Frontline Feminisms, war and revolution

by Laurie Cashdan

I had the great fortune to attend the conference on “Frontline Feminisms: Women, War & Resistance,” held at the University of California-Riverside, Jan. 16-18. The organizers worked hard to create an international dialogue among scholars and activists, drawing speakers from the Balkans and the Middle East, Africa and Latin America, South and East Asia, Europe and the U.S., including Chicana activists from southern California.

This internationalism quickly transformed into a discussion of urgent problems. For instance, Nwanyaro Chiwengo, from Zaire’s Shaba province, and Fatimah Ibrahim from the Sudan, discussed “ignored war[s]” of monumental proportions and implications ongoing in Central and East Africa. Chiwengo argued that U.S. interests in Zaire’s diamond and mineral wealth and its strategic political position, bordering Rwanda and Burundi, have influenced U.S. media coverage. She described ethnic cleansing in Zaire and U.S. strategies to intervene in choosing a successor for Mobutu Sese Seko.

Speakers raised challenging questions about feminism, nationalism and liberation, three terms which have too often met in drastic collision in the last decade. Vesna Kesic from Zagreb, Croatia, put the problem powerfully in a roundtable called, “Feminism and Nationalism: Can They Be Coupled?” “‘Freedom is not an abstract term,’” she insisted. “Which kind of freedom will always matter to me.” Kesic sharply critiqued the reactionary nationalism or patriotism which continues to drive Croatia even after the war — officially over. She disaggregated what post-side nationalism from struggles for national freedom, of which she approves, but argued that women’s liberation needs to be within — not external to — those freedom movements.

If Kesic’s complex historic questions about the Balkan, seemed to frame the conference, Angela Davis’s keynote talk posed little new direction. She asked why the “cascading conservatism” circling the globe has been met by so much despair in the U.S. — and even nostalgia for the distant sixties. Unfortunately, Davis’s solution was limited to an analysis of how global capitalism underlies such phenomena as the booming prison industrial complex. One could hardly argue with her views on skyrocketing incarceration rates. However, it was discouraging to hear Davis herself romanticize earlier revolutionary movements from Cuba to Vietnam as models for a revived revolutionary transnationalism.

Angela Davis’s uncritical attitude concerning socialism contrasted with talks by less prominent speakers. Sonja Hale, speaking about women in the 30-year-long Eritrean liberation movement against Ethiopia, described herself as an independent Marxist and made it clear that socialist feminists cannot afford to paper over serious issues about Marxism. Hale described the support Ethiopia received from Russia before 1969. The Eritrean liberation movement — also Marxist but independent from Russia and Cuba — remained isolated, including from the international women’s movement, despite complex issues. Eritrean women have raised issues of gender in a pre-revolutionary society.

Elhadi Amani, an Iranian who spoke in the feminism and nationalism roundtable, also showed the danger of avoiding rethinking about Marxism by radical feminists. Amani lambasted not only the Islamic fundamentalists but the Iranian Marxist parties for their negative reactions after the revolution to International Women’s Day demonstrations in 1979. Had the Left recognized the significance of women’s protest against Khomeini’s edict mandating hijab, he argued, they might have saved the revolutionary struggle so many died for instead of giving the upper hand to fundamentalism.

Kesic’s question of “what kind of freedom,” as Hale and Amani posed it, linked the liberation of women to the problematic of “what happens after the revolution” — a theme throughout the conference. At the session, “From the Mississippi Delta to South Central Los Angeles,” panelists addressed important issues faced by Black women activists in the post-Civil Rights era. Ida Lemcham from Memphis “Local 282 Furniture Workers union described how the incompletion of the Civil Rights Movement has left workers facing restructuring and revived anti-union attacks by employers and municipalities in Mississippi and West Tennessee.

