

ORGANIZATIONS

Unity and diversity in Women's Caucus

By Claire Greensfelder

SAN JOSE, CAL.—Opposition to right wing attacks upon abortion and the ERA was the rallying point for moderate and left of center feminists at the Third Biennial convention of the National Women's Political Caucus here Sept. 9-11.

Entitled "Women, Power and Politics," the convention drew over 1500 delegates, alternates and observers for three days of workshops, speeches, resolutions and the election of new officers for the six year old organization.

The delegates, representing 35,000 mostly middle class Democratic and Republican women, were unanimous in their support for the ERA and Medicaid paid abortions.

There was also much discussion of the International Women's Year conference to be held in Houston in November, including strategy sessions on how to prevent expected right-wing political sabotage by the John Birch Society, American Nazi Party, Mormon church and other conservative forces.

The Caucus has an unusual diversity in its ranks; there is no comparable organization in the male political establishment. This diversity was reflected in the speakers: from Mary Louise Smith, ex-chair of the Republican National Committee to Willa Mae Reed (not a Caucus member), 1976 candidate for Vice President on the Socialist Worker's Party ticket; from Jill Ruckelshaus, a Republican activist, to Liz Carpenter, one-time press secretary for Lady Bird Johnson and currently co-chair of ERA-America.

The Caucus is about 60 percent Democratic, 25 percent Republican and 15 percent Independent. It has active black, Chicana and lesbian caucuses. A new labor caucus was formed at the convention, as well as an older women's caucus and a legal support group composed of members who are attorneys and judges.

Political aim of movement.

Unlike the convention of the National Organization for Women earlier this year, other political parties such as the SWP were not actively present. Willa Mae Reed told *In These Times*: "We [the SWP] do not see the NWPC as a next step in the development of the women's movement. The most attractive organization for activist women is NOW."

NOW, which is a larger organization with 55,000 members, "addresses issues and does consciousness raising," Iris Mitgang vice-chair-elect said. "NWPC is a political organization. We're considered the political arm of the women's movement. We see our task as affecting the system by electing women to public office because the men aren't doing it for us." Although many of the members of the Caucus are also members of NOW (including Mitgang), no attempt has been made to coordinate the two memberships.

The topics presented in workshop sessions underlined the determination of the caucus to place more women into elected and appointed political offices. Election targeting, direct voter contact, basic and advanced campaign strategy, fundraising at the grassroots level were just a few of the 36 workshops offered. Discussion was steered away from generalities as the moderators of the sessions focused on the specifics of election techniques.

Differences in party loyalties were kept distinctly low-key, as the group applauded speech after speech attacking Carter's stand on abortion and urging the passage of the ERA. Frances "Sissy" Farenthold, president of Wells College, brought the delegates to their feet for a three minute standing ovation

National Women's Political Caucus members see themselves as the "political arm of the women's movement," and set as their task the election of women to office. They include Democrats, Republicans and Independents.

Gloria Steinem told the gathering that "The system is so radically wrong that when we demand simple justice like the ERA, it makes us come off as radicals."

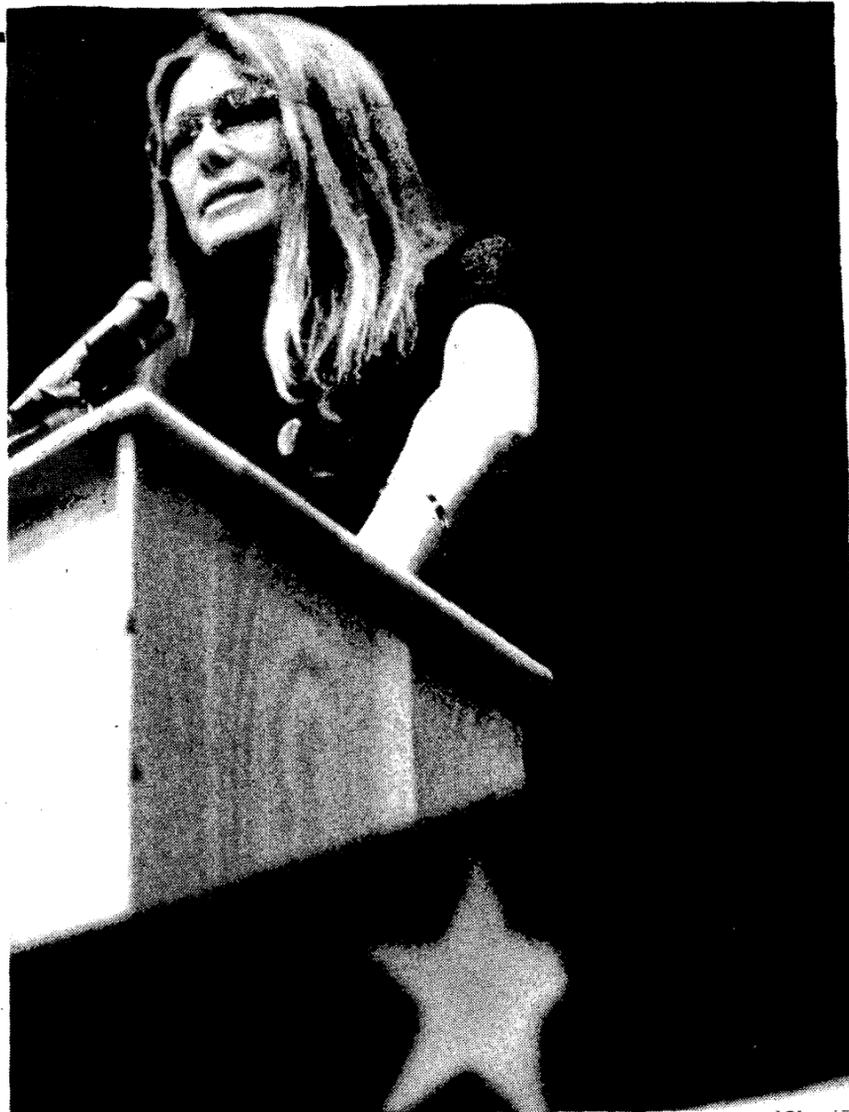
when she declared, "The right to an abortion has become a class issue, a race issue, a privacy issue and even a consumer issue, but above all it is *our* issue."

