

# International Women's Day Committee newsletter

APRIL 1983

Now that International Women's Day 1983 is behind us, IWDC is starting to discuss and plan our work for the year ahead. This process begins, however, with a thorough evaluation of IWD 1983. So far we have participated in four evaluation meetings: two held by the March 8th Coalition, and two IWDC evaluations where we discussed in more detail the role IWDC played in the Coalition. These evaluations are important in pinpointing what worked and why, and what things we should try to do differently next year.

In both the March 8th Coalition and IWDC, women were generally pleased with our decision to try a new format of public forums prior to the march. (These forums are discussed elsewhere in this newsletter.) Other new and successful events were the mixed (men and women) benefit dance for the Mini Skool strikers and the Five-Minute Feminist Cabaret. Both events involved more groups in IWD organizing, and both were great fun for all who attended.

Another first: the Women's Cultural Building videotaped two of the public forums (on abortion and labour) as well as parts of the march. These tapes can be viewed at the Women's Cultural Building Headquarters, 563 Queen St. W., from April 19-25th. It's so important for women to document our own movement and keep records (see the Women's Movement Archives notice on the back page).

International Women's Day is also a special time for us because it's a time when we welcome new members. Every year some women who join the March 8th Coalition to build IWD find that they want to continue their political activity in the Toronto women's movement and join IWDC. This year a number of women have expressed interest in working with us, and have begun attending meetings. We look forward to the energy and experience new members bring to the group. Welcome.

--the Newsletter Committee

*IWDC is a socialist-feminist group. We operate on the principle that mass actions are our most effective instruments of change. We believe that the oppression of women touches every aspect of our lives and that the liberation of women will require fundamental changes in the structure of society.*

*We hold bi-weekly meetings where our policy and overall direction are determined. Smaller committees work on specific issues or in different areas. Our current committees include: trade union, education, newsletter, women's movement.*

*We welcome new women. If you would like more information about IWDC call Pat at 534-4138.*

## IWDC Meeting Schedule

Wednesdays, April 27 and May 11  
University Settlement House,  
23 Grange Road, at 7:30 pm.

## THINKING ABOUT INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Once again, International Women's Day was better than ever! Over 7000 women and men marched through the streets of Toronto on March 5th in support of the demands of feminists in this city and, indeed, the world. A greater measure of success than simply numbers, though significant in themselves, was the broad base the demonstrators represented--the peace movement, the abortion campaign, the trade union movement, solidarity groups, the unemployed, lesbians, the immigrant communities, feminists of every description...

It is not by accident these groups and individuals came together, many for the first time, to support the particular struggles of women. The March 8th Coalition made a political decision this year to try and involve women who have not been part of the "mainstream" women's movement or previous Coalitions, by adopting a new organizational format for International Women's Day--public forums focussing on the three themes of the Coalition: A Woman's Right to a Job, A Woman's Right to Choose, A Woman's Right to Peace. This decision had a number of positive effects:

- 1) it increased and raised the level of debate within the Coalition as the planning of the forums required discussion of each theme and its related demands;

- 2) it allowed for greater participation of women in organizing around IWD, for some could only come, or only felt comfortable coming, to meetings which were specifically struck to organize the forum in which they were interested;

- 3) at the same time, a sense of unity was not lost in the organizing or the events as each committee was instructed to connect all the themes and demands. This was achieved through a keynote speech by the chairperson of each forum, as well as by the variety of speakers. For example, at the Abortion Forum, women from the trade union, lesbian, and immigrant women's communities spoke of their special struggles and positions concerning abortion rights;

- 4) unity was built, not through insisting that each speech be adopted by the Coalition, but rather by allowing women from various sectors to share their particular concerns, in the hope of generating greater understanding and ongoing open debate. It is through dialogue and shared practice that unity will be built.

"Feminism" is not a universal category and, therefore, not an automatic point of unity among all women. While it may be generalized that "feminism" is the awareness of the special oppression and exploitation all women face because they are women, the reason for that oppression, its particularities based upon one's class, nation, sexual orientation, etc. and the way to fight for its eradication are not agreed upon by "feminists."

The International Women's Day Committee (IWDC), as a socialist-feminist collective, believes that a radical transformation of society is necessary to achieve women's liberation. At the same time, the fight for women's liberation is seen as an integral part of the struggle for socialism.

Today, we live in a class society, where a very few rule the majority in the interests of profit and control. This society is governed by patriarchal relations which subordinate women to men. We live in a racist society, a society which participates in and shores up an imperialist world order. Women in this society suffer as workers, as women, and because of our colour and language. We must fight for change on all these fronts.

