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New York, N.Y. 10014
October 2, 1973

Dear Comrades,

Enclosed are reports by Paula Reimers on two important meetings of trade-union women. The meetings were called to prepare for a national conference of women trade unionists to be held in Chicago March 23-24. As indicated in the reports, this conference has the potential of being a significant one, and we will want to continue to participate in building it.

Comradely,

Betsey Stone

Betsey Stone
National Office

REPORT ON MIDWEST CONFERENCE OF TRADE UNION WOMEN LEADERS

by Paula Reimers

According to the figures read to the conference, 209 women attended the conference in Chicago on June 29-30. The women came from 18 states (mostly Midwestern) and represented 28 unions. The breakdown by unions was as follows: 103 UAW, 21 AFSCME, 17 Amalgamated Meat Cutters, 11 American Federation of Teachers, 8 Communication Workers of America, 5 American Federation of Government Employees, 4 Newspaper Guild, 4 Amalgamated Clothing Workers, 3 International Ladies Garment Workers Union, 2 Office and Professional Employees International Union, 2 United Farm Workers, 1 International Association of Machinists. Also represented were: the Brotherhood of Railway, Airline and Steamship Clerks, Grain Millers, Hotel and Restaurant Workers, International Typographical Union, Service Employees International Union, Brotherhood of Teamsters, United Steelworkers and Veterans Administration Service Employees.

I would estimate, from the way women in the discussion identified themselves, that 15-20 percent of the women were officials at some level in their unions. Of these, I would say the majority were shop stewards or committee people, with a few local secretary-treasurers thrown in.

There may have been a few older CPers there, but they had no vocal or noticeable spokespeople. The overwhelming majority of the women seemed to be liberals, McGovernites in the last election. Democratic Party involvement was not emphasized primarily I imagine because it's not an election year. We saw none of our sectarian or ultraleft opponents.

The conference, according to the organizers, was a preliminary meeting to see if sentiment exists to establish an on-going interunion women's organization; since such sentiment obviously existed, the conference set up interim machinery to organize a national conference next year, which will be well-publicized, broadly representative, and will adopt policy resolutions and establish the new organization. The conference also decided to hold at least two more regional conferences in the near future, one on the East Coast and one on the West Coast. There may be others in other regional areas.

The three most prominent leaders at the conference, who apparently played a leading role in its organization, were Olga Madar (UAW International Vice-President), Addie Wyatt (Director, Women's Affairs, Meat Cutters International), and Catherine Conway (Communications Workers of America International staff). These women chaired the three sessions of the conference and led the discussion.

Olga Madar suggested on behalf of the conference organizers, and the conference accepted, a proposal that decisions on policy and issues be postponed until they could be taken up by the national conference next year. That meant that there could be discussion but no decisions at Chicago. A steering committee was elected composed of one representative from each union and one representative from each state.

In each of the three sessions, there was a brief presentation

and a lot of discussion from the floor. The following points were clearly indicated in the discussion:

A) The women's liberation movement has made a powerful impact on the consciousness of women trade unionists. A number of the women, including Olga Madar, stressed the importance of the women's movement in their own development. "The growth of the women's liberation movement has highlighted the need of women to unite as women, fighting around women's issues. We owe a debt of gratitude to the women's liberation movement for getting us up off our butts and active." Other women brought up the importance of the fight around such issues as the ERA, abortion, contraception and child care.

B) There was no division made between "union issues" and "social issues." There was a marked dissatisfaction with the abstention of the union movement and the union leadership from important social issues, such as the antiwar movement. The new organization will take stands on and organize around the problems of women on the job (day care, parental leave, equal pay, job upgrading, organize the unorganized), the problems of women in the unions (underrepresentation of women on policy-making bodies at all levels and underrepresentation of women's needs in negotiation, grievance, etc.), and the general problems of society with which women are concerned (abortion and contraception, the ERA, the war).

C) There was a desire to link up with the organized women's liberation movement in common activities whenever possible.

D) The women showed an understanding that it will in many cases take a struggle within the unions with the predominantly male conservative union leadership (and often the backward union brothers) to achieve these goals. Women will need to organize caucuses to get resolutions passed and learn all the techniques to fight for them in the locals and internationals, said Catherine Conway. Within one local or international sometimes women are weak or isolated; sisters from different unions and different areas must help and support one another.

E) It is crucially important to talk to other women in our own and other unions, especially rank-and-file women. It was constantly emphasized in discussion and from the podium that we must reach out and involve every woman who is willing to be active. One woman asked about the use of the term "union women leaders," but she wasn't an official in her union. Addie Wyatt said that the term hadn't been meant to be exclusive and that we should consider every woman who is active as a leader. This is healthy, but we should expect the bureaucrats to attempt to interpret the term more rigidly if they begin to feel threatened by the organization.

The conference clearly showed the impact of the women's liberation movement--especially through its fighting campaigns around abortion, contraception and around the ERA--on the women of the organized labor movement. Similar conferences recently held around the country (and reported in The Militant) confirm that this is not an isolated phenomenon. It reflects a response to pressure from the ranks of union women on the union bureaucracy,

an attempt on the part of the female members of the bureaucracy to increase their own power vis-a-vis the male bureaucrats, and a certain growth in consciousness on the part of women in the union bureaucracy.

