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THE KINGSTON HOMOPHILE CONFERENCE: A REPORT

On May 22-24, '76, the Queen's Homophile Association sponsored a conference entitled "The Not-So-Invisible Woman - Lesbian Perspectives in the Gay Movement". Fifty men and forty women attended. Because the conference was open to both women and men a number of lesbian women chose not to attend. Wages Due Lesbians circulated a paper, prior to the conference, on the imperative need for lesbian autonomy in the gay movement and outlining our reasons for not sending an official delegation to the Kingston conference. This paper and a letter from GATE, were the only conference documents.

The conference was planned to take a certain direction. It was assumed, or hoped that the way to decide the relationship of women to the gay movement was to have both the women and men put forward their ideas on a lesbian perspective. But the conference took a rather historic turn in another direction.

On Saturday morning the first plenary session was held to make final decisions and approvals of the agenda, which consisted of seven workshops, only one of which was billed as "women only". Francie Wyland, from Wages Due Lesbians, put forward a motion that the women meet alone to decide the content of the agenda and the direction that we women wanted the conference to take. She asked that only the women be allowed to vote on this question because it was our decision to make.

Francie went on to say that the first question before us, as lesbian women, was our autonomy in the gay movement. That the power relation between men and women - the power that men have over us because they are in a world where men have money and women don't - doesn't disappear when the men are sleeping with each other. In fact, that power difference is even more apparent now when the cutbacks in jobs, welfare, unemployment insurance, family allowance and social services mean many women are being forced back into the closet, into relationships with men, and forced into a poverty that drastically limits the possibility of coming out.

She added that "the power of a movement for gay liberation depends on the power we build, as lesbian women, against the power that men; straight and gay, have over us. The questions we're here to sort out, the men can't help us with. They can demonstrate their solidarity with us by absenting themselves from the vote that we must take as women, to decide whether we will convene now, apart from the men, to decide what kind of conference we need. This is billed as a conference about relations between men and women in the gay movement. First we lesbian women must determine our own situation independently of the men. What we decide will then determine those relations, and the men's response to us will determine whether the gay movement stands for all our liberation or not.

At this point, amid cheers from the women, one of the men added that he would like the rest of the men to abstain from the vote, which in the end all the men did - except two who voted in support of the women meeting autonomously. The women, of course, voted to meet separately.

Reconvening without the men, the final steps to make it a women's conference were taken. We decided to meet alone for the rest of the weekend, until the end of the Sunday sessions when we would meet once

more with the men to report on our conference, and hear them report on theirs.

THE WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

The women's conference began with a discussion on autonomy and how there is a conflict of interests in the gay movement between men and women. We talked about the fact men have power over women and that this means that they may be fighting for things that don't improve our situation at all. As Marie Robertson, from Ottawa, said, "When 'sexual orientation' is put in the Human Rights Code, I'll still be a woman with no time and no money...".

Some of the women who live in smaller towns were afraid that autonomy would mean either that they remained in mixed organizations with no connection with the 'autonomous women' or that they would leave those organizations, thereby leaving the typewriters, telephones, offices, dance halls, cars and money that are necessary instruments for organizing. Others, with more experience in the gay movement, pointed out that if the three or four women in a mixed organization form an autonomous lesbian group within that organization, then they will have a much stronger voice in demanding that those resources be always at their disposal.

So, the move for autonomy, the switch from the gay movement to a lesbian movement meant something that many women had not experienced before; organizing with women to build lesbian power.

Wages Due responded to the question of how to reach out to women in their homes, suburbia, closets, with a report on how we have been organizing with straight women in the Wages for Housework Campaign, to win recognition, in the form of a wage for all women from the government, of the housework that we are all forced to do.

We spoke of how Wages Due's autonomous existence within the Campaign insured that whenever the Wages for Housework Committees speak, we speak directly to the situation of lesbian women. The women at the conference were amazed and excited to hear that most women responded to Wages Due's lesbian endorsement of the Family Allowance Petition(1) with support and understanding, saying that lesbians need the Family Allowance and wages for housework as much as the next woman. We also described how, through the petition and our endorsement, we have connected with lesbian women in shopping centres, women's groups, schools, in their homes, and wherever we've gone with the petition.