The themes chosen by the March 8th Coalition this year, themes supported by IWDC, address each of these areas of women's oppression. And they are especially relevant in this period of economic crisis. As the IWD pamphlet explains, women are particularly hard hit by wage controls and layoffs, not only in terms of income and, therefore, some measure of economic independence, but also in terms of the fights for issues of special concern to women: paid maternity leave, equal pay, workplace daycare, etc. Women's control over reproduction, our rights to choose whether or not to have children (fundamental to control over our own lives) is being further eroded as accessibility to abortion is cut back. As the government increases its military spending, monies for child care, education, health facilities and jobs are not simply left at current levels, but are cut back drastically. An anti-imperialist and anti-nuclear position is not only taken in support of our sisters' struggle against the conditions oppressing them, but also in our own interests. Military aggression and a nuclear arms buildup curb our rights as women daily, and may finally eliminate them altogether.

The Coalition's firm stand on the connection between feminism and anti-imperialism has generated much debate within the women's movement in Toronto (see for example the letters and article in the April issue of Broadside). This is the beginning of a healthy and necessary debate.

The March 8th Coalition made an important step forward this year in widening its membership, its base of support and, indeed, in raising many controversial debates. There is still, of course, a very long way to go. Support for the issues raised in the Coalition's pamphlet is not uniformly agreed upon by groups and sectors within the women's movement, nor among its allies. Many links among women struggling against their oppression remain weak, if not non-existent, for example, with Native and Black women, women on welfare, etc. There are many issues of vital concern to our struggle against women's oppression--such as pornography and heterosexism--which must be discussed in the months ahead.

But, hopefully, the channels of communication opened up over the past months, the links established, and the trust developed will continue to grow through active support for one another's struggles and the discussions these activities generate.

## HETEROSEXISM WORKSHOP

On December 5, 1982, the International Women's Day Committee gathered for an all day educational on the topic of "Heterosexism and Lesbian Experience." The educational, which had been planned by five women from IWDC's lesbian caucus, began with a short movie describing some myths and realities regarding lesbian existence. Some presentations then followed, dealing with the definition of heterosexism, how it is different from homophobia, and how it is institutionalized throughout our society, so that it acts to keep all women, straight or lesbian, single or married, in a position of dependence on men.

The large group then broke up into several small discussion groups, in which women asked questions, discussed their personal experience, and tried to find ways both to explain the concept of heterosexism to the world at large, and to develop strategies to fight against it. These discussions were generally fruitful and friendly.

After a coffee break, the group reconvened for a general discussion.

Since we cannot here reproduce all the discussions, we will simply quote from two of the presentations given at the beginning, in order to share with our newsletter readers some of our thoughts. Keep in mind that IWDC does not by any means have a "position" on heterosexism--if such a thing were in any case possible--and that the presentations were meant to stimulate, not end, discussion.

### 1) Definition of heterosexism:

"Heterosexism is not just a fancy new name for lesbian/gay oppression. It is a social institution, and an ideology, which results in the oppression of lesbians and gay men, but whose ramifications extend throughout the society. Heterosexism dictates the forms of relations between the sexes, both individual personal relations and also relations between the two categories (unequal pay, for instance, is a general relation between the two sexes). Because women are socialized to have a subsidiary, derived identity, it then seems 'natural' that women need men, both sexually and socially; it also seems natural that men should own women. Heterosexuality thus appears to be the only natural form of sexuality, and it is this imposition of one particular sexual practice as the norm, the paradigm, which then results in the repression, oppression, and invisibility of all other sexual practices."

2) Political implications: "It is in the interests of all women, no matter what their sexual preference, to fight against the things which tend to increase the compulsory aspects of heterosexuality. Economic independence is thus one of the goals of the fight against heterosexism; reproductive freedom, and an end to violence against women, are two other important aspects." "To oppose compulsory heterosexuality is not to put down heterosexuals; it is to free all of our sexual choices from the pressures and prejudices imposed on them by heterosexist society.

All women have their choices narrowed and twisted by a system which presupposes one and only one correct form of sexual-social bonding."

It was also agreed that an anti-heterosexist perspective means that support for lesbian-gay struggles is not simply a matter of solidarity with some far-off struggle; gay-lesbian oppression is being fought against by specific groups, but heterosexism is everyone's daily business. Mothers on family benefits, for instance, suffer from heterosexism because they are penalized for their "abnormal" single status.