In an action resolution (one that had a financial impact on the organization) around the ERA, the caucus voted to "commit the maximum available resources of the NWPC to that effort."

Controversy over racism.

While resolutions on abortion, the ERA, displaced homemakers, comprehensive childcare, civil rights and campaign finance reform generally passed easily, emphasizing the mood of unity and agreement that ran throughout the proceedings, the convention was not without discord.

Racism and minority participation in



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the Caucus were the issues that sparked the most controversy.

C. DeLores Tucker, black Secretary of State of Pennsylvania, said in her address to the group: "Black women have their own priorities, and most of them still consider racism a greater barrier than sexism. They see white women as interested in only white women's issues and particularly in white middle class women's issues."

There were also heated debates around by-laws revisions proposed by California's Alameda County caucus. The delegation presented a change that would eliminate the requirement that three of the five national vice-chairs be members of minority groups. Other delegates responded angrily to this move as they felt that the Caucus had not been doing enough to recruit minority mem-

bers, and that this would only hinder any progress that was being made. The proposal was blocked by the San Francisco delegation before it had a chance to come to a vote.

The convention was not all plenary sessions and debate. On Friday night there was a concert with feminist musicians Holly Near, Meg Christian, Mary Watkins and Malvina Reynolds. For many of the women present, this was their first contact with a woman-produced feminist concert.

Yet the general theme was network building and the social time was no exception. Women took advantage of receptions, lunch and dinner breaks, and free time to meet delegates from other states and establish contacts for future work.

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EDUCATION

Milwaukee aroused over busing

Plagued by calls for "neighborhood schools" from both white opponents of any desegregation and blacks upset that very few white students have been bused to schools out of their neighborhoods, the Milwaukee, Wisc., school year got off to a troubled start.

Last year, the first in a three-year, court-supervised effort to end segregation of the 103,000-student system, desegregation efforts were relatively successful and peaceful. Employing a variety of voluntary methods, the school system managed to meet Federal Judge John Reynolds' guidelines for the year.

"This community has gone through an enormous transition without a ripple," Special Master John Grounouski, the court-appointed overseer of the desegregation plan, said last summer. "I think the desegregation plan will go down in history as the model of human relations for the nation, not just human relations, but desegregation and quality education as well."

However, despite reassurances from the school board to the black community that blacks would not bear the brunt of busing in the second year—as they had in the first—figures released in August showed that 87.6 percent of the 14,500 students to be bused would be blacks. The number of black students to be "voluntarily" bused had been artificially increased by a school board de-

cision to close neighborhood schools. Students from those schools got to choose their new schools, hence the "voluntary" aspect of the choice.

"Blacks for Two-Way Integration" was formed in protest. Their survey showed strong sentiment among black parents for sending children to neighborhood schools. White opponents of busing, led by the Concerned Citizens for Freedom and Justice, strongly backed the new resistance to busing among some blacks.

The situation was further confused by court and school board decisions just before school opened on September 6. The Milwaukee school desegregation order had been appealed to the Supreme Court, which referred the decision back to the Circuit Court of Appeals to judge whether the city had acted intentionally in its original segregation. Two days before school opened, the case was returned to Judge Reynolds in Milwaukee by the Appellate Court, encouraging anti-busing parents to hope there would be a reversal of the desegregation order.

