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Sisters in Action for Power Raise Roof
Girls and Young Women Learn to Lead the Struggle for Social Change

AMARA PEREZ

"Are you glad I have been coming to Sisters in Action? I bet you thought I was never going to stay?"
"Yes I did because of your style."
"Because of my style?"
"Yes, your mind and concerns for rights and your interest in history and action!!!!".

This was taken from a note being passed between two girls, 12 and 15 years old, during a youth night movie. I found it stuck between cushions on the couch underneath pizza crusts and broken combs. It made me smile as I thought about girls, like these two, who naturally change because of their involvement in the organization—the way they see themselves, their role in the world and their capacity to make a difference.

Most of the girls at Sisters in Action for Power spend their most formative years building and strengthening their leadership skills in the context of building collective power and promoting progressive change. At 13, 14, 15 years of age, young women at Sisters in Action are door-knocking, leading membership meetings, working with public officials and the media, training other members on turning issues into campaigns, and membership organization that works with low-income women and girls of color. We develop members' leadership and organizing skills by engaging them in identifying, initiating and implementing direct action issue campaigns designed to promote racial, gender and economic justice.

Girls on the Front Line
In 1998 Sisters in Action for Power launched a campaign against Tri Met, Portland's Public Transit System. After two years of making presentations at Board meetings, hosting community speak-outs, and gathering the support of students, teachers and leaders throughout the community, members of Sisters in Action wanted results.

During the summer of 2000, more than 15 middle and high school girls, and many of their mothers, marched unannounced into the office of Tri Met's General Manager, Fred Hansen. There were several attempts made at the door by Tri Met staff, secretaries and security guards to discourage these young women from entering the office, including: lies that Mr. Hansen was out of the office, that he was busy, that he was not in the office, that he was not there, that he was not going to be in the office, and that he was not going to be there. But the girls stood their ground and continued to demand access to the office. The girls were successful in gaining access to the office and were able to speak their minds about the issues they were concerned about. The girls were able to storm into the offices of people in positions of power and having long discussions about colonialism. For low-income girls in Portland this is the only place where such skills are strengthened and leadership opportunities are designed to support them in taking action.

Sisters in Action for Power is an intergenerational, multi-racial, multi-issue campaign organization that works with low-income women and girls of color. We develop members' leadership and organizing skills by engaging them in identifying, initiating and implementing direct action issue campaigns designed to promote racial, gender and economic justice.
Hansen was not in the building; paternalistic coaxing suggesting real ladies did not behave like this; and threats to herd the group of girls to the police station. These young women simply wanted Mr. Hansen to follow through on his promise to present Sisters in Action for Power’s resolution at the Tri Met Board budget review.

After one hour of persuasive testimony from students and mothers and reporting on research findings, Mr. Hansen agreed. After this victory, youth-led chants and cheers filled the sterile administrative building. Staff came from every floor, gathered at windows and peeped around their cubicle walls to catch a glimpse of this well organized and tightly unified group of girls.

After the action one youth member wrote in her journal, "...doing direct action gives you this burning sensation in your stomach that lasts a long time. Nothing else in the world feels like that. This is why we do actions to make changes.”

Taking on Projects for Justice

Our first campaign in 1996 aimed to raise awareness and encourage institutional action on the problem of gender violence and the lack of safety for girls in the Portland Public School District. Led primarily by young women in high school, this campaign achieved many successes, including prompting the school district to track and report sexual harassment, and prompting Multnomah County to pass a resolution to incorporate gender violence in all violence prevention and intervention.

Our current campaign to promote transportation equity resulted from girls coming to the office frustrated by the daily task of securing money to get to and from school. In Portland there is no yellow bus service for many of our public schools. In fact, students have to pay to go to school. This has forced many low-income families to have to make tough decisions like choosing between a bus pass or a winter jacket, a bus ticket or lunch. Youth leaders wanted to take action.

Recently, Sisters in Action for Power was able to secure a small victory—a pilot project that would allow all students eligible for free and reduced lunch to also receive a free bus pass to get to and from school. Elisha Williams, 12, explains, “We have been able to make real changes that benefit our community. There are hardly any places in Portland for girls to be lead-

members, take action and work with other girls and women to do that.”

