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lesbian dynamics

After six years' participation in the National Organization for Women and about three years' confrontation with what they considered anti-lesbian attitudes within the organization, lesbian members of NOW for the first time formed a discrete caucus at the national convention. [For the first time, too, an acknowledged lesbian, Del Martin (co-author, *Lesbian/Woman*), ran for the National Board, stating that "Lesbians remain second-class members of NOW" and opposing also the "growing bureaucratic structure" of NOW and the proposed delegate system of voting. She was among the winners.]

The caucus met in the evenings to work out goals and activities as well as resolutions to be presented to the plenary session.

Supplementing the official NOW candidate questionnaire, the lesbian caucus prepared its own, questioning candidates for NOW offices on their consideration of lesbian discrimination as a priority for NOW.

At the Saturday evening caucus, the candidates' responses were read aloud and evaluated. With perhaps two or three exceptions, everyone running expressed unqualified support in the fight against lesbian discrimination -- which brought comments of approval for some candidates and cynical laughter for those others whose past performances were known to the lesbians gathered.

The response of Muriel Fox, former chairone of the National Board and newly elected chairone of the Advisory Committee, drew the most scorn. As a high-ranking officer for some time she had done nothing to implement a 1971 resolution that NOW support a test case involving child custody for a lesbian mother, it was noted. According to Del Martin, she had also remarked in a phone conversation that if Del Martin and Sydney Abbott (co-author, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*) became coordinators of the newly formed task force on sexuality and lesbianism, they would "use their position to proselytize for lesbianism."

It was also noted that Wilma Scott Heide, running unopposed for a second term as president, had failed to respond to the questionnaire.

NOW elections aside, the lesbian caucus discussed the necessity for incorporating the phrase "sexual orientation" in all legislation against discrimination on account of sex in employment, housing, financing, public accommodations and child custody (a resolution on this order was subsequently unanimously approved at the plenary); for doing their own research to combat the myths about lesbians; for changing the image of lesbians perpetrated in the media; and for the repeal of all sodomy/sex laws.

They remarked that although sex laws are currently used to entrap male homosexuals, as lesbians become more political these laws will be turned against them as well.

It was decided that members of the lesbian caucus would attend other NOW workshops scheduled for the following day to ensure that the interests of lesbians were not neglected in the areas under discussion, i.e., consciousness raising, image of women in the media, finance and credit, and, especially, the Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDEF).

The LDEF, according to its descriptive brochure, is the "tax-deductible arm of the National Organization for Women." It gives substance to many of NOW's goals by supporting legal cases charging violations of women's rights. The LDEF had refused to support the child custody case of the lesbian mother in San Jose last year. A landmark case, the woman was eventually awarded custody of her child but under condition that she see her lover only at certain specified times. The lesbian caucus decided that an LDEF amicus brief in support of the woman's appeal of that stipulation was in order and necessary.

Before ending the session the women signed up to receive and work on a national NOW lesbian caucus newsletter. Of the 2,000 women who came to D.C. for the conference, 200 strong were out of the closet and in that caucus room.

The next day about 75 women and men attended the LDEF workshop; one representative of the lesbian caucus searched the room for familiar faces and finally found one.

LDEF President Sylvia Roberts was explaining the tax-exempt nature of the Fund and its decisive contributions to a number of far-ranging court actions to give women full legal

rights under the constitution when the woman from the lesbian caucus broached the subject of the lesbian mother's case.

Roberts quickly countered with: "We can lose our tax-exempt status from the IRS if we cater to one group. We have three criteria for participating in a case: it has to affect the largest number of women; it must be a test case, one that has never been brought before; and it must communicate concerns about ending sex discrimination. We have five lawyers to pass on the merits of a case brought to us."

It was pointed out that the lesbian mother case met all criteria, to which Roberts responded that fitness on the basis of sexual preference and practice was an issue that the defendant's lawyer had told her was not going to be raised. Therefore, the case did not meet the third qualification.