Then, the evening of the first day back to school, the school board—with an anti-busing white majority—voted in favor of a resolution that would allow students to transfer back to neighborhood schools if there was sufficient space. Administrators were left in a muddle. In protest, confusion or whatever else,

many students stayed out of school in the first week.

On September 8 the Appeals Court amended its earlier order to state that Judge Reynolds' desegregation plan was still in effect, overriding the school board position on neighborhood schools.

The future of the desegregation plan now is in doubt. Nearly everyone agrees that voluntary means alone will not be sufficient to meet the original goal of 102 desegregated schools—73 schools have now met the court guidelines. On the other hand, if Judge Reynolds does not satisfy the Appeals Court that his desegregation order meets Supreme Court criteria, the desegregation process will probably be stalled where it is.

Blacks and whites who have worked hard for desegregation and busing are distressed that the once promising plan is now threatened, even if they also empathize with the black criticism of largely one-way busing.

And, in another grace note to the complicated desegregation fugue, Native Americans have complained that they are being bused as "non-whites" in order to meet desegregation guidelines, and that busing disperses Indians who have recently managed to win special programs in schools where they have been concentrated.

This article was based on information supplied by Ian Harris.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Weakness with minorities & labor doomed Bella

By Paul A. DuBrul

Q. How can you build a successful left electoral coalition without labor, blacks or other minorities?

A. You can't.

In every poll taken throughout the tangled seven candidate Democratic mayoral primary in New York, Bella Abzug placed either first or second—enough to put her in the sudden death 11-day runoff to decide the final winner. Yet when the votes were counted September 8th, she finished in a disappointing fourth place. What happened to Bella—New York's leading left political figure, and a major national voice for peace, feminism and progressive social change?

The answer is depressingly simple. She failed to get the financial support or endorsements of organized labor. Her significant past support from blacks and Puerto Ricans was siphoned off by two leading minority politicians. The city's "Permanent Government"—bankers, landlords and real estate developers, publishers and Democratic party bosses—took an "anyone but Bella" position on her campaign. Women failed to rally to her feminist candidacy.

In the end, Bella was left with white, middle class, mostly Manhattan, liberals—still a sizable bloc of the 40 percent of Democratic voters who turned out for the primary, but not enough to do the trick.

The anti-Bella gangup started early. Sensing that the former Congresswoman was an easy winner in a showdown with incumbent Abraham Beame in the scheduled June primary, Governor Hugh Carey simply rescheduled the primary to September, hoping that "someone" would show up to beat Bella and Beame.

Gov. Carey's favorites.

Carey's favorite "someone" was his law school classmate Mario Cuomo who had failed in a 1974 bid for Lieutenant Governor and had been consoled with appointment as New York's Secretary of State, sort of a glorified notary public.

Cuomo had taken himself out of the running "definitively" because of his wife's opposition to having their family disrupted. Mrs. Cuomo subsequently relented after personal importuning by the Governor and a pledge that he would help Cuomo raise a campaign war chest. (Carey kept his pledge and helped his Secretary of State raise almost \$1.5 million.)

Edward Koch, Congressman from Manhattan's silk-stocking district, was Carey's second choice, and had already hired Carey's successful 1974 media advisor Dave Garth. But Koch, whose striking physical resemblance to TV's chicken king Frank Perdue rarely goes unmentioned, was generally viewed as unknown and "too liberal" for white ethnic voters in Brooklyn and Queens. He had run briefly in the 1973 Mayoral primary, reminding voters that he had opposed a controversial public housing project in middle class Forest Hills and that he would be "tough on crime." But nobody seemed to be listening at that time, and he soon dropped out for lack of funds.

As Jimmy Carter has shown, being unknown by the voters may be a candidate's greatest advantage in the age of

saturation TV advertising. Given proper direction, he can become anything the voters think they want. Cuomo and Koch now raced for the tube.

Neighborhoodism and polls.

Cuomo hired Jerry Rafshoon, the sculptor of Carter's image. While the relationship has not been smooth, Cuomo's commercials made much of his respect for the immigrant generations who built the city and portrayed him as an angry, earthy advocate of "neighborhoods." ("Neighborhood" has become the latest code word in the perennial American search to raise the issue of race in campaigns without directly saying so. Italians, Irish and white conservatives of any ethnic group are all deemed to live in neighborhoods; blacks, Puerto Ricans and white liberals are assumed to have little commitment to wherever they raise their families.)

Dave Garth repeated the formula that has helped him elect lacklustre candidates in most of the nation's largest states. He had Koch regurgitate the results of the latest public opinion polls on the air, then claim that he was the only candidate to take "tough, unpopular" positions.