Sisters in Action is an inter-generational organization that prioritizes the full participation and leadership of girls and young women. Youth under 18 were recruited first in the organization’s beginning base-building efforts. Young women develop and strengthen the skills necessary to build collective power, move a social justice campaign and build a community-based organization that can respond to the needs of low-income communities.

Over the past two years, adult women have been recruited into the organization and leadership body—primarily by girl-led outreach efforts. Young women and girls are now training adult members with the skills and information they have learned. They draw from their experiences, their work in the field and from the collective vision for change they are formulating. They are eager to build power and excited to lead the movement.

Consciousness Raising—the Fire Behind the Action

The role of popular education as a means to promote critical thinking is at the core of our work to take action. Political education is an integral part of grassroots leadership development as well as a critical piece of building a movement that integrates consciousness raising and action. We use role-plays, theater activities, and other engaging exercises to promote critical analysis. A strong political education program creates a fire, a burning drive to make change. It is rooted in the personal, connected to the political and inherently promotes collective action. For example, we have been conducting a three-month project on the historical context and legacy of Sisters in Action for Power.

Members of Sisters in Action for Power gather outside the office in Portland. Photo courtesy of Sister in Action for Power.

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of colonialism. "Talking about colonization is like going into a land mine. Everything you learn feels like an explosion. Then all of a sudden you see how things have been and are today, not the myths and lies we are told in school," writes one girl.

A wide variety of activities and teaching methods have provided young women an entry point to understand the legacy of colonialism as well as a framework to understand oppression and violence today. On a world map girls color-coded colonizing and colonized countries, they put Columbus on trail for genocide, and wrote journal entries from the perspective of a young Taino girl 500 years ago.

We are now moving from discussing the pillars of colonialism to its contemporary manifestation—globalization and cultural hegemony. A popular education curriculum like this example connects issues to a larger political framework. Members can then understand how our organizing efforts and other social justice struggles around the world fit into a larger framework and a larger movement to bring about change.

Given supportive mechanisms that provide information and community building opportunities, girls learn to harness their voices and personal power, bolstering their self-esteem. "We are not the leaders of the future. We are leaders right now, leading change in our community," said one young woman leading a community action meeting. Intergenerational organizing focuses on developing both young and adult women's understanding of sociopolitical concepts as well as strengthening community action skills so members work together to build power and ultimately a successful progressive movement.

Amara Perez helps organize Sisters in Action for Power, which received a grant from RESIST in 1999. For more information, contact Sisters in Action for Power, 1732 NE Alberta, Portland, OR 97211.

Appalachian Women Rising Up

MEREDITH DEAN

For generations, Appalachian women have fought for their homes and families, including standing up in front of company thugs and lying down in front of coal trucks, whatever the occasion demanded. But they never quite found the time or occasion to fight for themselves. It's as if the Women's Movement just couldn't navigate the winding rutted roads up the creeks and through the hollers. Or maybe didn't want to.

After all, Appalachia is a difficult region to understand, or in which to get a foothold. Stereotypical as it may sound, people do tend to stick close to home and kin—long past any real hope or possibility. And people do tend to be suspicious of outsiders; recognizing, after years of exploitation by loggers, coal operators and even well-intentioned missionary types, their vulnerability to external interests. And people are wary of "joining," even though the United Mine Workers is and has been one of the strongest unions in the country.

So it has not been without a great deal of struggle that women have come to be organized in Appalachian communities. Of course, women have always been at the heart of communal activities; but it wasn't until 1992 that at least one group of women decided to do it in a more intentional, more organized, and more explicitly, "women's"

Appalachian Women Rising Up

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Coming Together Across Differences

In 1999, we organized the first ever anti-racism event in the most depressed county in Virginia, despite harassment from the Ku Klux Klan. “Now that caught my attention,” says Kisha Milgrim. “There you were, a group of women not afraid to put it out there, speaking about racism and homophobia, along with other forms of violence against women.

