

Power and Politics '84

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Washington Blade News Service

MILWAUKEE — Three hundred fifty Lesbians from across the country convened here last weekend for a first-of-its kind national Lesbian conference under the sponsorship of the National Organization for Women.

The conference, January 20-22, which drew only minimal press coverage, was billed as "Power and Politics '84," but discussions throughout the weekend swept freely from politics to homophobia, racism, and even semantics. The conference schedule itself was packed with an ambitious variety of panels on such topics as "Lesbian and Gay Candidates and Campaigns," "Coming Out in NOW," "Minority Rights and Lesbian Rights," and "Recruiting Lesbians to NOW."

In addition to holding the conference to exchange ideas between NOW's national leadership and its largely visible Lesbian membership, the conference served as a symbolic gesture of NOW's "renewal of our commitment" to working for Lesbian and Gay rights, said NOW National President Judy Goldsmith in her welcoming letter to conference participants. NOW also put some teeth into that commitment by carrying out a resolution passed at its last national convention to target one state to throw NOW resources and clout behind a Gay rights bill.

The state chosen, New Jersey, was announced on Monday following the Lesbian conference. According to NOW spokeswoman Lisa Lederer, New Jersey was chosen by seven of eight members of NOW's board-appointed Conference Implementation Committee (CIC) on Lesbian rights by consensus on Monday. Lederer said she didn't know how many other states submitted proposals seeking NOW's support for their state Gay rights bill and that NOW would not be releasing a list of those proposals. She said that New Jersey was chosen for its potential for success in passing Gay Rights legislation and for the people-support available to work on its passage. Lederer said there was no budget figure yet decided for NOW's participation in the New Jersey effort, but that NOW would provide both staff time and attorneys to help in the effort in the coming year.

Allen Kratz, president of the New Jersey Lesbian and Gay Coalition, said he was "delighted" to hear of NOW's decision and said their support "will help us make a very good showing" when the proposed amendment to the state's civil rights law is introduced for the first time next month.

NOW's newly-elected executive Vice President Lois Reckitt, an open Lesbian, said, en route back to Washington from the conference, that she felt the conference "went very, very well."

"There was a lot of good dialogue and a chance to talk through some important issues," said Reckitt. "The challenge now is to go home and implement some of what the conference participants found was possible."

But while most conference participants agreed with Reckitt, there was considerable

dissension heard throughout the weekend over the conference's lack of opportunity to pass resolutions to carry to the national convention in June and over NOW's recent endorsement of former Vice President Walter Mondale for President.

In her speech at Saturday night's plenary dinner session, President Goldsmith said the endorsement of Mondale was made with "extraordinary" and "powerful consensus" by the board of directors. However, on Sunday unconfirmed reports were circulating that a petition was being prepared to have the Lesbian conference endorse Sen. Alan Cranston. Both Cranston and Mondale had booths at the conference exhibit hall.

Still other women at the conference said they were against NOW making any endorsement at all. Candace Wagner and Shelly Davis of Chicago and Ellen Haywood of New York City, who were distributing Socialist publications at a booth, said the endorsement was buying into a political party and system that does not really support Lesbian and Gay rights. But all three agreed that the conference was a positive step forward for Lesbian and Gay rights.

"It's the first real concrete step by NOW," said Davis. "It gives us more of a mandate to go back and do Lesbian rights work."

"I'm frustrated, but optimistic," said Haywood. "The vast majority of women here are frustrated that NOW is becoming partisan. NOW says 'Reagan is so bad we have to support Mondale,' but we're frustrated we don't have a real alternative yet."

Asked at a press conference whether the National Gay Task Force supported NOW's endorsement of Mondale, NGTF executive director Virginia Apuzzo replied, "NGTF supports NOW's right to endorse Walter Mondale. NGTF has been historically non-partisan." But Apuzzo added that NGTF would be deciding next month whether they, too, would break with tradition and endorse a candidate for the upcoming Democratic National Convention.

Despite the heavy emphasis on politics during the weekend conference — including passing the hat on at least three occasions to raise contributions for NOW-supported women candidates to political office — and continued pressure by Lesbians to gain more support from national NOW, the weekend was also heavily marked by enthusiastic, frank, and serious discussions among participants on specific strategies for combating homophobia and gaining Lesbian and Gay rights both within and outside of NOW.

"Never censor Gay and Lesbian Visibility at NOW events," advised Mary Rooker, the Lesbian and Gay rights coordinator for the Maryland NOW chapter. "Our invisibility is the worst thing holding us back." Rooker, a member of the Southern Prince George's County NOW, spoke at a panel on "Recruiting Lesbians to NOW."

