

THE CHICAGO WOMEN'S LIBERATION UNION

Comparing City Organizations: Different Approaches to Bringing Women Together

March 29, 2014

By Vivian Rothstein (vivroth46@gmail.com)

(This paper was presented as part of "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s," a conference organized by the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, March 27-29, 2014.)

In 1960s and 70s Chicago, the city was under the control of a Democratic political machine that monopolized virtually all political life in the city. There was a network of community organizing efforts in poverty stricken neighborhoods but it was difficult to win even a stop sign without going through your Democratic Committeeman, making it hard to build any grassroots power base. The city was deeply segregated by race and class and the police department was an oppressive presence, killing Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, in his bed in 1969. Out of respect for the black self-determination movement, progressive whites were asked to organize primarily in the white community.

Into this mix was born the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, modeled on what we learned of the Vietnamese Women's Union when I participated in a 1967 peace delegation to North Vietnam. The Women's Union had chapters in each village, provincial capital, and national level and a seat on the Politburo of the ruling Communist Party. In addition to its political role, the Union ran schools, child care, crafts coops and health centers for women throughout the country to provide services and develop women's leadership.*

CWLU was structured to include chapters (essentially consciousness raising/study groups) and projects (Womankind newspaper, Liberation School, Graphics Collective, etc.). Each chapter and project picked a representative to the CWLU steering committee which made decisions about the overall direction of the organization. CWLU participated in coalitions with black and Latino women's organizations on citywide demonstrations and other projects. There was at least one large membership gathering a year. Each work group ran its own project fairly independently. There were no paid staff; all this work was done by volunteers. And we had to raise funds from the members for rent, printing, postage, etc., about \$10,000 a year.

The politics of the CWLU were consciously "revolutionary," pluralistic, non-sectarian and inclusive. Our theory promoted four major areas of work: struggles around women's immediate needs, consciousness raising/education, development of analysis and strategy, and building alternative institutions based on our vision and values. And we felt these areas of activity were needed to challenge the social structures in which women's oppression is located as outlined by Juliet Mitchell's article The Longest Revolution (New England Free Press). Mitchell identified these structures as production, reproduction, sexuality and the socialization of children.

We were generally anti-capitalist and inspired by the vision of a socialist, equalitarian economic system but knew that women's oppression existed in both models, necessitating an independent revolutionary women's organization that worked for women's liberation and economic equality.

From its inception various left groups questioned the wisdom of organizing an all-women's organization composed primarily of white women as potentially a reformist, or worse, a reactionary step. But the energy of the founding CWLU convention propelled the organization forward. Later in its life, the Socialist Workers Party challenged our representative decision making structure, and in the end the Union dissolved in 1977 under criticism from a left women's collective that felt the organization was too white and not revolutionary enough. What our critics failed to see was that at that moment in history, primarily (but not exclusively) young middle class, white women were ready to act against their oppression and CWLU was formed to give that energy progressive form, direction and impact.

Spreading leadership beyond those experienced women comfortable with exerting it was always a goal of the Women's Union. The speakers' bureau trained women in organizing and delivering their message in public and assigned the numerous speaking requests on a rotating basis to give everyone a chance to appear in public. It wasn't always easy to speak at a mixed rally of mostly male presenters, but we believed in learning by doing. Consensus decision making was our model unless some contentious decision required a vote. Still, as in most New Left groups of the 1960s, there was great ambivalence about leaders – they were respected, envied and resented all at the same time – something I think reflects a tradition in our American character. And for women's liberation activists I believe, reflects a certain desperation to be heard and recognized.

Mistakes? Well, the pluralistic and non-sectarian politics that we built into the CWLU model opened us up to continuous attacks and criticism from other more "political" groups. I'm not sure I would have done it differently because we deeply believed that, instead of one, there were many roads to women's liberation and progressive change and we wanted to encourage them all. We did not adopt one ideological road map. And it's clear that our approach was the right one as hundreds of women got involved in CWLU projects, either as work group members, in CR groups, as recipients of services, liberation school students, marchers on our demonstrations or volunteers on hotlines. We helped change conditions for women all around the world, and of that we can all be proud.

*Today the Vietnamese Women's Union runs the Hoa Binh tourist agency to fund its organization which used to get government monies. It also has Women's Museums in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.