This contention was refuted by another woman, who observed that that was the issue in the case, or there would have been no case. Roberts replied that "this whole thing is taking a lot of time. We have many other things to discuss that are of vital concern to most of the people here." Many of those people applauded the rejoinder and the lesbian caucus representative left.

Roberts then settled back and detailed how NOW members and chapters and special interest groups could engage the LDEF under IRS and NOW guidelines. "Our dream is to be NOW's lawyer in a wide variety of litigations," she said.

Meanwhile, outside in the hall, members of the lesbian caucus were discussing the outcomes of the various workshops. They were joined by members of the black caucus, who were angered by the fact that the one black candidate for the National Board had been taken off the ballot for lacking the proper credentials.

Referring to the lesbian caucus newsletter, Del Martin said, "We're going beyond this conference. It's not the membership we're up against, but the ruling clique. We'll get it together through our nationwide communications."

She and her colleagues then left to meet privately with the black women, a natural alliance of two minority groups, especially for those women who were part of both caucuses.

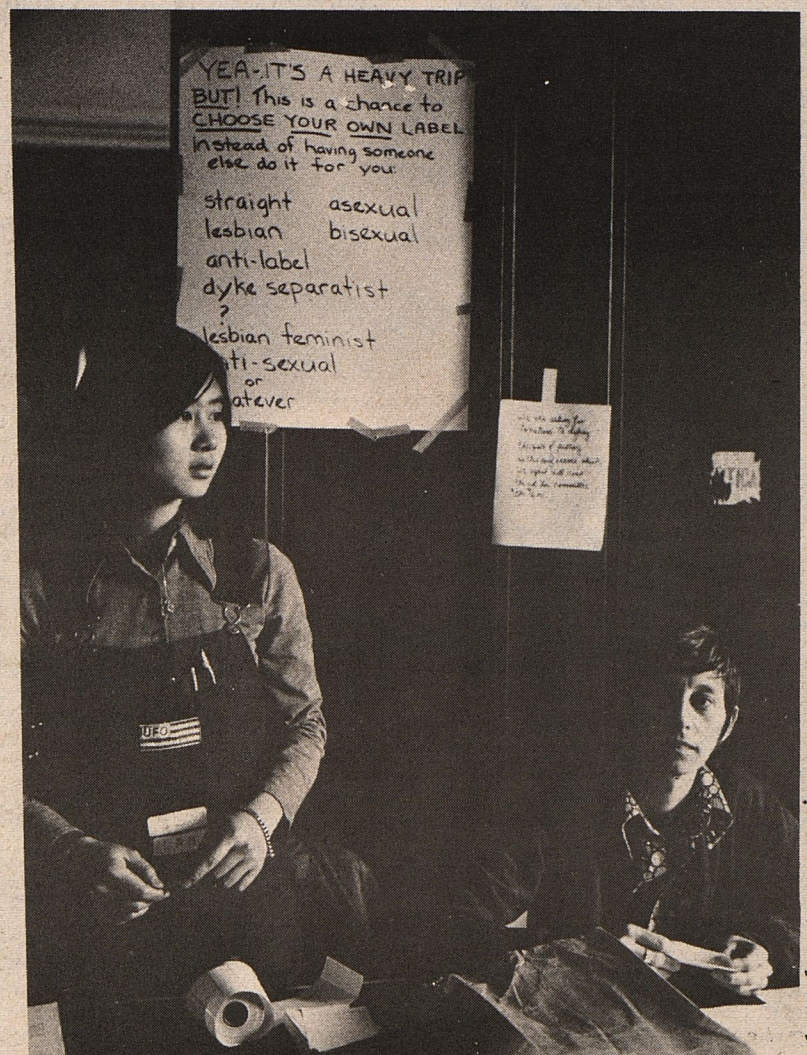
by fran pollner

late copy

In the January issue of *off our backs* was an article on the "Lesbian/Feminist Dialogue" held in New York in December. The photos accompanying the article arrived air mail, special delivery, the day after we went to press. But here is a backward glance at two of them. (Maybe next month we'll have some photos of the NOW conference.)



Margaret Sloan and Gloria Steinem



Lesbian activists at Barnard provide labels