

REPORT ON THE CHICAGO AND WASHINGTON ANTIWAR CONFERENCES, June 1, 1967

by Mary-Alice Waters

At the recent antiwar conferences of the Student and Spring Mobilization Committees we were primarily concerned with two things: reaching agreement on the date, place and character of the next mass action against the war, and maintaining a structure for the two committees that would be firmly based on the principle of non-exclusion. In other words, we wanted to maintain the national antiwar coalition on the basis on which it has been built over the last two years and lay out the plans for the next step ahead.

In addition to those two main objectives, at the conference of the Student Mobilization Committee (StMC) in Chicago we also wanted to maintain and strengthen the StMC on the programmatic basis adopted at the founding conference in December, reaffirming the three planks of withdrawal, opposition to the draft, and opposition to campus complicity with the war. We wanted to outline a meaningful program of summer activity that would strengthen the radical student withdrawal wing of the antiwar movement and enhance the authority of the StMC as the leadership of the student antiwar movement, and prevent the StMC from becoming an organization concerned primarily with antidraft activity.

Finally, we wanted to use the two conferences as an opportunity to educate the antiwar activists we could reach on the general questions of mass action, electoral action, the draft, and the GIs. The success of both the conferences and the main decisions arrived at assured a basis for maintaining the coalition over the next period and building toward the largest mass anti-imperialist action yet organized by the antiwar movement.

With the exception of the first Washington conference (November, 1965), that was held in conjunction with a large march on the capitol, the two recent conferences were the largest to date. Attendance at the student conference was more than 500 (as compared to 250-300 at the original student conference last December) and 670 registered for the conference in Washington. Both meetings, held as they were on the heels of the most successful antiwar action yet organized, were significantly broader and more authoritative than the conferences which have called for previous national actions. Attendance at the two conferences together included all the left wing political organizations and parties, representatives of independent antiwar committees, pacifists, high school students, professors, veterans groups, SNCC, black nationalists, MPI, all the major women's peace groups, new politickers, concerned citizens of all types, and large numbers of independents, some of whom, such as Sidney Peck and Al Evanoff, played very important roles. The one significant layer of the population not well-represented was the organized labor movement.

Even in conferences of this size, our political-educational influence was clearly predominant. On each of the major questions -- mass action, political action, the draft, and structure -- proposals we supported were accepted by the majority. On the

draft question, even though the majority do not agree with our general approach, we were able to win over a few, and won acceptance of proposals that were acceptable to us.

The conferences were the most serious yet held, with less of the "nut" fringe in evidence. The SWP-YSA was more than ever accepted as a legitimate part of the antiwar movement and as serious builders of it. The absence of the DuBois Club, CP youth, and SDS from the Washington conference was further indication of the fact that the YSA is the radical youth organization playing the most important role in the antiwar movement and most closely identified with its left wing.

Gar Alperovitz, of Vietnam Summer, made a short presentation at the Washington conference and urged people to participate, but neither Vietnam Summer nor the Negotiations Now groups made any real impact on the conferences.

The Washington conference especially posed some delicate tactical problems for us in dealing with those who are our allies on the basic question of mass mobilizations. The impact of April 15 provided a larger number of allies than we've had at most other conferences, but many of them were fearful we would try to ram through a call for a fall mass action to the exclusion of all else, alienating and antagonizing those who wanted something in addition to mass action to come out of these conferences. We wanted to help develop a list of proposed activities that would not destroy the basis of the coalition by forcing sections to take political responsibility for activities they do not support. Many proponents of "escalating the coalition" were in favor of having the SpMC take responsibility for organizing draft refusal and electoral activity. We had to deal with this problem in a tactfully delicate manner while making our position clear and preserving the coalition on the basis it has been built - mass actions in the streets against the war.

Fall Action

After the tremendous success of April 15, far beyond the expectations of everybody, both nationally and internationally, individuals and groups in the antiwar movement who are opposed to mass actions were in a very poor position to oppose a call for the fall action. Since it was the April 15 mobilization that built both the mobilization committees and brought hundreds of new antiwar activists into the local committees across the country, even the old standby argument that national mass actions are a detriment to local organizing, carried very little weight at these two conferences. For these reasons, what opposition there was to the fall action took the form of opposition to setting a concrete date, proposing that a fall date be left undecided at this time, or that another mass mobilization be put off until next spring. When it actually came down to a vote, however, there were only scattered individuals who voted against the motions either in Chicago or Washington.