"You can't leave too much in the hands of partisan politics," said Pat Maher of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, referring to the still unsuccessful New York City Gay rights bill. Maher, speaking at a panel entitled "Work With Public Officials," said that "documenting discrimination is really, really, critical" to gaining passage of Gay rights legislation. "People don't believe Gays and Lesbians are discriminated against or that it destroys our lives."

"Action on Lesbian rights has to begin to take place on the chapter level," said Kathy Webb, NOW National Secretary and former

president of the Arkansas Gay Rights organization. Webb spoke at a panel on "Where Lesbianism and Feminism Meet."

In addition to workshops, participants heard from a number of women leaders within the Lesbian and Gay movement. In the opening plenary session, openly Lesbian state representative Karen Clark of Minnesota warned that it was important to become "independent as Lesbians, but not isolated as Lesbians." Clark pointed to the recent attempt in Minneapolis to enact an anti-pornography law. The bill passed the City Council, but was vetoed by the mayor and became "a heated issue in our city," said Clark.

"People started saying, 'That's just a bunch of Lesbians behind the bill,'" said Clark. "'Bunch of Lesbians' was a way to discredit the bill and make its success a lot harder."

Speaking to the Saturday night plenary dinner session, NGTF's Apuzzo blasted President Reagan for, among other things, "attempting to rewrite the civil rights laws by changing the definition of discrimination."

"We have to educate and coax all of those who have given up on this system," urged

Apuzzo. "If we make the effort, we can make the difference."

Apuzzo's speech was interrupted with sustained applause and cheers when she referred to NOW's sometime reputation for wanting to keep Lesbians out of sight, saying, "We are not any organization's nasty little secret any more."

Gwenn Craig, co-chair of the National Association of Gay and Lesbian Democratic Clubs and an openly Lesbian delegate to the 1980 Democratic National Convention, picked up an Apuzzo's comments about the struggle of Lesbians within NOW.

Craig said that in 1971, Lesbians were "an embarrassment and a menace" to NOW. "Some Lesbians left NOW for the good of the women's movement," said Craig. Craig's speech, too, was interrupted with applause when she said that today, "We are in the ranks of NOW, we are in the halls of Congress, we are on the professional tennis courts."

"We are defeated in the end," said Craig, "if our ambassadors are closeted. The price of maintaining our secret is maintaining silence."

Big Brother has been watching gays and lesbians for decades

Big Brother has been watching gay men and lesbians for decades, says Dan Siminoski, who recently filed for release of FBI gay surveillance documents under the Freedom of Information Act.

Siminoski was told that the documents he requested would "endanger the national security" if they were released, and that the public served by such a release would be "so small" that it would not be worthwhile to go through the clerical process involved.

It is time for the gay movement to join with other human rights groups and become a part of the human rights cause, Siminoski said. With this influence, gays can impress upon the government that they will no longer

tolerate being spied upon and harassed.

Gays are paying taxes to be spied upon by their government, and that government is not allowing those persons to see the information that is being accumulated about them.

Siminoski, who gave the keynote address at the Second Annual Gay Press Association's Regional Conference in Houston in late January, specifically pointed to the plight of Houston's lesbian and gay community. Houston's police department recently arrested 46 men in raids on gay bars and bookstores and the police have admitted compiling a "faggot file" on members of the community.

Siminoski is the plaintiff in *Siminoski vs. the FBI*, the case filed on his behalf by the California Civil Liberties Union last October which arose when he requested release of FBI documents for book research, "including but not limited to" 13 gay organizations nationwide which the bureau has been tracking since the early 1950s.

Siminoski solicits individual support for the ACLU case. Requests for information and contributions should be addressed to the National Gay Archives Freedom of Information Fund, 1654 North Hudson Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90028.

Comic strip character forced to stay in closet.

Are readers of the 63-year-old comic strip "Winnie Winkle" able to deal with Winnie's son Billy coming out?

"No," say editors of the New York News and the Chicago Tribune.

The story line, scheduled to begin on Christmas Day, was dropped three months earlier after advance strips were sent to the News and Tribune by the Tribune Company Syndicate.

In the abandoned story line, Billy was to announce that he and friend Russ Miller were lovers. Winnie gets upset, but loves Billy anyway. Instead, in the episodes which actually ran, Billy announced his engagement to an older woman with children.

"I thought it was inevitable that homosexuality was going to be brought out in a comic strip, and I wanted to be the front-runner," said Henry Raduta, who took over writing the strip 25 years ago.

A spokesman for the New York News said that the News may have run a strip like "Doodlesbury" with a gay theme but indicated that the subject might "not necessarily sit well" with the older audience which reads "Winnie Winkle."