

INTRODUCTION

As I write this introduction, I think back to the exhilarating mass challenge that met the World Trade Organization's 1999 Seattle meeting. It was an upsurge the like of which hadn't been seen since the 1960s-era revolt against the Vietnam War. The "Battle in Seattle" against global corporate rule reverberated far beyond U.S. borders and signaled growing, revitalized ferment among young people and workers. Once again, it was cool to be young, radical, in sync with political events, and involved in changing the world!

It is to this new wave of rebels and revolutionaries that *The Radical Women Manifesto* will speak most directly, offering a cutting-edge guide for their search to build and sustain a movement for redesigning society.

Some may be surprised at that statement, since Radical Women (RW), founded in Seattle in 1967, is older than many of these young activists! But consider: out of the profusion of women's liberation groups — consciousness-raising circles, utopian collectives, and action coalitions — that spanned the political spectrum of the 1960s and early '70s, only Radical Women has kept alive the militant spirit of feminist rebellion. And Radical Women has not merely survived, but dramatically changed the political landscape.

Why have we had such an impact? Precisely by being audacious, multiracial, queer and straight, socialist feminist advocates for the overthrow of capitalism! Precisely by em-

bracing a theory that explains why war, environmental devastation, and all forms of oppression are the order of the day under a system run for private profit. And precisely by, on the organizational front, having a democratic structure that enables us to act swiftly and decisively when it matters most.

When I first met Radical Women in 1972, the *Manifesto* took up only two mimeographed pages, yet it already encapsulated Radical Women's core beliefs on the cause of, and cure for, women's oppression. It described the origin of patriarchy in the rise of private property. And it explained that women's emancipation could only be achieved through socialism — which for its part, could only be won by a movement of the most oppressed, with women, especially women of color, playing a defining role. These were heady and subversive concepts — and they still are today!

That first *Manifesto* was like a lifeline to me, because it wove together all the diverse threads of my political awakening. I had become an anti-capitalist through my experiences in the movement against the war in Vietnam and a feminist in reaction to the sexism of my New Left "brothers." I had stood in solidarity with the race freedom struggles of Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, and the United Farm Workers Union. As a student at Cornell University in 1969, I joined hundreds of students, faculty and staff in supporting a courageous building occupation by Black students, which developed into an act of armed self-defense against racist white fraternity thugs and culminated in an uprising against the college administration by 10,000 students. When I worked at the Shelterhalf, an antiwar coffeehouse for soldiers in Tacoma, Washington, some of my cohorts were wrestling with their sexual identity and would soon number among the Northwest's earliest gay liberationists. Grappling with all these different issues, I and many others were rushing around in ceaseless, urgent activity but toward no coherent solution — a sure recipe for demoralization and burnout.

Sex — race — homophobia — war — imperialism — capital-

ism: no one I knew put all these elements together until I met Radical Women.

Radical Women not only connected these questions on paper, but in the streets as well — with chutzpah, humor, zest and *effectiveness*, no less. I joined up on the spot and gained as my reward a life filled with stimulating ideas and the satisfaction of having taken part in the panoramic events of our times. Only radical activism can provide this rich recompense, and I heartily recommend it.

HISTORY AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Radical Women Manifesto encapsulates the organization's *political theory*. You, of course, are also curious about what we have *done*. So it is my pleasure to present a whirlwind chronicle of Radical Women itself. Fasten your seat belts!

