

Birth of the Women's Prison Coalition
Conference Report

Over 120 women from western states met for two days to share experiences and discuss the state of the women's prison movement. The conference, which concluded months of preparation by the Santa Cruz Women's Prisoner Support Group, was held in the beautiful surroundings of Ben Lommand. The participants were impressed at the high quality of food, entertainment, and creative childcare provided by the organizers. One mother said, "I've never been to a conference before where my child wakes me up to ask if childcare has started yet,"

This historic first conference brought together ex-cons and women representing many diverse groups, Women Against Prison (Bay Area), Hands Across the Wall (Portland-Eugene), Through the Looking Glass (Seattle), Women's Prison Project (Santa Fe), Music Inside/Out (L.A.-S.F.), Alternatives to Incarceration-Parolee Support Network (Sonoma), Athena House (Santa Rosa), Women's Litigation Unit (S.F.), Prisoner's Union (S.F.), Women Fight Back **Network** (S.F.), S.F. Jail Project, August 21st Coalition and defense committees supporting Dessie Woods, Assata Shakur, and Eva Kutas.

The conference goals were to establish a strategy for women working in the women's prison movement and to set up a communication network. The format of the conference provided for intensive core group meetings, where goals were discussed, as well as workshops on such issues as Mothers in Prison, Racism, Lesbians, Alternatives, Juveniles, Organizing tactics, health care, behavior modification, and others.

The conference established a new group, The Women's Prison Coalition-Western Region, and formulated a strategy plan involving three parts,

1. Access to Prison- Program development, getting in and staying in.
2. End to construction of new prisons and jails.
- J. Organizing around special abuses--behavior modification healthcare, forced sterilization, child custody, Lesbian harassment, racism, death penalty, and political prisoners.

The last pmint was most hotly debated. A small group pushed strongly for a separation of political prisoners into a fourth catagory. There was consensus that organizing around political prisoners was necessary as a consiousness raising tool for the public (i.e. showing that prisoners are not an isolated group-them as distincs from os on the outside) and that the abuses heaped on politcal prisoners are the same as the harrassment inflicted on all prisoners. Because of this consensus it was difficult for many women to understand the inability/^{pf the entire grp}to agree on the this:partieular point of strategy. Agreement on all sides that in raality all prisoners are political prisoners because ther are victims of econmmic and social pressures, seemed to lead to a conclusion that the issue should not be separated 6rom other special abuses. The minority, however, still did not agree. The dissenters seem)ed to have an inflexible po oition developed prior to the conference, making them unwilling or unable to participate in meaningful discussion. Without denying the validity of their position, many conference participants were alienated and angered by their tactics which served to divide and to lessen the effectiveness of the conference as a whole.

A communications network will facilitate continuing communication through a newsletter and quarterly conferences. It is hoped that future meetings will not bog down in factionalism but will continue the positive outgrowth of this first conference providing support and skill' sharing to women ic¥he radical prison/criminal justice movement.

by Sally Johnson and Debra Miller
October 19, 1977

For further info.