The Washington motion that was passed not only set the date for October 21, but outlined the mobilization as a mass march on Washington under the theme of "Support our Boys, Bring the Troops Home," and called for international supporting actions. Although a time factor in Chicago prevented us from doing as thorough an educational job as we would have liked, in Washington we won some significant allies who spoke very forcefully for the action and the theme. They underscored the necessity for the theme in order to undercut the attempts of the pro-war forces to mobilize mass sentiment around the demand of "support our boys." The only speaker who opposed the theme was Archie Brown of San Francisco.

In Chicago the CP took a neutral position on the fall action, not speaking strongly for or against, but voting for. In Washington their line was clarified in the fall action workshop where they spelled out what they really wanted. As in Cleveland last November, they spoke for a mass action to help lay the basis for a "peace ticket" in 1968. They made tactical shifts as the relationship of forces changed during the conference and did not propose any counter-motions or vote against the motion that came out of the fall action workshop, but it was clear they would have preferred not setting the date concretely, and did not want the theme that was decided upon.

Electoral Action

The question of electoral action was not a central point of discussion at the StMC conference. A political action workshop was held which recommended that the StMC work to get referenda on the war on ballots around the country, both on campuses and in the communities. The CP youth raised the question of peace politics in '68, but did not make a big push for it.

In Washington, however, the political action workshop was the largest of the conference and evoked the most heated debate. The workshop was initiated by a series of presentations from several reform-Democrat-type politicians who have had virtually no connection with the antiwar movement or the SpMC. They simply saw the conference as an opportunity to proselytize for their particular version of reformist politics, either inside or outside the Democratic party. They all disagreed with each other, proposals ranging from Paul Booth's grass roots organizing for local elections, to Sanford Gottlieb's suggestion that the only way out was to vote for Percy or some other rational Republican. The chairman of the workshop, Arthur Waskow of Washington National Conference for New Politics, unsuccessfully tried to obtain a consensus for the King-Spock ticket.

The heart of the debate took place in the evening workshop where the CP and individual new politickers argued very hard for the "Mobilization Committee to establish a political action committee to work towards the setting up of an independent candidacy for president in 1968, heading a 'Peace and

Freedom' ticket." The CP was not pushing for the King-Spock ticket per se, but wanted endorsement of that general concept by the SpMC. They are not for an independent party.

Our motion that 1) the Mobilization Committee take no formal stand on any particular candidacies, parties or perspectives, but 2) the Mobilizer publicize for information the various electoral projects of the different sectors of the antiwar coalition, received the support of the majority of the workshop. Also approved was a motion to work for referenda on the war.

Both motions from the political action workshop were tabled in the plenary session due to lack of time for adequate discussion. It was proposed that the Administrative Committee call a conference in the near future to discuss the question of electoral action. Whether or not such a conference will be held, or what form it will take, is unclear at this point. What is clear is that the CP has decided to try to force the coalition to support a peace ticket in '68, and will try to drive such a proposal through whenever and wherever they can. Reports from different areas since the Washington conference indicate that the CP is pushing the peace ticket line hard, and will try to win in separate localities what they were unable to win at the national conference. Thus, the SpMC conference constituted the first major round in the battle for '68. Our general perspective of preventing the antiwar movement as an organized whole from taking a position in favor of "peace politics" clearly won this round.

The Draft

The question of antidraft activity evoked the most heated debate and discussion at the Chicago conference and to a lesser extent was a major point of disagreement in Washington. There were several basic reasons for this.

First, among the forces active in the antiwar movement there is greater sentiment and support for various types of antidraft activity than at any time in the past. This sentiment comes primarily, though by no means exclusively, from sections of SDS, the DuBois Clubs, and other students. It is not simply a question of pacifism or individual acts of conscience. Although most of these antidraft activities take on the character of individual acts of resistance -- such as draft card burning, draft refusal, non-cooperation, etc. -- many of the youth involved are concerned with the question of building a mass movement. Our major disagreement with them is on the question of how to build a mass movement against the war and the effects of antidraft activity on the majority of the American working class and the GIs. Our approach to the draft question, based on our general political perspective for the American working class is difficult for many middle class radical youth to understand.