FOUNDING MOTHERS

Radical Women emerged in Seattle, Washington from a "Free University" class on Women and Society conducted by Gloria Martin, a lifelong communist and civil rights champion. As a result of the class, Martin teamed up with Clara Fraser and Melba Windoffer (initiators of the Freedom Socialist Party) and Susan Stern (a prominent figure in the local Students for a Democratic Society) to launch Radical Women. In her book, *Socialist Feminism: The First Decade, 1966-76*, Martin writes that the new group was formed to "demonstrate that *women* could act politically, learn and teach theory, administer an organization, develop indigenous leadership, and focus movement and community attention on the sorely neglected matter of women's rights — *and that women could do this on their own.*"

Radical Women's blending of New Left student activists with feminist radicals from the "Old Left" socialist tradition stands out as highly unusual. The youth-oriented New Left, born out of the movement against the war in Vietnam, generally shunned the "orthodox" Marxist milieu and preached

“don’t trust anyone over 30.” Though Susan Stern soon left Radical Women to join the clandestine Weather Underground, 51-year-old Martin and 44-year-old Fraser became fabulous role models and trainers for the young feminists attracted to RW. As a young woman in St. Louis, Martin had courageously participated in early anti-segregation protests. Fraser, the daughter of radical Russian Jewish immigrants, had joined the socialist movement in her early 20s. Both were independent working women, unionists and mothers. Their style was feisty, confrontational, unconventional, critical, caring, educational and funny. They thrived on debate and were aficionados of literature, art, music, and cultures of all nations. How lucky we were to have them as mentors and friends!

Though people from several left viewpoints initially participated in Radical Women, all lost interest fairly quickly — except the Freedom Socialist Party (FSP). A long working relationship and parallel evolution of our socialist feminist programs resulted in formal *affiliation* between Radical Women and FSP in 1973. (The Freedom Socialist Party had been founded just one year before Radical Women. Its emphasis on women’s liberation was one of the central reasons it split from the Socialist Workers Party.)

The association with the Freedom Socialist Party helped ensure Radical Women’s survival in an ever-changing political environment. It also assisted us in becoming a national force, because everywhere the party set up a branch, its female comrades established a Radical Women chapter, too. Members of Radical Women found that the alliance with Freedom Socialist Party did not undercut our independence and autonomy, but gave us the ideological anchor and organizational support to sustain our uppity ways.

ANTIWAR STALWARTS

From the outset, Radical Women participated heavily in the explosive anti-Vietnam War mobilization. Guerrilla theater marked its debut. At the first protest RW attended, the contingent

arrived dressed as Viet Cong women — complete with guns!

Many male activists of the period believed that since women couldn’t be drafted, they had no place in the movement (except for office detail and domestic/sexual services). Radical Women countered that prejudice by arguing that, while we opposed the draft, we also opposed the sexism that excluded women from it. We contended that “the second sex” would make the strongest draft *resisters*. In addition, members spoke frankly to U.S. Army GIs about how sexism, racism and the promotion of violence against women are essential to military indoctrination.

We urged adoption of a multi-issue stance that linked social struggles instead of the prevalent single-issue perspective that kept demands narrow and simplistic. We also went far beyond the opportunist slogan of “Out Now” and explicitly called for the victory of North Vietnam’s socialist forces. In coalitions, we fought for democracy, a voice for Marxist viewpoints, recognition that women are among the chief victims of war, and an end to slavish devotion to the Democratic Party.

From the 1960s on, Radical Women’s resistance to imperialist war has been consistent and, of necessity, unending. We have denounced U.S./UN/NATO-instigated interference, intervention and war in Chile, Nicaragua, Iran, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Iraq and the Balkans — everywhere the lives and freedom of working women and men have been attacked for the sake of profits and rulingclass control.

MULTI-HUED, WORKINGCLASS FEMINISM

Radical Women members worked with African American women from the anti-poverty program to initiate the abortion movement in Washington State with a historic march on the capitol in 1969. We campaigned for free abortion on demand, against forced sterilization of women of color, and for affordable, quality, 24-hour childcare. We shook up the moralizers with our battles for legalized prostitution and no-fault divorce. We fought police insensitivity to victims of rape and

assault by lobbying for a Seattle city ordinance to institute a Special Commission on Crimes against Women.

In 1972, Clara Fraser, who had already represented herself in several court cases, taught a landmark women's legal self-defense class at the University of Washington. This was a survival issue during a time when women were routinely robbed of everything during divorce and child custody proceedings and often could not even find lawyers to represent them.

