



THE HOUSTON WOMEN'S CONFERENCE: A Victory for U.S. Imperialism Defend It or Defeat It

The white left and the white women's movement have been almost unanimous in describing the National Women's Conference held in Houston on November 18-20, 1977 as a victory for women's liberation. They have said that the Conference was a turning point, a sign of the movement's power and maturity.

We reject this view. Houston was a turning point, but one that clearly marked the nearly total alliance of the white women's movement with U.S. imperialism and white supremacy.

The struggle of the Vietnamese people and of Black people here in the US in the 1960's and early 1970's heightened every contradiction, widened every crack in US society. A spontaneous movement of white women developed to fight for women's liberation and against male supremacy. It changed the consciousness of millions of people and has been a powerful social force in our lifetime.

From its beginnings, though it contained two contending views of its leadership and goals. The revolutionary struggle for the liberation of women is led by the national

liberation struggles of Asia, Africa, Latin America and of oppressed nations within the borders of the US. They have clearly targeted the main enemy of women as US imperialism, and the way to liberation as its total overthrow. And we have seen the dramatic changes that successful wars of national liberation have meant in the lives of women -- in Vietnam, in China, in Mozambique and elsewhere.

A small but significant white anti-imperialist women's movement arose in response to that leadership. It attempted to take on the responsibility of organizing white women in revolutionary solidarity with the national liberation struggles, and with the just demands of women. It took up the struggle against the dominant white supremacy of the women's movement. But this sector of the women's movement was set back, as the movement overwhelmingly rejected revolutionary Third World leadership. The struggle for women was defined as a struggle for equal access to the power and privileges of imperial society -- equality for white women at the expense of Third World nations whose oppression and superexploitation is the foundation of this system.

We present this document as a direct challenge to the view of the Houston Conference that has been shared by much of the white left, the white women's movement and the imperialists. And we present it as a challenge to those individuals and organizations who see the Houston Conference for what it is, to take on the task of building a revolutionary women's movement within the white oppressor nation that follows the leadership of the national liberation struggles.

The Houston Conference marked a profound defeat for the revolutionary struggle of women worldwide for their liberation. If we learn its lessons and understand the challenge it presents, we can fight to turn defeat into victory.

The United Nations declared 1961-1970 as the First Development Decade, to 'equalize' development between richer and poorer nations. In fact, the US used this in their neo-colonial strategy for the continued oppression of Third World nations. The US strategy was forced urbanization, the breaking down of agricultural economies, and the intensified extraction of raw materials. Nations once agriculturally rich were turned into cash crop economies, and made dependent on US imports for food.

Urbanization meant that men were forced into the cities to find work, or forced into semi-slave labor. No such jobs were made available to women, who remained on the land. At the same time, there was an increased push for birth control and sterilization of women. 'It is easier to kill a guerilla in the womb than in the mountains,' Che Guevara said. This was the strategy of US imperialism to increase its superprofits and crush the rise of resistance: the break-down of family structures, the disruption of the life and culture of whole nations, population control - genocide.

But by the mid sixties, this strategy needed to be changed. The victories of the Vietnamese people had thrown the US into crisis. It was a weakened power, with national liberation on the ascendancy worldwide. Imperialism needed to seize full control of the land to extract more resources and to attack the continuity of culture and nationhood. The land is a base from which to fight; the struggles of oppressed nations have always been for the land and liberation, for the power to control the land and its resources, the human wealth of the nation, its history and its future. For imperialism to retain its domination, the women had to be moved off of the land.

As stated by Pat Hutar, head of the US delegation to the United Nations International Women's Year Conference, '...full and equal participation of women in the development process can make the difference between success or failure of development itself.'

The root of the oppression of Third World women is attributed by the imperialists to the fact that men are brought into industrial production while women are left behind. In the name of women's liberation, women are uprooted from the land and forced into starvation or prostitution. Birth control and sterilization programs are accelerated--but this time the new centers recruit Third World women to run them, under the guise of 'sensitivity' but actually to maintain a more sophisticated 'cover' for genocide.

