



NO REVOLUTION WITHOUT US

We, a group of New York Lesbians, after two days of participation in the so-called "Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention" left with the clear realization that if women continue to struggle for their liberation within contexts defined by sexist male mentalities, they will never be free.

Lesbians and movement women were excited by Huey P. Newton's written gesture of solidarity and came to contribute strength and vision to the convention. Within our group there were mixed feelings. Those of us who had worked on the agenda committee for the convention had set up a format with which all oppressed peoples could relate and the mechanism for actually producing a constitution of, for and by the people was laid down. That the Panthers allowed such a committee to exist came about only through the insistence of the women who attended the planning session in Washington. An agreement was reached with the Panthers that the convention would reflect consciousness of women's oppression; that there be workshops around women's oppression and sexual self-determination, that a third world woman with a heavy woman's consciousness be a keynote speaker; and that a woman chair the sessions. The agenda committee kept meeting in an effort to provide for the administration of this agenda, but Panther communication got fainter and fainter until there was no communication at all. Those of us who had this experience went to the convention with heavy reservations but also with the hopes that the Panthers were operating in good faith. Those of us who hadn't been involved with the agenda committee went in sincere anticipation of a constitutional convention that would unite all oppressed peoples. This is what we actually encountered.

Michael Tabor was scheduled to speak at 9:00 a.m. with the workshops around social groupings, i.e., women, lesbians, third world, etc., meeting at 2:00 p.m. At 11:00 a.m., the Panthers began the security process of searching the thousands of people waiting to hear the speech. Sometime after 1:00 p.m. the speech actually began. Most of us dug it and were pleased with the frequent references to women and homosexuals; however, we were also disturbed at the superficiality of the presentation, which did not spring from real awareness of our oppression. The words "women" and "homosexual" were attached to the talk much like a caboose, easily detachable, is tacked on to the end of a train.

Getting the gist of the message and eager to begin the real business of writing a constitution, we left early in order to participate in the Lesbian workshop and therefore did not hear that all the workshops were cancelled. Two movement sisters still present, realizing the importance of the workshops and the need for women to talk to each other, asked the Panthers to announce a women's workshop for early the next morning. This request was denied and the women told that any such meeting would be considered a caucus outside the framework of the convention. In the light of the fact that the Panthers then announced a Yippie meeting, the sisters realized that women who dare to identify with their own oppression were felt by the Panthers to be a serious threat.

That afternoon the Lesbian workshop produced a paper on demands that were born out of an awareness of our oppression and that were basic to gaining our freedom. At the same time, the agenda committee found a third world woman speaker with the requisite consciousness who was prepared to speak on the platform with Huey that evening. This woman speaker was affirmed by Panther leadership that afternoon, but later in the evening, denied access to the building by the same leadership.

Outside McGonigle Hall, New York City Lesbians sat and listened on transistor radios to Huey declaiming about the declaration of independence for Black manhood and promising to level the earth in pursuit of the goal of the dignity, glory and flowering of this same Black manhood. This was followed by a

Panther sister whose rap was totally devoid of any awareness of women's oppression and merely an echo of male Panther rhetoric. Filled with outrage, we saw clearly the pointlessness of further relationship to the sexist, manipulative Panther convention. We decided to take our experiences and conclusions to the scheduled women's meeting the next morning.

By Sunday morning, women had still not officially met together. (Although the Panthers had cancelled the Saturday workshops, a couple hundred women met out of their own need and hammered out three sets of demands.) The all-woman's meeting scheduled for Sunday at 9:00 a.m. was also cancelled by the Panthers. Saturday night, the sisters who tried to call a meeting the day before mimeographed a leaflet that documented the shit that was coming down and called for a woman's meeting at the Women's Center. However, the Panthers in response to the threat of an independent all-women's meeting, hit the streets with a flyer that the workshop on self-determination for women would become the delayed all-women's meeting. This resulted in women-identified women having to choose between making their sole contributions to the women's workshop, or lending their strength to one of the topical workshops, i.e., distribution of land, control of government, etc. This overlapping scheduling forced many women-identified women out of the mainstream of the convention in the interest of having a dialogue with sisters about women's oppression. And if you think this account of what happened is confusing, you should have experienced the reality — the reality of being fucked over by the Black Panther Party.