Georgia Washington, founder of the L.A. 4+ Committee after her son Damion’s arrest at Florence and Normandy during the L.A. rebellion, described her exodus from Mississippi and her assumption — until the 1992 uprising and her subsequent fight with the penal system — that freedom had already been won. Other panelists connected this discussion to Marxist-Humanist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya’s concept of “revolution-in-permanence” — an idea she elaborated from Marx’s works.

This concept re-emerged implicitly at a workshop on Mexico and Central America. The intercommunication between Central American women about their different experiences has led Zapateira women to insist that the post-revolutionary society they are striving for must include women’s liberation. This was not on the agenda for either Cuba’s or El Salvador’s guerrilla movements, panelist Julia Shayne argued. She briefly described the feminist movement blossoming in El Salvador since the peace accords, led by women frustrated by years of having women’s issues ignored. At one of the first sessions, titled “What Happens to Feminist Activists After the Revolution?” Nora Chinchilla, speaking on Nicaragua, brought up these questions about Central America back to Marxism itself.

That those questions about national liberation, women’s liberation and Marxism thought kept surfacing shows that feminists searching for a radical international perspective cannot avoid confronting them. If the international dialogue at the Frontline Feminisms conference marked a beginning of such a discussion, I look forward to its further development.

Queer politics workshop

Riverside, Cal. — A spontaneous workshop entitled "Lesbianism, Queer Politics, and Revolution" sprouted...

Vesna Kesic, Croatia, speaking at Frontline Feminisms workshop on Feminism and Nationalism. At left are Elhadi Amani, Iran, and Sherna Gluck, U.S., and at right is Fatimah Ibrahim. Kesic's question of 'what kind of freedom,' as Hale and Amani posed it, linked the liberation of women to the problematic of 'what happens after the revolution.' A theme throughout the conference.

Oakland, Calif. — Women's rights prisoners in which charg women. We heard medical attention and medically confined guards with one woman car in and out she had. Even back of herself, or to others them who volunteer taking her mov. She is in the others. She used hair you have your own self give your a bit. The medical other prisoner all the time. We get haraignty women h...
Survey shows Alvord bond support strong

Three-fourths of likely voters said they would back such a measure even though it would mean taxes would rise.

By Mark Acosta
The Press-Enterprise

A telephone survey suggests that voters in the Alvord Unified School District would be willing to approve a $37 million bond to renovate campuses and help relieve crowding.

A survey last weekend of 400 likely voters showed that 76 percent would vote yes on such a measure, a consultant told the Alvord school board Thursday night. The approval rating, based on knowledge that the measure would raise taxes $57 a year on an average home, would be enough to win at the ballot box, trustees were told.

"I think it's a good shot with a well-run and well-organized campaign," said Gene Bregman, who runs the San Francisco-based Gene Bregman & Associates marketing research firm.

Please see BOND, B-8

MORE LOCAL

Two-sport standout: Riverside North High's Julia Gray always wanted to be like her athletic brothers, one a track star and one a basketball standout. But she has excelled in both, going one up on Ron and Leon Gray. Sports, C-6

A woman's call against discrimination

Civil rights leader Angela Davis speaks to Barbara Green and others after her speech at a conference on women Thursday at UCR.

By Felix Sanchez
The Press-Enterprise

RIVERSIDE

Women have to overcome a defeatist belief that their battles against sexism and discrimination are being lost, noted civil rights activist Angela Davis told a women's conference Thursday.

Speaking to more than 400 people at UC Riverside, most of them women and many from activist organizations around the world, Davis in particular chided American women for this attitude of resignation.

"How dare we succumb to defeatism. How dare we allow frustration and disappointments to disillusion us when women all over the world are resisting" oppression, sexism and, in some cases, atrocity, said Davis, a University of California Santa Cruz professor.

Davis, one of the 1960's highest-profile women's rights leaders, said she was "ashamed" of the American university system's failure to provide more options for women educators.