Imperialism's Strategy

The UN General Assembly declared 1975 to be International Women's Year, with the goals of 'Equality,

Development and Peace.' The US delegation to the UN proposed that a world conference be held in Mexico City in June, 1975. This proposal was part of the overall US world strategy called 'International Cooperation,' that is, the crushing of all wars in resistance to colonialism and neocolonialism in the name of 'peace.' The strategy included: 1. Building counter-revolutionary 'peace movements' and women's movements under the leadership of the petit-bourgeoisies of the oppressed nation in places like Chile and Ireland. These movements fight for the maintenance of the existing system of brutal oppression. The only true movement for peace is the movement to destroy that system by any means necessary. 2. Holding white women in the advanced imperialist nations up as the leadership of the worldwide struggle for women's liberation and peace. 3. Posing the main obstacle to the liberation of Third World women to be the men of their nations (and a few thoughtless men in the Agency for International Development) and that therefore Third World women have more in common with white women than their own peoples. 4. Reinstating birth control and sterilization in Third World nations in the name of freeing women.

The implementation of the US' Mexico City strategy was partially blocked by the national liberation struggles and the socialist countries who exposed it as an imperialist sham. The Tribune, a parallel conference of Third World nations and non-governmental organizations challenged the 'official' conference with the argument that the oppression of women of the Third World can only be accomplished with the liberation of



FRELIMO women's detachment in Mozambique



Vietnamese women rebuild their nation

their whole nations. President Echeverria of Mexico opened the 'official' IWY Conference by calling for a 'New International Economic Order.' It was his position, and that of most Third World nations at the Tribune, that the development of women cannot be separated from the development, systematic underdevelopment, of their nation. Third World nations at the IWY Conference and at the Tribune also fought for and won the passage of a resolution identifying Zionism as racism, over the strong opposition of the US. The US could not control the Conference, but it did manage to engineer the passage of some resolutions. These included a resolution calling for the declaration of the Decade of Women: Equality, Development, Peace. In fact, the continued existence of US imperialism marks the decade as one of oppression, exploitation and imperialist war.

The Houston Conference

The Houston Conference was to be the major US observance of the Decade of Women. The US State Department and the US Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year created several committees to prepare for Houston. The most significant was the 'International Interdependence Committee.'

The International Interdependence Committee was an argument to women of the US that they are the 'only new force for change' in a world beset by crisis, the threat of war and hunger. The Committee argued that all nations are interdependent – an admission by the US that imperialism is a worldwide system based on colonial domination. The road to change is that of equal participation by women in the international strategies of US imperialism: foreign 'aid,' population control, military occupation. The Committee is the essence of imperialism's strategy for white women, to make them equal partners in privilege and domination.

The US planned the Houston Conference very carefully. It had learned a hard lesson in Mexico City about what could be expected: the united resistance of Third World peoples. The Houston Conference was planned by a Commission appointed by President Ford, and then a second Commission was established when Carter took office. The Commission's members included four members of Congress, a member of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, and one governor.

The actual planning of the Conference was taken care of by the Secretariat and its staff, both appointed by the Commission and housed in the State Department with full use of its facilities. Under Ford, this group included two members 'on loan' from the US Information Agency; six from the State Department; two from the Justice Department; and one each from the Defense Supply Agency, the Federal Reserve Bank, and the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA).

The Secretariat, clearly an arm of the imperialist state, wrote the National Plan of Action, the main working paper of the Conference. This is the "victory" for the women's movement that is trumpeted by most of the white left and the women's movement – a state-planned, state-run conference.

The National Plan of Action

The National Plan of Action represented the "left" position on the floor of the Houston Conference, while the Ku Klux Klan, Right-to-Life and the Mormon Church represented the right-wing "minority" position. The Mississippi delegation to the Houston Conference received a great deal of publicity as a consolidated Klan delegation. But the media never explained that there were nine other consolidated right-wing delegations as well as half of Hawaii and half of Pennsylvania that voted as a bloc. Some delegations were controlled by the Mormons and some by Right-to-Life, but their disagreements were



*Recruiting white women for U.S. Marshalls:
Propaganda from Houston Conference*

clearly insignificant. And whatever disagreements existed between the right and the women's movement as represented at Houston were also clearly secondary to their united position that the right-wing has a "right" to fully participate in determining the direction of the women's movement. The majority of delegates at the Conference defended this right -- for groups that fight for white nationalism and fascism with lynch ropes, shotguns, that fight against the human rights of two thirds of the world's people.

The presence of the Klan and other right-wing forces served two purposes. First, it allowed the imperialist state and its National Plan to be portrayed as the defenders of women's liberation. All of the liberal forces could unite against the Klan, even as they approved the new imperialist strategy for international aggression and domination. Secondly, it gave the right-wing a legitimate platform from which to organize women. There was no need on their part to stage massive counter-demonstrations outside the Conference, because they were speaking at the microphones inside.