The Lesbians went to the Panther called meeting, because that is where most of the women went. Our intention was still to relate our experiences, raise the question of the relevance of the convention to Women's Revolution in the light of the blatant sexism of the preamble and the oppressive treatment the women were receiving. Our meeting was presided over by a Panther woman with male Panther guards ringing the room and balconies. Immediately, women began to struggle with the question of the intimidating presence of the men, but lost to the argument that they were there to protect the Panther woman. Meanwhile, across town, the gay men were meeting with another Panther woman who apparently required no such security.

As the workshop went on, a definite pattern of response and repression was observed. When demands for actions leading to the real equalization of power between the sexes undiluted and unsubverted by traditionally defined women-role concerns (i.e., the Lesbian demands), enthusiastic response of the women was met with charges of racism and bourgeois indulgence. To point out the absurdity of this, our demand for the abolishment of the nuclear family, heterosexual-role programming and patriarchy was called bourgeois and demands for 24-hour child-care centers was labelled right-on revolutionary. The women present were decidedly in need of time to continue to speak to each other, and voted for time to break into small groups around their various identifications. Male-identified Panther and YAWF women wanted to dispense with these time-consuming details and pushed for a quick drafting of a demands document arrived at by majority vote!

In spite of the blatant put-downs and manipulations, the larger group of women tried to act in their own interests, some sensing for the first time that the Panther schedule was not designed to accommodate them. But even their vote for small groups was subverted when the women running the meeting arbitrarily divided the room into quarters, effectively ending any chance for real communication.

Having done our best to communicate our consciousness to the women, and still fully aware of the irrelevance of this male-dominated militaristic hierarchical structure to our needs, the Lesbians caucused and decided to split. Part of the atmosphere that contributed to that decision was intimidation by

individual threats of violence throughout the weekend, the unnerving presence of the guards and the prevailing atmosphere of sexism. More relevant than this was our realization that our efforts would be wasted in trying to deal with men without the power to validate our demands. We had attempted to negotiate on enemy territory and found it oppressive and unworkable.

The story that unfolded after our leaving Philadelphia was told to us in New York by a beautiful Lesbian sister, who remained and followed the action. The sexist insensitivity of the Panthers obviously became apparent even to themselves. The tapes of this women's workshop, made by Newsreel and Radio Free People, were confiscated on the spot by the Panthers.

It was resolved on the floor that the Lesbian demands, which had elicited such enthusiastic response, be included in the demands paper even though we weren't present. Our sister went to the chosen demands committee and was assured that the Lesbian statement was included. That evening, at the convocation, the report from the workshop on self-determination for women was called for. Joan Bird and Mother McKeever collided mid-stage with yellow papers flying in a struggle for the microphone. Panther guards separated them, but somehow Mother McKeever grabbed the field. Now you know who Joan Bird is, but Mother McKeever is another trip entirely. A large, gray-haired, black woman, she had spent the day in attempts to harass and subvert the workshop. When women addressed their own needs, her charges of racism were the loudest. She called Lesbians "men" and tried to discredit us by appealing to old sexist hangups. After an afternoon of denunciations and harangues, this same Mother McKeever presented herself as representative of the workshop. The women who had prepared the actual demands got tacked on to the end of the program.

To put it briefly, in neither of the reports were the Lesbian demands included. Sisters who were waiting to hear them rushed forward to see what had happened, and to demand that they be read. What had happened was that someone had deleted them, but tried to appease the women with promises that they would appear in the printed copy of the workshop paper. The tragicomic compromise they made with our demands is as follows:

That women have the right to choose heterosexuality, bisexuality or homosexuality. That crash programs in the technology relevant to women be made available to them, i.e., child care.

We'd like you to realize that Lesbians and women-identified women went to this conference with no awareness of being a particular threat. The hysterical and paranoid reaction of the Panthers has helped us to realize the potency of our position as women whose primary concern is our own revolution.

This paper is a reconstruction of the experience of a group of white Lesbians at the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention and an analysis of the Women's Movement in relation to the Black Panthers. Although we recognize the difference in the black and white experiences, we are not presuming to analyze the black experience; but we cannot and will not invalidate our own experiences as women. Speaking from our guts, from the depth of our oppression, we say that the Black Panthers are sexist; that the Black Panther Party, supposedly our brothers in revolution, oppresses us is a doubly painful thing. But we will take no one's shit. And we, Revolutionary Women (as opposed to women revolutionaries) can act only from our own reality. We must, we will, make our women's revolution. No longer will we die alongside men who define our place and keep us there, whose highest flattery for us is our revolutionary wombs. Fuck that. We women of a dispersed nation will build our community, speak in a woman's language born from our woman's oppression, grow strong together and explode in our women's revolution.