From the discussion on how Wages Due was organizing we got into a deeper exploration of the Wages for Housework perspective and why lesbian women are fighting in the campaign for the wage. We talked about why wages are the power to not have to hide our lesbianism. We want the money so that any woman can leave a marriage if she wants to. so that none of us will have to sacrifice the possibility of having children by being lesbian, and so that all women will have the power to choose whether or not to be lesbian.

We talked about how our lack of money means that we have little or no time for ourselves and no power to end the isolation, the closets, the 24-hour workday, and the poverty that we have in common with all women. Because we are all fighting against our work and for more time and more money of our own, the lesbian women in Wages Due share the

same strategy as the straight women in the Wages for Housework Campaign. And it is a lesbian strategy because it breaks our isolation and increases our power as lesbians.

Earlier, Frances Gregory, from the Wages for Housework Committee, was enthusiastically asked to stay and contribute to the discussion as a straight woman. She said that Wages for Housework doesn't white-wash the differences between straight and lesbian women, nor does it say that we are so divided that we can't make a common struggle for power. "What working with lesbian women in the campaign means to me and other straight women is more power in our own lives fighting against all the unpaid work that we're expected to do in a relationship with a man."

Some women began talking about past and present marriages and the kind of hold that the men had on them. A control not attributed to the fact that they were individually nasty men, but to the fact that men get a wage after working all day and women don't. This meant that the women could not afford the divorce that might come from telling their husbands that they were lesbian, a move that might lead to losing custody of their children.

Women started talking about what their own situations were or had been and what wages for housework would mean to them. A number of women there were stuck in marriages they couldn't afford to leave. Their anger spoke for all the women there. Others began demanding the right to be paid for what we want to do, like speaking about sexuality at women's conferences, running women's clubs, and everything else we can do when we refuse unpaid housework.

We went back to meet with the men, to report on our conference. This report was given in the form of a statement that the women had written Sunday afternoon:

"We have decided that there exists a need for an autonomous lesbian movement in Canada to fulfill our needs, and thus have formed an informal coalition. Our fight for an autonomous organization of lesbians began at this conference on Saturday morning when we women took the weekend into our own hands. We made this conference our own. However, because of the fact that a number of lesbians are isolated in small communities and feel the need for support from mixed gay movements, this autonomy in some cases will manifest itself as an independent lesbian voice from within those movements.

We realize the need to build our power as lesbian women so that we no longer subordinate our interests to those of the straight women or the men - straight or gay - and so that our lesbian sisters who are in the majority of cases still invisible to us will have the possibility of coming out.

With the awareness that many lesbian women did not attend this conference for various personal and political reasons, we have postponed the formalization of strategy proposals until we have a larger, more representative voice. To this end two lesbian conferences will be held. Wages Due Lesbians Toronto will sponsor one this summer on Lesbians and Wages for Housework, and one will take place in Ottawa next fall.

We welcome support from gay men who endorse our stand and believe that the efforts of our autonomous movement will be a positive move in strengthening the fight against oppression."

We all walked away from the conference with a new sense of power and direction. Women were saying that they could now go back to their mixed gay groups and form autonomous lesbian groups whose function would be to organize women to come to the two conferences planned for the future. We recognized the fact that there are millions of women who can't afford to come to conferences as a step out of their isolation, and millions of women who are furious with the lives we have to lead and are determined to change them. Our aim, and the organizing many of us have been doing in the Wages for Housework Campaign is to break the weakness that our isolation imposes on us and to help build a movement of women fighting together for power.

Boo Watson
Wages Due Lesbians
June 1976

- 1) The Wages for Housework Campaign launched a petition protest against the freeze in the Family Allowance and thousands of women are signing it to defend the only money that presently comes into our hands for some of the work we do in our homes.