

Women workers and unionists demand job equality

by Mary Ann Curtis

Winning justice for all workers through united labor defense of discrimination victims was the theme of a practical conference for union and working women held in November at the University of Washington in Seattle.

The conference, entitled "Breaking the Barriers of Job Discrimination," attracted more than 130 working women, unionists, and anti-discrimination activists representing over 25 unions. Participants came from as far away as Portland, San Francisco and Pittsburgh, PA to exchange information, share skills and experience, and discuss strategies to combat job discrimination and advance workplace rights.

In three general sessions, participants not only demonstrated their commitment to rally the labor movement in defense of its most discriminated-against sectors — women, people of color, the disabled, and sexual minorities — they learned how to build new alliances to make that possible.

Fourteen workshops provided practical information on organizing unions and employee groups, outlined strategies for combating specific forms of job bias, including discrimination based on race, disability, sexual orientation, and political ideology, and provided updates on the setbacks and advances in equal employment law.

Participants emerged from the conference invigorated with ideas for organizing against all forms of workplace bias. Many stated that they were doubly inspired by the real-life examples of women who are fighting and winning discrimination grievances and suits across the country.

Crossroads for labor

In her keynote speech on "Labor's Stake in Combating Discrimination on the Job," Clara Fraser, a leading figure in the feminist and socialist movements and victor in a landmark free speech and discrimination suit against

Seattle City Light, said, "We are here to affirm that, despite the conservative climate and miserable machinations of the bosses, red-necks, venal politicians, and some upwardly bound careerists of both sexes and all races, we can win! And we have won! Anybody who proclaims their right to be themselves and still hold a job and be treated equally has a chance in this country — if you organize."

Most discrimination victims face the bosses alone, she added, abandoned by the bureaucratically-stifled and rightward-moving rights agencies, civil rights movements, and many unions. Therefore, "we must prepare to turn unions into fierce advocates for and defenders of their most oppressed and harassed members, or unions will swiftly become incapable of representing anybody."

"Labor is at a crossroads," Fraser wound up. "It faces an historic choice between the dead hand of the past that stifles the living and the wave of the future, which, quiet as it's kept, is us." Discrimination will cease "if we all stand tough and together whenever any union activist or human rights advocate or political dissident or whistle-blower gets fired or demoted or harassed for speaking out or demanding their rights."

Public organizing — the key to victory

Merle Woo of San Francisco, a feminist writer and member of the American Federation of Teachers, spoke on "Forging New Alliances in the Battle for Justice on the Job" in her keynote address. Woo won an unprecedented sex, race, political ideology, and sexual orientation discrimination suit against the University of California at Berkeley earlier this year after being fired from her lecturer's position in Asian American Studies in 1982. Woo explained that the key to her victory lay in organizing a diverse defense committee dedicated to the principle of free speech and to bringing all the issues surrounding her firing to as wide a public as possible.

The defense committee, Woo said, used every available avenue — state and federal courts, the union grievance procedure, public events, and the press — to prove that UC had terminated her because she was an Asian American feminist, lesbian, and radical who dared to openly criticize management.

Woo said, "We showed that management

must be governed by constitutional principles and that free speech and association for teachers, staff, and students does not stop at the schoolhouse gate." Community activists have something to teach labor, she continued — that *we* have to organize in our own defense around *all* the issues, with publicity and militance, to win.

Where unions stand

In a panel discussion entitled, "Discrimination is a Labor Issue," three union activists explained their unions' track records on countering discrimination and presented strategies for strengthening the anti-bias fight.

Cheryl Peoples, Equity Committee Chair and Executive Board member of the Communication Workers of America (CWA), Local 9102, said that by setting up an equity committee to address discrimination on the job

and inside the union, Local 9102 has begun to demonstrate to its members that countering racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination is the way to build solidarity within, and thus strengthen, the union.

Nemesio Domingo, founding member of the Alaska Cannery Workers Association and plaintiff in one of the Association's race discrimination suits against the Alaska fish packing industry, described ILWU Local 37, Cannery Workers Union's battle to end inequity between white, Filipino, and Alaskan Native workers in working and housing conditions. He discussed how the suits against the industry have forced improvements in hiring practices and wage rates and also sparked a movement to rid the union of internal corruption.

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PHOENIX RISING presents

Men's Therapy Group. Meeting every Thursday evening, this is an on-going therapy/support group for gay men. Led by Bob Weinreich, PhD. Sliding scale from \$7.50.

Women's Therapy Group. Meeting Thursday evenings from 8:30 to 10:00 p.m. for eight weeks, this group will be for working on goals for change. Starting date March 7. Led by Liz Webb, PhD, and Barbara Isaacs, PhD. Sliding scale from \$7.50.

Incest Survivors Group. Meeting Monday evenings from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. for ten weeks, this group will offer a safe place to explore unfinished issues from childhood sexual abuse. Starting date March 5. Led by Kao Rhiannon, PHD, and Patt Chance, MSW. Sliding scale from \$7.50.

Support Group for Partners of Incest Survivors. Meeting Tuesday evenings from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. for eight weeks, this group will offer an opportunity to share common concerns and relationship issues. Starting date March 6. Led by Kao Rhiannon, PhD. Sliding scale from \$7.50.

Tuesday Night Program. Beginning again January 22, our para-professional counselors lead you for eight weeks in personal growth activities to help you learn more about yourself. For both men and women. Sliding scale from \$3.50.

Safe-Sex Practices Workshop. Saturday, January 26, from 1:00 to 3:30 p.m. We will explore getting your sexual needs met in a safe yet satisfying way. For men only. Led by Bob Weinreich, PhD, and Bob DeWalt, MA. No charge.

Lesbian Couples Workshop: Enhancing Your Sexual Relationship. Saturday, February 9, from 9 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., this workshop will focus on enhancing partnerships and keeping communication open with regard to issues of intimacy. Confidentiality will be respected. Led by Kao Rhiannon, PhD. Sliding scale from \$25.00.

Pre-Orgasmic Group for Women. This group will help you find solutions in a safe, supportive arena. Led by Stevie Newcomer, MSW. This group will begin when full. Sliding scale from \$7.50.

To register, call 223-8299

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