Survival Politics in 1984
A Survey of San Diego Women's Organizations

by Galen Ellis

The following article is a survey of women activists and women's organizations written with the intention of promoting dialogue in the community around political focus and direction for 1984. Although it is impossible in this survey to represent all the various "progressive" tendencies and organizations which address women's issues, the following statements and summaries reflect a consensus on some of the basic objective conditions that women recognize: the feminization of poverty, cutbacks in social services, increased militarization, discrimination against women, gays and lesbians, and continuing harassment and violence against women. Under these conditions, and with the recognition of the potential of "gender gap" politics, women activists and organizations have developed their strategies for 1984.

SAN DIEGO NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF WOMEN

The strategy of NOW is to defeat Reagan. In 1984 they are struggling to get volunteers actively involved in their voter registration drive. By getting women active and cooperating with as many groups as possible, 1984 "is the chance to maximize the gender gap."

NOW is endorsing Mondale for the Democratic nominee to defeat Reagan. This was a difficult decision, according to local president, Lenore Lowe, particularly for California members who believed that Cranston was a viable choice. However, Judy Goldsmith, NOW's national president, met with the Mondale campaign for many months, and after checking out his record on women's issues concerning pro-choice, ERA, comparable worth, affirmative action, and his stand on the nuclear arms race, it was decided that Mondale would be the one. There were two other important factors: viability and visibility—Mondale has a good chance of winning.

NOW has never endorsed a presidential candidate, but according to Lowe, "These are times which require unusual measures. We normally maintain a bipartisan stand, but the Republicans have abandoned women—the ERA and affirmative action are examples."

SAN DIEGO COALITION OF LABOR UNION WOMEN

Working women have been hurt seriously by the Reagan administration. A second term, free from any reelection concerns, would certainly mean increased disaster, says Nancy Baker, CLUW's president.

However, we must do more than jump on the "Dump Reagan" bandwagon. As we help to develop consensus around issues like peace, equality, and human needs and social services; we must also articulate and organize around the particular concerns of working women to ensure that they are not forgotten once the campaign smoke clears.

While both the percentage of women who work and the total number of women in the work force are about 50 percent, women make only 59⁹ to a working man's $1.00, and most women are segregated into the underpaid ghetto fo women's work." Adequate social services, including health care and child care; pay equity, and the right to effective unions are all issues we must make a part of the popular consensus on which the American people demand that *all* politicians deliver.

WOMANCARE

The strategy for 1984 can be summed up in one word—survival. Survival means a lot. It means literal survival for individual women, faced with high unemployment, rising costs for food and rent, and restrictions on funding for health care services. It means continuation for institutions that provide services to women. And it means keeping our goals intact. For individuals, institutions, and the women's movement as a whole our challenge in 1984 is to *not* give into 1) the propaganda that the right has won a permanent victory and 2) the tremendous personal cost that the trend toward right wing politics has had for all people working for social change.

"Squeeze" Forces Change

At Womancare, in order to keep our goals intact, we have had to change our internal structure and external image. Our clinic has never been busier. However, as our costs have gone up, women's real income has gone down. At a time when more and more women need subsidized health care, the state has cut the amount it reimburses providers and has made it more difficult for women to qualify for state funding. This situation created a "squeeze" on the resources of the clinic, resulting in a cutback in the amount of energy Womancare as an institution could put into non-survival issues.

Unlike the early 70's when activists had the advantage of collective living, supportive friends, and the excitement of participating in a movement that was winning; long hours, low pay, and collective struggle are difficult to manage in 1984. Our structure has changed from an open hierarcy with the policy making available to all members, to a more traditional structure. This structure and the appearance or image that comes along with it, is making it possible for Womancare to survive financially.

Womancare is a social change organization. Our basis is sharing self-help with women in our clinic and in the community. Self-help can both break down barriers between women, enabling them to see their common oppression and work together to change it and can literally strengthen women by giving them tools to control their bodies. It can also be, for some women, the first step to uniting with other progressive movements and joing forces to work for the liberation of all people.

