New directions for Women

VOLUME 18 NUMBER 2 MARCH/APRIL 1989

Women Taught to Act in Own Behalf

WICKIE STAMPS

For an 80s organization, Women for Economic Justice (WEJ) evokes the 60s. They still practice grassroots organizing, preach empowerment and relentlessly envision a politicized working-class women's community as central to women's liberation.

But this should come as no surprise. From the start, WEJ has been a renegade. Its ancestor, the Women's Commission, was born under Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis and was subsequently booted out of its state position by the man who defeated him, the infamous Edward J. King, governor during the four years before Dukakis' re-election. King was none too tickled when this passel of feminists stirred up a fuss about his workfare program, a plan that would have forced welfare recipients into low-skill jobs in exchange for their stipends. Aptly renaming themselves the Women's Commission in Exile, these women refused to be silenced. Through statewide coalition work, predominantly with the Up To Poverty Campaign, they fought hard for the rights of poor women.

According to activist and WEJ board member Nancy Ryan, the Commission women were "politicized" by this struggle. With the gubernatorial re-election of Dukakis, the Women's Commission in Exile could have gone back under the State's wing. Yet they chose an independent path, preferring to maintain their commitment to low wage and welfare women. They even took a new name, Women for Economic Justice.

This 10-year odyssey has led WEJ deeper into poor communities—a path diametrically opposed to many other community groups. Ryan has watched them throughout their twists and turns. "WEJ started in the State House and year by year is inching its way into working class communities and communities of color." "The women who began WEJ wanted it to be a multicultural organization," says WEJ executive director Barbara Neely. "We accomplished this by outreach to women of color and by hiring women who themselves have had low incomes, who understand that the only difference between most advocates and community women working in low-wage jobs is information and time."

Self-Help

WEJ never wavers on one point; the voice and agenda of low-wage and welfare women remains at the forefront. Organizers' first agenda item is to inform women that WEJ has no agenda. "From what we see it's been a long time since anyone has gone out and talked to low income women and women of color about what they think," says Neely. "There's a lot of fury and indignation out there and sharp, gut analysis about what is going on in society. We found that women become activists on their own behalf when they have the necessary information, opportunity and help in organizing. In actuality, what you are supposed to be doing is working yourself out of a job, moving society to the point where folks like me and organizations like this are no longer necessary."

Volunteers, vital to this ambitious program, are attracted by WEJ's community organizing tactics. And where does WEJ find willing hands? "We don't," says Neely, "they find us . . . there are a lot of folks who died in the 70s, who lay down to rest or were brought to their knees. They are now re-emerging." Neely comments on how empowerment underpins their work: "We tell staff and volunteers that you are getting ready to go and talk to women who are survivors, women who can do things you can't even imagine. If they can survive the poverty in this society there is a strong

Ellen Shub

ELBA CRESPO AND BARBARA NEELY OF Women for Economic Justice.

likelihood they could run the country."

As executive director, Barbara Neely is a dynamic influence in this women's organization. No stranger to political and community organizing, she cut her political teeth in the Black liberation movement. She helped shape **Southern Exposure**, a progressive Southern journal, and later fielded radio broadcasts for the Africa News Service. As a community organizer she's well versed in poor women's oppression. She found that the priorities of poor women cross many lines. "The problems are the same in low income working class communities whether they are Black or white: drugs, teenage pregnancy, rape, street and family violence and lack of economic power."

As a woman of color, she has inherited a tradition of working for social change and neighborhood organizing. "There is no way to split up what you do from who you are. If in order to survive you've got to open up society, then that's what you work on. I come from some extremely strong women who don't make any bones about that. They are all leaders in their families. I grew up in poverty with women who had to do everything, who are clever, smart and capable. In this society if you don't have any money you've got to be all these things or you're dead from starvation. Now when I go home and visit my mother I see the way those women manage the block; everybody's children get fed. They share what they have. They find ways of helping others that are not insulting. As a women's community these are things we need to be doing."

A Multi-Tactic Organization

Working hard not to duplicate other organizations' efforts, WEJ uses coalition-building, demonstrations, lobbying and education to advance the agenda of low income women. In 1987 they participated in a demonstration protesting the Boston Park Plaza's declaration that hotel maids put down their mops, pick up rags and clean the hotel's bathrooms on their hands and knees. This spring—through a community network and leadership conference—WEJ will work with low wage earning women and welfare recipients on issues of social and economic justice.

Although focused primarily on domestic concerns, international issues are clearly on WEJ's worksheet. Barbara Neely holds that as U.S. corporations "run away in search of cheaper labor markets, our problems as women are becoming internationalized. As poor women in the United States lose their jobs, poor women globally are being tracked into low wage work. WEJ will turn to international development models and begin to assess "how women survive in systems that clearly do not intend for us to do so." Through workshops and literature, their economic literacy project demystifies economics for immigrant women, female union members and women in prisons. Their forthcoming pamphlet, **Women's Poverties: Race, Class and the Feminization of Poverty**, lays out the economic forces confronting women from diverse ethnic communities.

Undaunted by Conservatism

Growing conservatism and an ebb in activism are temporary sticking points in WEJ's work. Neely has found that "it's somehow tougher today. When you had the mobilizing effect of the civil rights movement, the Black nationalist movement and the emerging women's movement, it was easier to get out there and organize. But as the economic and political climate turns against you, you have to really be serious about wanting change for low-income women."

WEJ's blossoming Family Policy/Education Project responds to the right's chronically narrow definition of the family. Neely asserts that not only have the "terms of the debate around the family been set by the conservatives, but family policies affecting the poor are ghettoized and stigmatized." WEJ's community forums challenge neighborhoods to initiate dialogue on numerous points: What myths color the right wing's definition of family? Which types are we told are unacceptable? How do we set our political priorities in this morass?

"We deserve the right to stick our nose anywhere low-income women are being affected, including into the eye of the President," asserts Neely. "That is our political task."

For more information contact Women for Economic Justice, 145 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02111. (617) 426-9734.

Wickie Stamps is a freelance writer and collective member at Gay Community News in Boston.