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December 2, 1970

To All Organizers, NC Members, and At-Largers:

Dear Comrades,

The enclosed article is a reply to the red-baiting attack "Subversion in the Woman's Movement: What Is To Be Done?" by Martha Shelley. Shelley's article attempted to justify exclusion from the women's liberation movement of all women who belong to "male-dominated" organizations or who participate in the struggles of other oppressed people. In particular, she singled out the Socialist Workers Party and the Young Socialist Alliance as the main "subversives" in the feminist movement.

This article was first distributed at the New York Women's Center meeting on October 15 which voted to exclude the SWP and YSA from its leading bodies. Since then, three feminist newspapers with national circulations have printed this attack: Off Our Backs, Ain't I A Woman, and It Ain't Me Babe.

We are sending this reply to Martha Shelley to the newspapers which printed her article and also to every other women's liberation journal and organization for which we have addresses. Comrades in local areas should see that our reply is distributed to groups in their area; locals should make additional copies of the article for this purpose. If there are women's journals in local areas which did not receive our article, we should urge them to print it.

Comradely,

Cindy Jaquith

Cindy Jaquith
YSA Women's Liberation
Work Director

An article by Martha Shelley called "Subversion in the Woman's Movement: What Is To Be Done?" has been printed recently in several women's liberation newspapers. I feel that this article contains many untrue statements and distortions, as well as some ideas which can be very damaging to the women's movement. I am sending this reply to Martha Shelley's article in the hopes of contributing to an open and fruitful discussion of these differences within the movement.

The main point of Martha Shelley's article is to attack all other women in the movement that Martha Shelley defines as "male-oriented" and urge that such women be "cast out" of the movement.

Included among the women Martha Shelley condemns as "male-oriented" are women who are part of various social struggles, such as Angela Davis, Black Panther women, women from the Socialist Workers Party, women who appear in the mass media, and women who support male politicians.

It is important for us to be aware of the logic of this approach, because if the various categories of women which Martha Shelley defines as male-dominated were excluded from the movement, it would mean the destruction of our movement.

Martha Shelley refers to Angela Davis and Leila Khaled, the Palestinian woman commando, as "women fighting for male causes." Not only is it wrong for feminists to consider other struggles against oppression as "male causes" and exclude women who are involved in these movements; but if all women who are involved in other struggles than women's liberation were excluded from the feminist movement, there would be little movement left. Such a policy would exclude Black and Third World women who participate in the Black liberation movement, the Chicano liberation movement, and other Third World liberation movements. Such a policy would exclude all women who want to build the movement to end the war in Vietnam. Such a policy would exclude all working women who are fighting against their oppression as workers. These struggles can only strengthen the feminist movement. We should welcome women involved in these movements to join us. They can provide strong fighters for women's liberation. Also, we want to bring the women's liberation movement into these other movements; for instance, working women will be organizing within the trade unions to make them fight for the needs of women.

Martha Shelley also says that women who belong to organizations that include men should be excluded because they are supposedly "male-oriented." Again, if this policy were carried out, it would destroy the movement by excluding the vast majority of women in this country. Such a policy would mean excluding all women who registered or voted for candidates of the Democratic or Republican parties, which I would agree are certainly male-dominated. It would exclude all women who are members of trade unions. It would exclude women from such groups as the Phoenix Organization of Women. POW is a group of mainly Black and Puerto Rican women who live in Phoenix House, a drug rehabilitation center for both men and women in New York City. POW women have become very active in the New York women's movement since August 26.

Actually, if Martha Shelley really wanted to throw all the "male-oriented" women out of the movement, she would not stop with women who associate with men in organizations only. What about all the women who live with men? Should they be excluded because they are by definition "male-oriented?" This would exclude the overwhelming majority of American women. We could obviously never hope to build a mass women's movement if these women were all treated with automatic distrust when they began coming around the movement!

The reality is that our entire lives are circumscribed by men. Even women who don't live with men or join organizations with men still more than likely must work for a male employer; they must read newspapers published by males; they must live surrounded by, and relating to, sexist institutions, from the school system to the courts, to the hospitals.

The central goal of women's liberation is to end this whole system of sexist oppression. But we can only do that if we are able to involve all women who are ready to fight against their oppression as women. And we will not be able to reach out and involve new women if the atmosphere in the movement is one of hunting for "subversives" and "male-oriented" women and "casting them out" of the movement.

One of the organizations singled out for special attack by Martha Shelley is the Socialist Workers Party. Since almost all the statements she makes about the Socialist Workers Party are simply untrue, I would like to briefly correct these errors for the benefit of women in the movement who want to know the truth.

First of all, she says "The Socialist Workers Party is highly attractive to male-oriented women who have swallowed the line that a socialist revolution will automatically bring about the liberation of women." This is not the position of the SWP.

The SWP believes, along with many other women in the movement, that in order to lay the economic and social foundations for winning our total liberation, we must change the whole system -- we must eliminate capitalism and build towards a socialist society. But we do not think that "a socialist revolution will automatically bring about the liberation of women." A socialist revolution will not be completed until women are totally liberated.

The SWP believes that women must begin to struggle now, we must build up the power of women, through a mass women's movement which will continue to exist through and after a socialist revolution. Only by building up our own independent power will women be able to assure that our needs are satisfied.

