

14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014
March 30, 1976

TO ALL ORGANIZERS AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION DIRECTORS

Dear Comrades,

The following is a report on the National Education Association's human rights conference, held in Washington, D.C., February 19-22. The conference endorsed the May 16 ERA march in Springfield, Illinois, and discussed other issues relating to the women's liberation struggle.

Comradely,

Cindy Jaquith
Cindy Jaquith
SWP National Office

* * *

Report on NEA Conference on Civil and Human Rights
in Education

This is a report on the National Education Association's 15th Annual Conference on Civil and Human Rights in Education, "Women's Rights: A Force for Educational Equity," held February 19-22. The 600 or so participants met at the Sheraton-Park Hotel in Washington, D.C. The Conference was national in scope, with delegates from as far as Alaska and Hawaii, and most other spots in between. In addition to comrades in the NEA, members of the DC branch sold Militants and distributed copies of the Fight for Women's Rights. About 90 Militants were sold and several hundred campaign leaflets given out.

The first general session Thursday evening was the introduction of various officials, including the chairpersons of the Black, Chicano and Women's Caucuses.

After Friday morning workshops, there was a luncheon featuring Rep. Patsy Mink. Her message was that ERA is the Number 1 priority facing women today, and that groups such as the NEA, and its state and local affiliates have a prime responsibility for raising public support for passage of the ERA. It was a short, emphatic, to the point speech which was enthusiastically received. It served as a good lead-in for the first session of the Women's Caucus, which was held at the close of the afternoon workshops.

Some 40-50 women eventually jammed into the small room assigned to the Women's Caucus. The chairperson, Louise Jones of Boise, Idaho, said that the discussion would center around building for the NEA's national convention in Miami. At this point Maude Wilkinson suggested that perhaps the caucus should

address itself to the question of the ERA; as Rep. Mink had noted it is the Number 1 priority. Heads nodded and nobody disagreed, but Jones said that the first hour of the caucus would be devoted to organizational matters and then when the Black and Chicano Caucus joined, there would be discussion of issues.

So when the other caucus came in, the question was again raised. The May 16 ERA demonstration in Springfield, Illinois, was mentioned and discussed, and it was then put on the list of questions to be brought up before the general session of the conference. Then a woman from Wisconsin said that Sen. Proxmire was supporting an anti-abortion amendment, and maybe the caucus should deal with that, too. That started the ball rolling, and other issues began coming up: Opposition to the New York Shankerite proposal to eliminate minority quotas from the NEA constitution; economic sanctions by NEA members against firms without affirmative action plans; support for bringing paraprofessionals into the NEA; for quality childcare, both in general and at the NEA convention in particular.

What is significant is that the caucus was forced by its members to actively consider issues. I don't believe that the leaders of the Caucus oppose discussion of issues. I think that they were afraid that there would not be general support for such items as ERA and abortion. The people who brought up the abortion matter said later that they were very hesitant to bring the matter to the Caucus. About three individuals spoke against the abortion issue, but the mood of the Caucus was completely and thoroughly against them. This was the issue that generated the most intense feelings and it was almost all on the pro-abortion side.

Friday night was a speech by Karen Galloway, which was only attended by one-third to one-half of the conference.

On Saturday, John Ryor, president of the NEA, spoke. His speech was short and to the point: ERA is the first order of business, and we have got to get serious about passing it. And it has to be a national effort. ERA is no good for those people in states that have ratified if four more don't ratify. He noted that NEA is housing the new group, ERAmerica, in its national office building.

At the Saturday session of the Women's Caucus, the resolutions were passed. Jones said that they would be taken to a plenary session of the conference, designed to give those conference participants who were interested in voting on issues a chance to do so. It was not to be a general session of the conference. We could not figure out a way to get around this, and accepted what we had.

Saturday's Women's Caucus was very gratifying. The women were all serious in their purpose. They felt as if they were going to have an impact on the way the NEA is run, and consequently, on the fate of certain issues, particularly abortion and the ERA.

ERA was passed quickly and unanimously. Abortion was again the most heated debate. The pro-abortion resolution was passed, but the word "abortion" was deleted as a compromise. Also, an interest group was formed to write a resolution urging education in sexual matters.

Sunday's plenary session was held in the morning with perhaps a third of the conference in attendance. The resolutions that were passed included:

Endorsement of the May 16 ERA demonstration in Springfield, Illinois, urging all NEA members to attend, and setting up a committee to organize NEA participation Passed unanimously;

A condemnation of Proxmire's anti-abortion bill. Passed with a half dozen negative votes;

A condemnation of New York State United Teachers efforts to delete reference to minority quotas from NEA constitution. Passed unanimously.

Two anti-abortion resolutions were introduced, but they met with such opposition that one was withdrawn and the other died before being voted upon.

The Militant salespeople were all received very well. Not a single hostile encounter was noted. Quite a number were sold to people who had seen one in the hands of other delegates.

There was also an interesting exchange at a workshop on "Political Strategies for Change Advocates." There was an hour or so speech on how to make scorecards on your legislators, lobby them hard, get your facts straight, etc. The last twenty minutes were questions and answers and the place became a hornet's nest. The very first comment was from a woman from Nebraska who wanted to know how to organize herself in what she saw as a very conservative community. A Black woman from Michigan said that since this was an education conference, dealing with change, she wanted to know what to do with the kids in her class, how she could change them, when they all knew good and well that there weren't going to be jobs for at least a quarter of them when they graduated. Amens, right ons, etc., buzzed through the room. I mentioned that people should recognize the limitations of the outline given by the speakers. I used the ERA ratification drive in Virginia as an example of a perfect lobbying campaign that had gotten absolutely nowhere. I said that more involvement with broad numbers of people was necessary, not traditional lobbying. More right ons and amens; Then a woman from central New Jersey said that we had to realize that conditions in this country were not going to change until the government was changed. And I don't mean electing Kennedy, she said. All this conversation had taken place among the participants. It was at the call for a change in government that the leadership said that we had to hurry to hear John Ryor at lunch, workshop dismissed.