Children play at an anti-racism event in Dickenson County, Virginia. Photo courtesy of Appalachian Women’s Alliance

to say it like it is.” Others in the community also took notice—they had to. For the very first time, there was support from the local United Mineworkers, local churches, the local police, even the local merchants. After attending the anti-racism event, Kisha joined the Women’s Alliance because she wanted “to meet other women who are actually doing something for the community” and she wanted to accomplish something herself.

Kisha lives up a holler in a place called Wakenva, named after the three coal companies it once supported. Just about every other African American in the county lives 30 miles away in one of the old company houses left over from the Clinchfield Coal era. Since becoming a member, Kisha has helped to organize a computer class, a Black History dinner, and a circle for pre-teen and teenage girls to talk about issues of self-esteem and self-worth.

Fifteen-year-old Sunale Crowe lives on the Qualla Boundary, an expanse of land in western North Carolina owned for generations by the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation. Sunale got involved with the Alliance when she wrote a poem for the Appalachian Women’s Journal, “To walk the sky path, you must believe in yourself ...”

Explains her foster mother, “As we’ve lost our traditions, we’ve also lost respect for women and their sacred place among our people. Girls no longer have the role models they need to become healthy, self-reliant leaders.” Sunale wants to work on teenage pregnancy and domestic violence in her community.

Two states away, Debbie and her partner live in rural Kentucky. They and nine other lesbian couples, both black and white, are working to establish a supportive community to sustain them through their senior years. Many are living double lives at work or with their families, and none of them have the legal rights and benefits granted to married heterosexual couples, even though most are in committed long-term relationships. Debbie joined the Alliance as a way to reach out to lesbians living in isolation, and as a way to work on homophobia in the mountains within a larger, safer context. “All of my adult life I have been standing up against racism, sexism, classism, and economic injustice, but it’s been too risky to stand up for my own rights as a lesbian. The Alliance is giving me the support I need to take the risk.”

For this next Caravan, Kisha and Sunale and Debbie will be organizing events in their communities. And if we’re lucky, women from their communities will travel with us, at least to the next stop. And at each place we’ll attempt to justly convey the struggles and the courage of the women we’ve met at the previous stops. And slowly but surely, place by place, woman by woman, we’ll continue to cross the physical barriers, the cultural barriers, and the barriers of race, class and sexual orientation which have kept us apart.

This Time It’s Personal

I recently asked one of our local organizers, Edna Gulley, what she thought was different about the Alliance—why we had lasted. “Women in the mountains haven’t known how to fight for ourselves. Our families and churches have taught us not to,” she said. “But in the Women’s Alliance, we didn’t give up. We kept at it. Even when people closed their doors and talked about us, we stood up for what was right, and kept asking other women to stand with us.”

“To walk the sky path, you must follow the bright moon light . . . . ”

Meredith Dean is the executive director of Appalachian Women’s Alliance, which received a grant from RESIST last year. For more information, contact the Appalachian Women’s Alliance, PO Box 688, Floyd, VA 24091.
Appalachian Women Rising Up

Women had moved from barely speaking up, to speaking out, to organizing others to speak. And Alliance members were now speaking about racism and homophobia, along with other forms of violence against women.

Florida Feminists Demand Justice
Gainesville Women's Liberation Calls for Universal Health Care

JENNY BROWN

Among several other projects, Gainesville Women's Liberation engaged in an aggressive campaign for universal health care. Below, director Jenny Brown describes their work and goals.

What organizing has Gainesville Women's Liberation been doing with your Health Care for All Project?

In the fall of 2000, Gainesville Women's Liberation worked with the Alachua County Labor Party to place a non-binding referendum on the ballot that asked voters if they favored universal health care without private insurance companies. The campaign slogan was, "Together we can get the insurance companies and HMOs off our backs." We assisted our local National Organization for Women (NOW) chapters in developing materials directed at women to distribute at hospitals, beauty parlors, schools and childcare centers.