RW persistently pressed to form alliances and united fronts, including Action Childcare Coalition, the Feminist Coordinating Council (an umbrella organization made up of the whole spectrum of women's groups in Seattle), and the Coalition for Protective Legislation (a labor and feminist effort to extend female-designated workplace safeguards to men after passage of the Washington State Equal Rights Amendment).

Due to our understanding that the property system, not the male gender, was responsible for female subjugation, we rejected what was known as radical feminism, a male-bashing trend that alienated many women of color and working women. Because of this, our meeting hall was spray-painted one night with separatist put-downs such as "Radical Women Builds Men." But we never regretted choosing political principles over transient popularity.

Right from the beginning, RW differentiated itself from the liberal "ladies who lobby." While honchos in groups such as the National Organization for Women maneuvered to keep the feminist movement from "going too far," RW advanced the viewpoint that seeking "respectability" is a losing strategy — and one that sells out the women most abused by society.

Thanks to Clara Fraser's insight and intervention, we avoided another of the worst diseases of the movement: the tendency to trash its own leaders. When a group of younger members failed to defend Clara from a verbal onslaught by opponents at an antiwar meeting, she decided it was high time they learned what it means to be on the firing line. She pushed new Radical Women sisters to take on more responsi-

bility and authority. Radical Women later adopted her essays "Woman as Leader" and "Response to 'Notes on Leadership'" as position papers.

Through confronting rampant sexism, the anarchistic tenets of the New Left, and the debilitating psychology of the feminine mystique, Radical Women sisters discovered that women have a natural talent for leadership — a gift the world desperately needs.

RACE LIBERATIONISTS

The integration of race and sex freedom struggles has always been a hallmark of our theory and practice. RW has continuously supported the front-line role of women of color, combatted racism among feminist activists, and spoken out against sexism in people of color movements. We have also shown appreciation for others brave enough to do the same. In its early days, for example, Radical Women sent a dozen red roses to then-civil rights organizer Julian Bond after he made a breakthrough statement in favor of women's equality.

Our commitment to a feminism that speaks to the needs of women of color was cemented by the organization's character-defining first split which ensued after a fight over Radical Women's cosponsorship of a rally against police brutality spearheaded by the Black Panthers. A few Radical Women members claimed this had "nothing to do with women's liberation" and stomped out.

Rid of that baggage, Radical Women proceeded to help protect the local Black Panther Party from the kind of lethal cop attacks that decimated Black militants in other cities. When the police began massing in front of Panther headquarters one day, we activated our phone tree and called out a community defense guard. Radical Women and our supporters formed a human line that blocked the cops from entering the building. The threatened assault was thwarted.

I was among several Radical Women members arrested at construction sites as part of mass civil disobedience organized

by the United Construction Workers Association (UCWA) to break the color line in the all-white building trades. We took considerable heat for calling on UCWA, a group mostly composed of Black men, to promote the entrance of women into the trades — but we won their support!

We were instrumental to the defense of heroic Chicana feminist Rosa Morales, victim of a sexist firing from her position as Chicano Studies staff-person at the University of Washington. We mobilized for Native American sovereignty and participated in the Puyallup Tribe's successful takeover of Cascadia Juvenile Center, a former Indian hospital. From New York to Los Angeles, we have demanded affirmative action, ethnic studies, justice for immigrants, and an end to police violence.

One of our most vital internal developments was the formation of the National Comrades of Color Caucus in 1981. This unique body consists of the members of color in both Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party. It promotes the confidence, skills and visibility of Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino and Native members, and provides direction to RW and FSP on issues important to people of color. The caucus is a powerful tool for addressing and overcoming unconscious racism that can crop up within our organizations.

Because the caucus demonstrates the significance that socialist feminists place on the leadership and struggles of people of color, more women of color have been encouraged to join Radical Women and have become the majority in several branches.

LAVENDER POWER

When the gay movement burst into flower in the early 1970s, Radical Women enthusiastically welcomed this key political development. Our lesbian members set to work to expand Marxist theory by analyzing how homophobic persecution connects to gender oppression and class exploitation.