CENTER FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES AND SERVICES

CWSS is a non-profit organization, and therefore, cannot endorse a candidate or be involved in a political campaign, although members of the staff are involved with other groups that are politically active. "We used to have nothing to do with politics," states one CWSS staff member. "We had come from a radical perspective with a view that the current political system is shot. Yet we've come to understand that regardless of corruption and lack of accesibility to the political system, boycotting electoral politics has not helped us. This is particularly significant as the New Right has reestablished the effectiveness of that system to meet its needs. We'd like it to work for us. Frankly, it's the only perspective to have without going crazy. It's not exactly a pure perspective, so you're talking about compromise."

Feminist By Action

The Center is also an active member of the Women's Coalition, which functions as a clearing house for strategies like voter registration, and has over 100 groups on its mailing list. Since it encompasses all women's organizations—some feminist, some not—it was impossible at first to make policy statements. However, it is becoming more feminist by action and not policy. Groups like the National Women's Poltiical Caucus (NWPC), although not politically defined as feminist, are coming to have more and more in common with feminists.

At the Center, women are trying to talk more with each other about the candidates—how does a staff member's involvement in a campaign effect the rest of the group? And of course, a major avenue of discussion is how can they bring to politicians an awareness of issues that effect women. In the past, their political strategy was limited to a survival mechanism—they talked about rape and unemployment. But now they are beginning to think about a political mission on an ongoing basis.

CWSS sees the importance of building coalitions among womens' organizations, and of the instrumental role of NOW in this process. As one staff member said, "The local NOW chapter, under the leadership of Lenore Low has gotten us to rediscover what coalition building means. She has been effective in sharing resources with us at the Center, and is helping all of us understand what some of our commonalities are."

BLACK FEDERATION

The foremost issues for black women in 1984 are, across the board, the foremost issues for the black community as a whole: limited access to education and jobs, lack of subsidized housing and the weakening of affirmative action, to name a few. "We must talk economics first, because its hard to talk about other things when people are trying to survive," says Kathy Rollins, the Federations executive director.

Kathy describes herself as a feminist, and yet she recognizes an urgent need to address the immediate economic conditions that the black community experiences as a whole. "Welfare mothers are not born. They are made by unpaid childcare and unfair wages. Survival is the primary reason that Reagan must be defeated this year."

"In the black community the unemployment rate is always twice that of whites—and it's not coming down. The black community is a separate nation within a nation. We are unable to catch up when opportunities become available because we are still being poorly educated and undertrained. The black middle class has decreased since Reagan. Black professionals tended to work in government positions because they were the least discriminatory. These are the jobs that are being cut back, and minorities must leave due to seniority. The kinds of jobs that are being created are not replacing those that were lost."

Time to Take Responsibility

Rollins and others in the Federation support Jackson for the Democratic nomination, and are working on his campaign locally.

A voter registration drive in the black community is an important strategy, and yet Rollins emphasizes that voting is the minimum that black women should do to participate. "They must also speak out on their needs for domestic programs and childcare...more women need to participate in community politics. There are women who are involved, but don't recognize their own skills to develop into leaders..." Improving self-image for black women, and often for black men as well, is a constant and important issue for Rollins. "I think it is possible for black women to participate as advocates for blacks as a whole, and at the same time address the special needs of black women. It is time for people to take responsibility."

WOMEN'S CAUCUS of the SAN DIEGO DEMOCRATIC CLUB

The San Diego Democratic Club meets the political concerns of the Gay/Lesbian community. The women's caucus of the club is a little over a year old, and its strategies are twofold.

First, it is developing women's participation in the broader political process. It recently sent two women to the First National NOW Lesbian Rights Conference in Milwaukee this past February. It was sponsored by the Club and NOW and supported by both men and women.

"Gay Vote San Diego" is a voter registration project of the Democratic Club. The goal is to register 5,000 to 10,000 gays and lesbians in San Diego, and inform that population of candidates' stands on gay rights. The women's caucus is joining in this effort with men in the Club, and working in coalition with other women's groups such as the NWPC, NOW, etc. According to McCallister, it is a strategy, "and, of course, a way to beat the bushes in the Lesbian community."

"Personally, I would like to see a forum for lesbians to do our own rub-