From the experience and publicity around Houston, one would think that the primary thing about the Klan and its right-wing allies is that they oppose the Equal Rights Amendment. In reality, they stand for white supremacy, and the systematic murder of Third World and particularly Black people. When forces in the white left see Houston as a victory because the Klan was booed, they accept organized white supremacy as an insignificant lunatic fringe. Klan terror will not be stopped by polite disapproval. That the Klan was legitimized at Houston exposes the alliance of the "liberals", the white left, the white women's movement with organized fascist forces.

The National Plan of Action included 26 points to be presented to Carter as proposed legislation. The National Commission had presented the Plan to state meetings held in preparation for the Houston Conference, and it was for the most part passed in toto.

A careful campaign called Pro-Plan was orchestrated to ensure the smooth passage of the National Plan without any significant changes. The squashing of debate and rigid procedure was justified by the threat of right-wing disruptions; "unity" against the right was to be had at all costs.

It is within this context that Third World women challenged the perfunctory three paragraphs in the Plan on "Minority Women," and fought for a substitute plank. Caucuses of Third World women met to formulate a plank that spoke more truthfully about their oppression. The Conference Planners and Pro-Plan leaders were forced to accept the plank under the threat of rebellion; they had learned the lesson of Mexico City well.

The substitute plank presented by the United Minority Caucus was the most progressive aspect of the Houston Conference -- but the state never fully relinquished its control. The final draft of the plank was written by Gloria Steinem, exposed as a CIA agent within the women's movement from her days in the National Student Association. And while the plank did put forward the just demand of sovereignty for Native Americans, it also stated that "Puerto Rican women are part of the United States and want to be treated as such." This pro-imperialist statement was never agreed to by the women in the Puerto Rican delegation and stands

in direct contradiction to the struggle of the Puerto Rican people for independence. Moreover, the Conference planners used their endorsement of the United Minority Caucus to prevent the case of Lolita Lebron from being brought to the floor. (Lolita Lebron is a Puerto Rican nationalist revolutionary who is a prisoner-of-war at Alderson, West Virginia for her participation in an armed attack on the US Congress. The action was taken by five Nationalists in order to bring the case of the colonization of Puerto Rico by the US to world attention.)

The planks on "Minority Women," "Reproductive Freedom," and "Sexual Preference" were three of the most controversial areas in the entire Conference because the right-wing found them the most offensive. All three were passed overwhelmingly, even though the right-wing was guaranteed access to the perfunctory floor debate.

The plank on Reproductive Freedom includes a token mention of sterilization -- but it is weaker than any proposed legislation that has called for a waiting period between the signing of a consent form and the operation itself, as well as for counselling of Third World women under the control of their communities. The national plank, in fact, call for no protective legislation at all. In essence, the consent form is reduced to protection for the state rather than for Third World women, children and their nations.

The plank dealing with Sexual Preference call for an end to discrimination against homosexuals, an end to penal codes prohibiting homosexuality, and an end to the denial of child custody on the basis of the parent being gay. The passage of this plank appears to be a progressive move, but it must be viewed in the whole context of the Houston Conference. In order to organize white women and the white women's movement to be an active participant in colonial oppression and racist attacks, to aid imperialism in its strategy, some concessions must be made. White gay people may be



U.S. Border Patrol
Klan allies in
defending the empire
Recruitment pamphlet
from Houston Conference

allowed to rise, if they will do so on the backs of Third World peoples. The implications of the passage of this plank were best explained by Jean O'Leary of the National Gay Task Force, a Commissioner of the Houston Conference and the main manipulator of the plank: "We are now not only in the mainstream, but we will help to determine its course."

Another important plank concerned violence against women and children. Its passage licensed US imperialism to heighten its assault on Third World families in the name of women's liberation. There was a fight at the Conference to put the financial burden for the protection of women and children on the state, while political control of projects would be held by the community. This was defeated, and the plank that was ultimately approved called for even greater state intervention and power. It was recommended that the state have even more power to take children away from their families because of an "unhealthy environment." US imperialism, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the welfare system and family courts kidnap thousands of Native American, Black and other Third World children and place them in state-controlled institutions or in white foster homes. This is one tactic in a strategy of destroying national identity and power among the oppressed nations, and it was legitimized and encouraged at the Houston Conference.