Although the dynamics of such a group, if it carries out any effective activity, will bring it into bitter conflict with the bureaucratized union apparatus, at this point it has the blessings of at least a section of the bureaucracy. For example, it was evident that the UAW played a leading role and probably footed the bill for the conference. Also, the AFT delegate to the steering committee was appointed by the AFT Executive Board (Virginia Gallagher, International Vice-President; alternate: Marjorie Stern, chairwoman of the Women's Rights Committee).

In the long run, groups like this can contribute to bringing union women into the struggles of the women's liberation movement. They may also contribute to the effort to build a left wing in the unions by helping to one degree or another to loosen the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy on the unions.

July 10, 1973

REPORT ON SEPTEMBER 15, 1973, PLANNING MEETING
IN CHICAGO FOR WOMEN'S TRADE UNION CONFERENCE

by Paula Reimers

For people who attended the Midwest Conference of Trade Union Women leaders in June, the planning meeting on September 15 was quite a revelation. It was strikingly different from the first.

Size and composition: It was much smaller, 41 women from 15 unions. (The small size may be accounted for by the fact that it was a planning group, at least that's how it was billed.) It seemed to be much more hand-picked than the first conference. At the beginning women were asked to identify their names, unions and positions, and, unlike the first conference, nearly everyone had a position, local, international or staff. The percentage of Black women was much lower than the first conference, perhaps 10 or 15 percent. The women were as a rule older than the women at the June conference.

Tone: The change in tone was probably more striking even than the changes in size and composition. I got the feeling this was much more of an "inner circle," "closed club" type of meeting. The fighting tone of the June conference around social and union issues was gone. Apparently the union bureaucrats, noting the enthusiasm and dynamism of the first conference, had become a little uneasy about it. They seemed to be more unsure about which way they wanted to go with the group or even what role or functions they wanted it to undertake. There are obvious divisions within the leadership on such questions. They were clear, however, that they must keep a close rein on the group because it can so easily go beyond and around them.

Proceedings: Addie Wyatt from the Meat Cutters chaired the meeting all day. She began by explaining that there had been a "misunderstanding" at the June conference when they had taken a list of volunteers for the planning committee, that "it was obvious in going over the list of volunteers that many of the women who volunteered didn't have the time or resources to really put into the job," (i.e., they were rank-and-filers). The officers had gone over the list and tried to find those women who were union officers or on staff and therefore could commit the time and resources of their unions to working on the conference.

The meeting broke up into five committees to handle the work (statement of purpose, outreach, finances, organizational tasks, and conference planning). The committees met and then reported back to the large meeting with their proposals for approval.

The following is a summary of committee reports presented to the full meeting and approved by it:

a) Statement of purpose--It was very general and vague. A proposal made by myself to fight for the rights of women on the job, in the union and in society was not included. It was proposed and accepted that the statement function as a call to the national conference.

b) Conference planning--The national conference is scheduled for March 23-24 in Chicago. Regional planning meetings were scheduled for three areas: the east (Philadelphia, December 8), the south (Atlanta, no date proposed), the west (no place or date proposed). There was general agreement to expand the steering committee to include representatives from those areas. The perspective outlined for the regional meetings was relatively small meetings (as opposed to the original formulation of "conferences") to involve "key people--not hundreds of people--at planning meetings." The function and scope of these meetings was not defined, but they are not to pass resolutions for decision at the national conference. (How these resolutions will be proposed and by whom was not discussed.)

c) Organizational Tasks--The name of the organization is "Coalition of Labor Union Women." A letterhead will be drawn up and forms will be available to sign women up as participants in the organization.

c) Finances--There was a collection which netted \$300. There was a proposal to raise \$50,000 seed money by individual officers and staff getting money from their unions. There were a number of proposals on dues and a proposal on fees for national conference registration (\$10) and regional conference registration (\$5).

(e) Outreach--The outreach proposals were very low key: notices in women's magazines and newsletters, to women's groups, to unions, and a press release. When the idea was raised of getting out a leaflet announcing the conference in a massive way, to be distributed on the job, at union meetings and conferences and everywhere union women gather, this was agreed to. But one had the feeling that the conference leadership would resist attempts to build the national conference among the rank and file.

Voting at the national conference: Olga Madar (International vice-president, UAW) sent up a trial balloon on having delegated voting at the conference. When it was pointed out that union women would want to take an active part in the conference with voice and vote, she denied that it was her intention to propose delegated voting, but suggested that votes be assigned proportionally by unions, that the women caucus by union and vote how to cast the votes assigned to the union. This was, she said, to prevent powerful unions like the UAW from dominating the conference.

Summary and Our Tasks: Our orientation should be to build the national conference in the broadest possible way. We should aim to build the largest, most broadly representative conference we can. (That means leaflets, publicity, etc.) We want to learn about the forces involved and meet new people who are interested in our ideas, not take major organizational responsibility or central leadership roles. We want to make contacts in the union movement in this building activity. It will give us a chance to work with some of these women in an activity. We may even be able to recruit some rank-and-file women.

The kind of experience that comrades can gain in trade-union work is invaluable. Working with and getting to know the union

movement, making contact with individuals; getting a feel for the mood and tempo and development of the union members--all these can be important for future work.

September 19, 1973