Secondly, most of those interested in draft resistance understood quite clearly the difference between supporting the right of individuals to resist the draft, and supporting, encouraging and organizing people to defy the draft. Although they disagreed strongly among themselves as to the best form of draft resistance, they were unified in their determination that the SpMC and the StMC take a strong stand in favor of supporting and organizing draft resistance itself.

The determination of those supporting antidraft activity as the major focus of the antiwar movement to impose this activity on the entire coalition simply meant that we had to give a little more on this issue than we have had to previously, in order to hold the coalition together to carry off another mass mobilization. Antidraft demonstrations are included in the list of projects approved by both conferences, although motions to make organization and encouragement of draft refusal part of the policy or the statement of aims of both the StMC and the SpMC were defeated. The inability of the draft resisters to agree among themselves on the form of antidraft activity indicates that these actions will probably be small and poorly organized.

We made our position on the draft clear at both conferences and argued strongly against the policy statements encouraging draft refusal in one form or another.

Furthermore, Pfc. Howard Petrick's presence at the Student conference, and the Veterans publicity about the case of Capt. Levy at the Washington conference, stimulated considerable discussion on the relationship of the antiwar movement to the GIs.

Structure

Setting up a structure that would enable the StMC and the SpMC to carry out the work of building the antiwar movement over the next few months and organize another mass action, necessitated two things: 1) a structure based on the principle of non-exclusion and 2) one based on the real forces involved in the antiwar movement. At the same time the structure had to be flexible enough to include new forces coming into the antiwar movement.

The weakness of the CP in the antiwar movement, coupled with their desire to move it to the right politically and open the way to support for a peace ticket in '68, meant they were particularly concerned with the question of structuring the two committees. They were forced into a position of having to oppose the most democratic structure --one based on representation from national organizations involved in the coalition and representatives from the local antiwar organizations -- because of our roots in the antiwar movement, and the militant character of most of the student committees. For this reason they wanted a structure which gave inordinate weight to the category they labeled "broadening elements," i.e., student body presidents,

young christians, ex-SDS leaders, trade union officials, religious figures, etc.

They were unable to repeat on a national scale their success in capturing the structure on the west coast, where they excluded all but one of our comrades from the main steering body of the west coast SpMC. At the StMC conference they hoped to establish a closed national continuations committee which included only minimal representation from local committees and several dozen names of individuals unknown to those active in the antiwar movement. The structure proposal passed at the conference accepted a list of specific individuals, many of them "broadening elements," with the stipulation that the meetings of the continuations committee be open, and that representatives of new organizations and local areas would be co-opted by the committee.

The structure of the SpMC was set up on the basis of one representative from each national organization, one from each major metropolitan area, the three coordinators of the StMC, and working vice chairmen selected by this Administrative Committee.

The Administrative Committee will have the problem of setting up a working staff to keep the SpMC functioning. One of the main tasks will be to find an individual capable of working with the various elements of the coalition and efficient enough to hold the minimal apparatus together in New York. Bevel will undoubtedly be basing his work in Washington, building his projected non-violent "confrontation" which the conference approved as one of its projects during the summer.

Tasks

1. Our major task in the months ahead will be strengthening and building the radical student, withdrawal wing of the antiwar movement, by promoting a meaningful program of summer activity and laying the ground work for the fall mass action on October 21. In many areas campus antiwar committees have changed their names to StMC or in some other way made clear their affiliation with the national StMC. We want to encourage this identification and build the StMC as the authoritative leadership of the radical wing of the antiwar movement.

2. In each major area we want to encourage attempts to reach out to new campuses and cities with literature, speakers, tours, etc., building the antiwar movement and the StMC.

3. We want to continue to work in the broad local mobilization committees that were organized to build the April 15 action. These committees should start laying plans now for bringing as many people as possible to Washington on October 21.

4. We want to continue the educational work within the antiwar movement on the questions of mass action, electoral action, the draft, the GIs, non-exclusion, etc.