive and grow. Winning, however, will require more than just survival, and more than simply numbers. In the shorter term, it will require a strengthened emergency drive for ERA ratification and a renewed national campaign to preserve legal abortion. It will also require long-range planning, the development of massive organizational resources and the nurturing of new allies. America's civil rights, labor and progressive forces should surely be among those allies. Winning will also require a renewed commitment on the part of all of us to the critical goals we hold in common. ■

Nancy Shier is the Executive Director of the Chicago Chapter of the National Organization for Women.

New England DSOC Member Wins Maine State House Seat

By Harlan Baker

THE REPUBLICANS ARE GOING to kick your ass. They know you're a socialist and they don't want you going to Augusta." That was the comment of one of my friends soon after I was drafted to replace an incumbent Democrat in the race for a seat in the Maine State Legislature.

Fortunately, his reservations, although shared by many, were offset by support in the Democratic Party. When some fellow members of the Democratic City Committee from outside my district complained that "a socialist and communist" had been nominated, another member replied, "I don't care what he is, he does his work in the Democratic Party."

The campaign began after Labor Day in my home district, where I had been active in Democratic Party politics and as a community organizer for the past six years. The district is made up mostly of students, the elderly, working class families and activists.

Labor and Democratic Party support were crucial in the campaign. The AFL-

CIO, Maine Teachers Association, Firefighters Local 740 and the Maine State Employees Association gave their endorsements. Party officials campaigned in the district. DSOC members helped in all the tedious nuts and bolts aspects of the campaign, and I went door to door on every street in the district.

The campaign stressed local issues, such as development of Portland's port facilities, hospital cost containment and public employees rights. While local bankers and businessmen backed the Maine Committee for Tax Limitation, which sought to put a limit on government spending, I proposed shifting the emphasis from property taxes to more use of income and corporate taxes.

The issues hit home. When the paper ballots were finally counted at 3 a.m. on November 8, my conservative opponent had gained 435 votes. I polled 903. ■

Harlan Baker served on the DSOC National Board from 1974 to 1976. He was a DSOC organizer in Boston and Chicago and is active in the Maine DSOC.