Here is a quotation from the position of the SWP, adopted almost a year ago:

"The most important basic characteristic of the emerging women's liberation movement, the key factor which gives it such revolutionary implications, is its independence. The movement, of course, is related to and interconnected with other struggles -- youth, Black

and Brown liberation, antiwar, working class --- but it has its own demands, its own organizational forms. It is not simply the women's wing of an antiwar committee, a union, or a Black organization, and its fate is not directly dependent on the evolution of other struggles. For the first time in decades, women are saying that they are not willing to wait for anyone else to take up their struggle; they will do it now, in their own way, and they are not willing to subordinate their demands to the needs of any other struggle."

The SWP does not support the policies of the present regime in the Soviet Union, as Martha Shelley implies. We are for the overthrow of the Soviet bureaucracy. One of our strongest criticisms of Stalin and his successors is the fact that they reversed many of the gains women won in the first stages of the revolution and reintroduced reactionary laws and practices which strengthened the family and the oppression of women.

The whole section in Martha Shelley's article on the SWP sounds like it could have come directly out of "I Led Three Lives" or out of the mouth of J. Edgar Hoover. She says the SWP "has moved with frightening success to infiltrate and take over sections of the women's movement."

Another paragraph says the SWP has a "handbook" on how to infiltrate the movement, which is given only to "loyal party members." When I was reading this part to a group of SWP women, we all burst out laughing at this section, because it is so ridiculous.

The policy of the SWP is to build the women's movement, to participate in it, to learn from it, and to contribute what we can to it. We support and help to build all struggles against oppression. What Martha Shelley objects to and calls "infiltration" seems to be simply the fact that SWP women participate fully in the movement and try to build it into a mass movement.

Martha Shelley says that the SWP has "moved full-time workers into the women's centers of New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Los Angeles..." First of all, neither the SWP nor the Young Socialist Alliance, a youth organization which generally agrees with the SWP, have any members who live in Baltimore. In the other cities she mentions, SWP and YSA members have simply participated in the women's centers very actively, trying to help them grow.

Whether she is aware of it or not, the type of language and charges Martha Shelley uses to describe the SWP are all the standard charges of right-wingers against all socialists. This type of thing reached a high point during the McCarthy period in the 1950's, when not only communists and socialists were persecuted, but anyone who dared to struggle at all was charged with being a communist or a "dupe" of communists.

The new movements of the 1960's have so far rejected the reactionary practice of red-baiting and purges against socialists. These new movements have set the policy that the most important thing is to unite the broadest possible forces in struggle on various issues, no matter what views people may have on other topics.

The charge that SWP women would try to "move out" feminist literature from women's centers is also false. We think that the literature that has come out of the movement, from women awakened to their oppression, is one of the most important accomplishments of the movement.

We believe that all feminist literature should be available at women's centers, including socialist views concerning women's liberation. Does Martha Shelley think that the views of feminists who are socialists should be excluded from women's centers?

She also charges that the "SWP has considered gay people to be counterrevolutionaries." Again, this is completely untrue. We think that homosexuals are unjustly discriminated against and oppressed in this society, and we fully support the struggle of homosexuals to eliminate all laws penalizing them and all oppression of them.

I believe it is an insult to the intelligence of women in the movement to say that they are being "co-opted" to "infiltrated" by socialists. Rather than making such charges, it would be more fruitful and beneficial to the movement for Martha Shelley to deal instead with the political ideas that the YSA and SWP have stood for in the movement.

In the New York Women's Center, Martha Shelley voted with about 30 other women to exclude YSA and SWP women from all leading bodies of the Center on the grounds that they were "male-dominated." A Black woman from the Phoenix Organization of Women also left the Center meetings, feeling that she was excluded too.

It became clear in New York that the YSA and SWP and the Phoenix women were excluded from full participation in the Center because a small section of the movement who worked around the Women's Center disagreed with the ideas that the YSA, SWP and POW women have concerning what the New York women's movement should do.

In the New York movement at this time, women from a broad spectrum of around 30 organizations, from the YWCA to campus women's liberation organizations to the SWP, have decided to unite to form an action coalition, to plan demonstrations and other actions that could bring to bear the weight of the whole movement. Women around the Women's Center disagreed with the perspective of building such an action coalition, and disagreed with the first action projected by the coalition: a mass march of women and their children on Mayor Lindsay's home demanding public abortion clinics and child-care centers. Many of these women opposed building any demonstrations at all, and felt that August 26 accomplished nothing.

But rather than discuss these two perspectives openly within the movement, the women from the Women's Center, including Martha Shelley, resorted to the charges of "male-domination" and "infiltration" by the people they disagreed with, in an attempt to discourage women in the movement from even considering the ideas held by the so-called "male-dominated" groups. Their ideas on mass action -- when they did present them at a meeting of 300 women to form the women's coalition -- were not accepted by the vast majority of women. Neither were their ideas on exclusion of women accepted. The

coalition decided to welcome the participation of all women.

The question of what is the best and most effective perspective for the women's movement is very important, and must be seriously discussed in an atmosphere of free exchange of ideas and democracy. This cannot be accomplished in an atmosphere of purges and "casting out" any "unpure" women.

Only with the full participation of all women who want to fight against their oppression can our movement grow and be strong.

Ruthann Miller

Socialist Workers Party
Young Socialist Alliance