Please see WOMEN, B-8

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PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

"Who Does It" Directory
Home Services Published daily in
The Press-Enterprise Classifieds
M.L. King Jr. Day, Monday

Government offices: All federal, state, county, city, Jurupa and Ruidoux Community Services District offices will be closed Monday.

Mall delivery: No delivery Monday; service resumes Tuesday.

Financial institutions: Most banks and savings and loans will be closed Monday.

Stores: Most major stores and supermarkets will be open normal hours Monday.

Public transportation: Metrolink and Riverside Transit Agency buses will run on a normal schedule Monday.

Libraries: Libraries will be closed.

Schools and colleges: Riverside, Alvord and Jurupa district schools will be closed. RCC, UCR, Loma Linda University, California Baptist College, La Sierra University and Cal State San Bernardino will be closed.

Garbage pickup: City of Riverside will have Monday pickups on Tuesday and Tuesday pickups on Wednesday, with the rest of the week as normal. NEWCO, Mark's Tri-Co, Disposal, BFI, Western Waste Industries will have normal service. County landfills will be open Monday.

Police arrest pair in grocer's slaying

The Press-Enterprise

Police arrested two men Thursday night in connection with the Nov. 23 shooting death of a Highland market owner.

Kyung Lim, 44, was shot and killed during a robbery attempt at the Jolly Boys Market at 7697 Sterling Ave.

Police arrested...
Guest speaker Marina Patricia of Chiapas, Mexico, shares some of her experiences with the audience during "Frontline Feminisms: Women, War and Resistance," a program at Beyond Baroque in Venice on Sunday. The program was devoted to the role of women and feminism in militarized zones around the world. Participants included women from Mexico, Vietnam, Guatemala, the Sudan, Croatia, Israel and Northern Ireland.

WOMEN'S WAR CRY
Feminists meet in Venice to discuss fight for peace
WOMEN'S WAR CRY

Feminists meet in Venice to discuss fight for peace

By Kim Irwin
STAFF WRITER

In the strife-torn state of Chiapas in southern Mexico, it was Indian women who first joined hands and stood shoulder-to-shoulder to face down government soldiers.

In the former Yugoslavia, again it was women who first organized to promote peace in that war-torn region.

The role of women — and feminism — in militarized zones was the subject of a panel discussion Sunday at Beyond Baroque in Venice. The discussion capped a three-day "Women & War" workshop at the University of California, Riverside that drew female activists from as far away as Mexico, Vietnam, Guatemala, the Sudan, Croatia, Israel and Northern Ireland.

"It was an inspiring conference," said Kate Hartford, a participant from the University of Massachusetts in Boston who also attended the discussion in Venice. "We were able to trade experiences and ideas."


Through an interpreter Marina Patricia, director of a human rights center in Chiapas, shared her experiences.

They faced the military

The military presence in Chiapas, Patricia said, has resulted in increased prostitution and alcoholism in her state. Generally characterized as submissive, Chiapas' indigenous women joined together to protest the military, at one point numbering 5,000 at a rally that scared local merchants enough they closed their businesses.

"The sectors of economy and power in this region were very afraid," Patricia said. "They said, 'What are these women going to do to us?' It's important to note that the people who first faced these soldiers were not the men, but the women."

"The most active peace activists in the former Yugoslavia were women," she said. "This is beyond any doubt."

With communication nearly impossible, the task of uniting for peace seemed impossible, Kesic said. They persevered, however, and finally were able to meet in 1995 for a three-day conference in Medulin, Istria.

Exchange of experiences

"The aim was for feminists and activists to exchange experiences, to free frozen feelings toward one another and to restore women's political dialogue," Kesic said.

"We found that women's dialogue starts from personal stories and arrives to the political level, it starts from tears and laughter, from childhood stories, and returns to our own experiences of war, genocide, home, land and nation."

Fred Dewey, director of Beyond Baroque, set up the panel discussion because he thought it "was important that the Westside hear these stories."