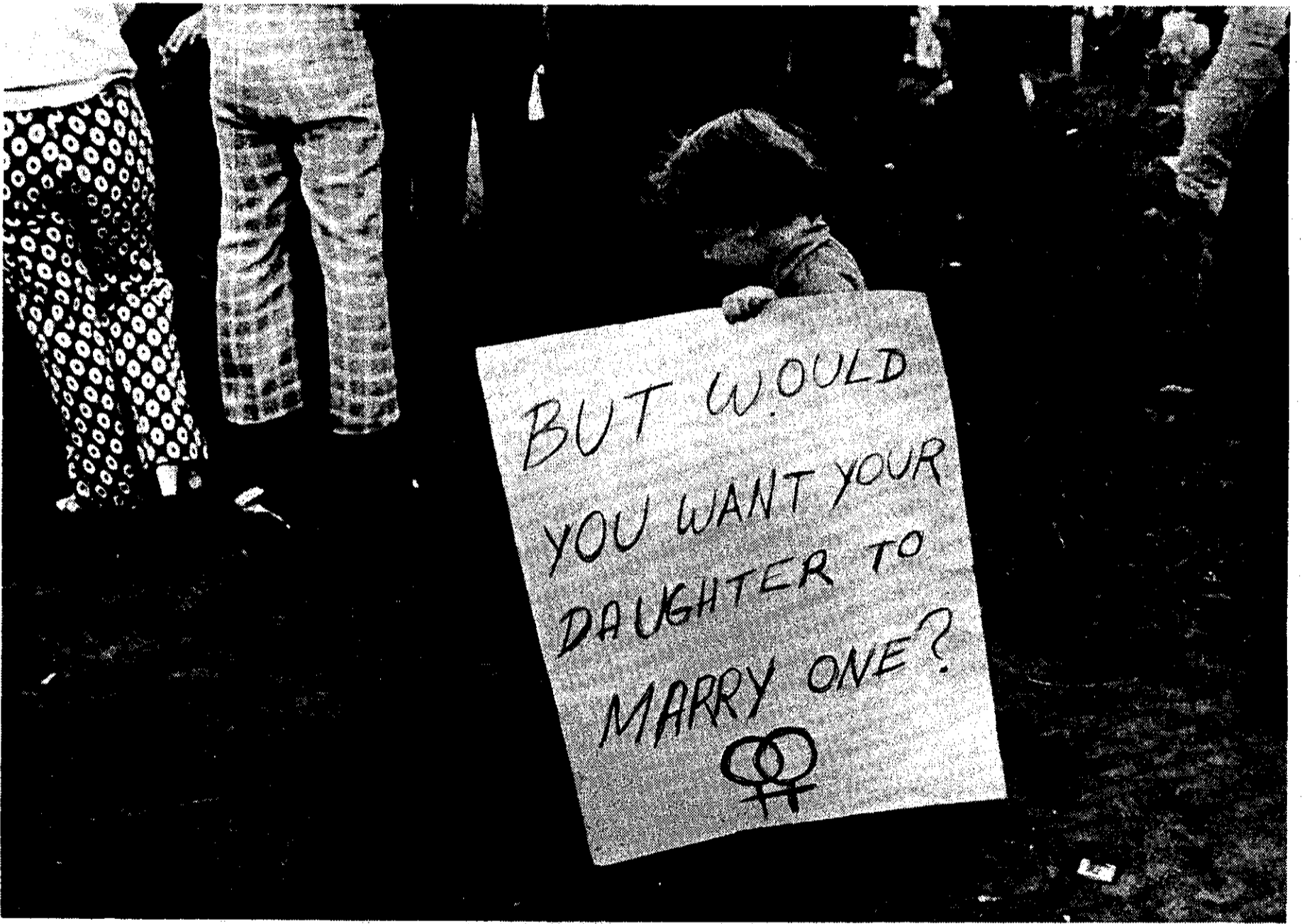


photo by Diana Davies