Koch inveighed against the municipal unions as the cause of the city's fiscal crisis. As Jack Newfield and I have written extensively elsewhere, and as the SEC has recently confirmed, it was actually the large commercial banks that destroyed the city's economy. Never mind, the voters told the pollsters that "greedy" unions had driven the city to the verge of bankruptcy, and Ed Koch told them they were right.

Koch also solved his problem with appearing not to be "tough" enough. He would grab voters on the streets and introduce himself by saying "Hi, I'm for capital punishment. Are you?" As the polls had shown all along, 80 percent were indeed for capital punishment.

Koch ran a split-level campaign, carefully documented by the *Village Voice*, using the capital punishment pitch in his literature and speeches in the outer boroughs but dropping it entirely in supposedly liberal Manhattan.

Bella troubles.

While all of this was taking place, Bella Abzug, the front-runner, was having some unexpected problems. Union leaders who had enthusiastically supported her Senate bid a year earlier (she lost by one percentage point to Daniel Patrick Moynihan in a five candidate race) suddenly weren't answering her phone calls.

A large bloc of unions, led by the Machinists and Communications Workers, suddenly endorsed Cuomo. They had been "talked to" by the Governor. Most of the municipal unions endorsed Abe Beame, the man who had laid off tens of thousands of their members and frozen wages for three years. District Council 37, the largest and most progressive municipal union, declared its neutrality in the race. So did the anti-war Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Only Local 1199 of the Hospital Workers endorsed a woman who had been a labor lawyer and had walked on picket lines for 25 years.

Without large contributions from the unions, Bella was forced to "nickel and dime" it with fundraisers and cocktail parties. But even traditional liberal givers suddenly hid their check books. After all, it was one thing to have Bella emoting in Congress, and quite another to have her making the daily decisions on things like rent control, business taxes and restoring sharply reduced city services.



When it came down to the wire, the only solid support for Bella was with white, middle class, primarily Manhattan liberals.

(After particularly hostile questioning at a luncheon for real estate executives, she reminded her audience that all seven Mayoral candidates had indicated their support for rent control. "Yeah," a voice from the audience interjected, "but we know you mean it.")

Both Koch and Cuomo also made much of a pre-primary comment by Bella that she believed police and firemen had "the right to strike." Her explanation that anti-strike legislation for public workers had not stopped strikes by cops, teachers, firemen or hospital workers and that only effective collective bargaining could maintain emergency services never caught up with the impression that Bella was "soft" on municipal workers.

Loss of minority votes.

Nothing hurt the Abzug campaign as much as the loss of minority voters, however. In her Senate race, Bella had gotten 90 percent of the black votes cast. But Percy Sutton, the city's leading black official had announced his candidacy in January, hoping that his long service to Abe Beame and the Democratic machines would guarantee him the role of becoming the city's first black mayor.

Sutton was dismissed by the press, and boycotted by the city's large Establishment contributors. Mortally wounded, he persisted and appealed to black voters solely on the basis of racial solidarity. Blacks did vote in record numbers, providing Sutton with enough strength to come in fifth of the seven contenders.

Herman Badillo, the city's leading Puerto Rican official, who had been brutalized by the Beame forces in the runoff four years earlier, entered the race as a declared "spoiler." He announced that Bella had reneged on a commitment made when he had supported her for the Senate.

Together, Sutton and Badillo polled 230,000 votes. Bella failed to make the

runoff by 20,000. There is little disagreement that while the minority vote would have been smaller had the two not run, almost all of whatever minority votes were cast would have been in the Abzug column.

Koch and Cuomo combined polled only 39 percent of the vote. While Abe Beame ran a surprising third many of his votes came from municipal workers and their families who would have been unlikely to vote for the two candidates who made a point of their hostility to the wages and benefits paid to city workers. Bella again would have gotten the bulk of these votes.

Failure of the left.

So New York's Democrats must now choose between two conservatives who were almost unknown three months ago. This whole fiasco must have an ominous *deja vu* quality for anyone who was involved in last year's Presidential campaign or in any number of state and local campaigns where a number of contending left candidates have happily slashed each other's throats while disciplined conservative campaigns went on to victory in Democratic primaries.

Part of the problem clearly lies in the fragmentation of our politics along racial and ethnic, instead of class, lines. But that is just another way of saying that the left has failed miserably in constructing a coherent, easily understood program which will win the allegiance of the majority of Americans who are the victims of the existing political system. Until that task is accomplished, our elections will continue to be manipulated by the fear-mongers and power brokers—and we will all suffer at their hands.

Paul A. DuBrul is co-author with Jack Newfield of The Abuse of Power: The Permanent Government and the Fall of New York. He was issues director for the Abzug campaign.

More on Bella Abzug's loss next week.