Radical Women was instrumental in obtaining a Seattle

city ordinance providing employment and housing protections for sexual minorities. We have helped build militant lesbian/gay rights organizations and have been involved in innumerable coalitions devoted to preventing forced AIDS testing, squashing ballot-box attacks on gay rights, lobbying for state gay rights bills, and more.

In the 1980s, Radical Women sister Merle Woo, a popular college lecturer, noted writer and courageous Asian American lesbian spokesperson, triumphed against the University of California at Berkeley in two epic employment cases charging discrimination on race, sex, sexuality and political ideology.

The lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender movement remains one of the most vibrant and active social struggles, and Radical Women is proud to be part of it.

“GOIN’ PROLETARIAN”

In 1974, RW recognized that we had made a historic transition from being a primarily student group to an organization of full-fledged workers. We had recruited a number of working women through helping to organize a strike and a union of low-paid employees (mostly female and of color) at the University of Washington. In the process, we developed the idea that later became known as “comparable worth.” This goes beyond the concept of “equal pay for equal work” by insisting on equal pay for comparable work through establishment of objective measures of the “worth” of dissimilar job tasks.

Meanwhile, affirmative action gave many Radical Women members the opportunity to become trailblazers in the non-traditional trades. At Seattle's public power company, City Light, Clara Fraser crafted and implemented the country's first plan to train women as utility electricians. I was one of ten Electrical Trades Trainees (ETTs) who won our spurs in that highly successful program. However, for her efforts to defend the ETT program against management sabotage and her prominent role in a mass walkout at the utility, Clara was fired. She fought an intense, seven-year legal case that ulti-

mately affirmed the right of free speech in the workplace and won her reinstatement at City Light.

Radical Women members naturally became union militants once in the workforce, and some have been sparkplugs for many years on county labor councils in San Francisco and Seattle. In the 1990s, getting unions on board in the crucial fight against resurgent fascism has been one of our paramount concerns.

Our theoretical understanding of the significance of women's mass entry into the House of Labor has also deepened. Not only have our numbers grown, but we are strategically placed in the rapidly growing and powerful service sector. Together with people of color and lesbians and gays, women are the overwhelming majority of workers. In a nutshell: our potential to revolutionize society is greater than ever.

THE WORLD IS OUR BEAT

Sisterhood is global — especially for socialist feminists. Radical Women has expanded to Australia, and our international interventions have also increased.

In 1993, delegates from our Seattle, Washington and Portland, Oregon branches toured Russia and Eastern Europe to gauge the impact of the Soviet Union's breakup on women, workers, national minorities and homosexuals. By and large, the people they met were disgusted with the crumbling Stalinist bureaucracy but at the same time tremendously distrustful of capitalist restoration. RW's brand of democratic, feminist, revolutionary socialism attracted serious interest.

Radical Women has also worked diligently for the survival of the Cuban workers state. We have forged a special relationship of solidarity with the Federation of Cuban Women. In 1997, RW and the Federation cosponsored the first-ever International Feminist Brigade to Cuba. The brigade promoted global defense of the island, broadened opposition to the vicious U.S. blockade, and publicized the Cuban Revolution's inspiring gains for women, children, and people of color.

JOIN US!

Radical Women brings vision, militancy, and an ethic of collaboration to the feminist movement, and we have been influential far beyond our size. Radical Women has moved public discourse as a whole to the left, toward attention to the needs and demands of the most excluded and harassed members of society. In so doing, the organization has magnified the strength and effectiveness of the feminist, labor, people of color and lesbian/gay/bi/transgender struggles.

I fell in love with Radical Women for its passion, boldness, imagination, intelligence and principle. All these qualities are as fresh today as they were the day I joined. Check out our *Manifesto* and, if you like what you read, connect with us in the great adventure of creating a socialist feminist future!

— MEGAN CORNISH
Seattle, Washington


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