There was also some discussion about the fact that taking an anti-heterosexist perspective means to be critical of the traditional family, in particular of the ideology that coerces everyone into belonging to such a social group as their primary unit. Since the Left, especially in the U.S., has recently wavered and hesitated on this issue, and since the rise of the right has in some places meant that criticizing the family is a touchy business, this presents some problems in terms of our political work. There was a consensus that we are still at the stage of sorting out our thoughts on the question of heterosexism and the compulsory family, and we still need to do much more thinking before translating our ideas into practice. The three key points of the critique of heterosexism as a political practice seemed to be:

- 1) support for lesbian-gay struggles, based not only on solidarity but on an integrated understanding of the commonality of many of our issues;
- 2) support for women's right to economic independence, which is the starting point for overcoming the compulsory nature of the heterosexual bond;
- 3) support for women's reproductive rights and sexual choices, based on the understanding that what we seek is a world in which reproductive and sexual choices are indeed free, and no one choice is considered morally or politically superior to others.

### Resources:

The film we showed was Hardly an Ending produced by Amelia Productions in Vancouver. Write them c/o Ellen Frank, 1774 Grand Street, Vancouver, V7V 4S4.

You'll also be interested in:

Amy Gottlieb's article "Mothers, Sisters, Lovers, Listen" in Still Ain't Satisfied (Women's Press, 1982) and Mariana Valverde's "Heterosexism: A Challenge to the Left" in Canadian Dimension, March 1983.

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# The abortion fight continues...

The first meeting of the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics held after International Women's Day was well attended, and those present were very enthusiastic about the ongoing campaign. There are a number of activities that the OCAC sub-committees are taking up in the next few months, and a lot of room for involvement. The committees include: Trade union and NDP, which has a number of union speaking engagements coming up; Toronto outreach, which is building support in local community groups, religious groups, etc.; Lobbying and legislature, which is planning a lobby blitz day in May; Provincial outreach, which since March 8th has had speakers in Guelph and Hamilton, with requests from Kingston and Sudbury; Media, which is doing an ongoing media watch responding to articles and programs; and the Clinic Defence Committee, which is developing strategies for the political defence of the clinic when established.

There have also been recent demonstrations in Toronto and Hamilton protesting ads sponsored by Campaign Life on CHCH-TV, Hamilton. We urge you to write or call the station stating your opposition to these anti-choice ads.

OCAC had a very positive evaluation discussion of the March 8th Coalition, and our involvement both in the organizing and in the week's events. A number of OCAC members worked actively in the Coalition, particularly on the public meeting dealing with Women's Liberation and Abortion. The group felt that the format of meetings leading up to the day was a good step forward, because it allowed for the active involvement of women from different areas in the Coalition itself, and a broader political discussion of the themes and demands. OCAC was also quite pleased with the numbers attending the abortion forum, and the good presentations from the panel which was made up of representatives from the trade union movement, the immigrant community, OCAC, the ONDP women's committee, and a lesbian feminist. The ensuing discussion was felt to be an important public dialogue in the issue and the present campaign. The abortion contingent in the march was quite large with many people marching behind the OCAC banner.

Although a firm date has not yet been set for the opening of the Toronto clinic, a significant step in the battle for legalization will be taken in the next few weeks with the opening of the clinic in Winnipeg. It's vitally important to show strong support for the Winnipeg clinic, and although OCAC is continuing to build local support for clinics in Ontario, we are also organizing a large rally and demonstration in support of the Winnipeg Coalition. What happens in Manitoba will affect our campaign here, and the response of the Tory government. This is the moment that the pro-choice movement has been organizing for. We urge all who support full access to free abortion to give strong support to this clinic.

\* \* \* DON'T FORGET \* \* \*

Rally in Support of Winnipeg  
FREE-STANDING ABORTION CLINIC

Saturday, April 30th  
11:30 a.m.  
at the corner of Victoria  
and Gould Street (Ryerson)

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## Women's Movement Archives

The Women's Movement Archives now has an office: 455 Spadina Ave., Suite 205 (at College and Spadina). The Archives has material dating back as far as 1968 as well as journals, newspapers and newsletters from all across Canada.

The Archives also has three full time staff members. Sandy Fox (of IWDC) is the Co-ordinator. Give Sandy a call at 597-8865 about all those boxes of letters, files and leaflets you have stored away in your closet or basement. What may be junk to you may be gold to her. The Archives can arrange to photocopy material you want to keep and can help you sort through those boxes of leaflets and files.

Drop into the Archives and get acquainted with the material and the staff. The hours are 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday; arrangements can be made for visits outside regular office hours.

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## In and around town...

Call the "Hotline" for updates on Women's Cultural Building events: 534-1682.

DEC Films is having a BENEFIT April 23. They're showing 10 films between 4pm and midnight. Tickets are \$7, \$5 for unemployed. Includes "The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter" and "The Wilmar 8." For further information call 964-6901.