The proposal that exposed the essence of the Houston Conference was the one on "International Affairs," which called for recruiting women into the State Department and the Department of Defense, into the US Information Agency and the Agency for International Development; for women to serve as ambassadors, board members of international organizations, and as members of US delegations to the UN. It urges the full participation of women in foreign policy decision-making. There is a clause urging AID to promote the integration of women into the development plans of their nations -- in other words, promote equal access for women to the neocolonial elite.

Chicana women from Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico



Pamphlet distributed at Conference

The White Left and THE White Women's Movement

The white left and the white women's movement overwhelmingly saw the Conference as a victory. It was described as the response of imperialism to the growing threat of the women's movement; as a significant advance for democratic rights for women; and as a diverse gathering that showed the women's movement to be a strong progressive force. Off Our Backs, a women's newspaper, stated that women "from 18 to 64, from welfare households and from mansions, gay and straight, mothers and non-mothers....of every skin color....discovered that they could (mostly) work together, that more connected them than separated them." This view is wrong, because there is no unity between white and Third World women, between oppressor and oppressed, that is not built on the terms of the struggles of oppressed peoples for their liberation. The Houston Conference was clearly built on the terms of US imperialism.

Majority Report, a women's weekly in New York City, saw Houston as an unsuccessful attempt to co-opt a successful and potentially explosive" movement. The white women's movement has been "successful" primarily in building an alliance with imperialism against the revolutionary movements worldwide for liberation. And the state certainly didn't fail in its effort to seize the leadership of the women's movement. This was less a case of co-optation than an "official" endorsement of the dominant white supremacist politics and direction of the white women's movement. Worker's World Party headlined an article in its newspaper "Klan Routed in Houston", referring to a demonstration against the Klan in which 75 women, many of them Third World, fought 25 members of the Christian Legal Defense League (a Klan front organization). We fully support their actions - but this action hardly "routed" the Klan, when inside the Conference they were a legitimate "minority" tendency among women. Houston showed once again that the Klan is not a tiny bunch of fanatics, but rather the militant leadership of white supremacy, of white people in general.

The Bay Area Prairie Fire Organizing Committee saw the conference as an imperialist response to the growing threat of the women's movement. That threat is illustrated, as they saw it, by "thousands of women, led by caucuses of Third World women and of lesbians, who gave tremendous affirmation and support on an unprecedented level for the rights of Third World women, reproductive freedom and lesbian and gay liberation." This is a lie; this did not happen. Licensing

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for my country. To
me is to love my country."
Lolita Lebron

Puerto Rican Nationalist
P.R.N. imprisoned for
armed action against
Congress in the war
for Puerto Rican
Independence



**DEFEAT US IMPERIALISM!
SMASH WHITE SUPREMACY!
BUILD THE REVOLUTIONARY
STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S
LIBERATION!**

the Bureau of Indian Affairs to kidnap even more Native American children from their nations, and urging greater access for women to jobs in the imperialist state apparatus have nothing to do with liberation.

Conclusion

There has been a struggle in the world to define the content of women's liberation. It is a struggle between US imperialism and the leading revolutionary forces, the national liberation struggles. Vietnamese women, Afrikan women in the US and in Africa, and other Third World women have asserted that the only context for women's liberation is the liberation of oppressed nations and the defeat of imperialism. There can be no liberation for women when their whole nations are enslaved; there can be no liberation for women within the system of imperialism.

Imperialism puts forward a very different view, one that is accepted in practice by most of the white left and the white women's movement. It wipes out the distinctions between women of the oppressor nation and women of the oppressed nations, and puts forward instead a common oppression and therefore a common unity of all women. It defines the leadership of the struggle for women's liberation as white women.

The collusion between the white left and the white women's movement and US imperialism continues a history of opportunism and white supremacy. That history is one of subordinating the struggles for national liberation, particularly the struggles of the Black nation, to that of the multinational working class; or of denying their existence altogether. That history is one of an alliance with imperialism in its war against Third World nations around the world and within the US borders.

US imperialism is a dying system, but it is fighting hard to consolidate white people in defense of the empire. It can make concessions to white women if those concessions will strengthen their allegiance and guarantee their support for imperialism's strategy to extract increasing profit from the Third World. The women's movement that gathered at the Houston Conference offered white women not only a bigger piece of the pie, but a greater decision-making role in how to steal it. The potential exists for something different, for a revolutionary women's movement to be built among white women. Such a movement can be built, but only if it accepts the leadership of the national liberation struggles against US imperialism.



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