As part of the education for the referendum, in October we co-sponsored a "Speak Out" and town meeting on insurance companies and HMOs. People spoke publicly about their struggles to get health care and adequate medical coverage. We gave cash prizes for the highest healthcare bill and the heaviest load of insurance company paperwork.

During the campaign we also wrote and performed a skit all over town which we called "Where's the Care? Follow the Money." It illustrates that we are spending enough money on health care to cover everyone, but it's going into the pockets of the insurance companies and drug companies. We also make the point in the skit that the US is rated #37 in the world for health care, while France is rated #1, according to the United Nations. Amazingly, France spends only two-thirds of what the US spends per person. The skit requires crowd participation, and it was a big hit at churches, meetings, and the Labor Day breakfast. We even performed it in a bar.

In November, the referendum passed with 65% of the vote. It got more positive votes than any other measure on the ballot. Since then, we've co-authored an organizers packet for others around the country who want to launch similar referenda. (Ordering information below.)

With other groups, including Florida NOW and the Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement, we've established a Women's Liberation Task Force for National Health Care to make universal health care part of the agenda for women's liberation. We're inviting feminist groups to sign up.

Why is health care an issue for a group interested in women's liberation?

Women frequently make up for the gaps in our inadequate health care system by taking care of family members in the home,

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husband's job. Talk about undermining our programs for the care of people who need health care, health care coverage is not an issue in relationships.

They are naturally linked. Gainesville Women's Liberation conducted more than a dozen consciousness-raising workshops with a wide range of women to analyze our experiences. It's the only way we know to make sure a proposal for change will truly meet every woman's needs. Whether it's insurance, no insurance, Medicaid, or workers compensation, the health care system is expensive, aggravating, humiliating, and getting worse. With insurance, the prices are going through the roof. Then the maze of phone calls and paperwork is designed to make you give up. With Medicaid you have to prove extremely low income, and even then most doctors won't take you. Women reported good experiences with military medicine—which is actually a socialized system—and with health care in Canada and England.

Knowing how we're all being affected negatively by our job-based insurance system means we reject incremental approaches. For example, there was a bill in Florida last year to extend Medicaid to those who are at 150% of the poverty level. Once again we would have to prove we are worthy of health care. And then we have to worry that if our income goes up we'll lose our insurance. Quentin Young of Physicians for a National Health Program leads universal health care rallies with the chant, "Everybody in, nobody out!" Universal coverage is the only system that's going to fix our problems as women.

We think health care is one of those issues that can unite big majorities, but we'll need to stand firm together to win a truly universal system. It may even take a political party like the Labor Party to challenge the mainstream parties. In Canada, it was the New Democratic Party that brought universal health insurance first to Saskatchewan and then to all of Canada 30 years ago.

We believe that one strength in this fight is that it is not just a defensive battle. Progressive women activists are putting forward a positive proposal for how we think society should be. As one of our volunteers said, "We are all each other's insurance." That's the message we want to get across.

Jenny Brown directs Gainesville Women's Liberation, which received a grant from RESIST last year. For more information, contact GWL at PO Box 2625, Gainesville, FL, 32602.

Resources:
To order the 125-page Universal Health Care Organizers Guide from Gainesville Women's Liberation, write us at PO Box 2625, Gainesville, FL, 32602. The packets are available for $15 each. Please include $3 postage for the first packet and a dollar for each additional packet. For more information, call (352) 373-4841.

For original source material on consciousness-raising and recent material on universal health care and women, visit the Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives for Action at www.afn.org/~redstock, or write P.O. Box 744, Stuyvesant Station, New York, NY 10009.


Physicians for a National Health Program (www.pnhp.org) is another fantastic resource for organizing on universal health care.

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Plan to RESIST for Social Change

For more than 34 years, RESIST has relied on the support of donors to maintain its vital grant-giving program to grassroots groups. To extend that support—and help radical groups organize for change—you can:

1. Make a tax-deductible contribution.
2. Join the pledge program (see p8).
3. Donate stocks or other securities.
4. Include a bequest to RESIST in your will or life insurance policy.
5. Designate RESIST as a beneficiary of an IRA or pension plan.

For more information about these and other options, contact RESIST:
617/623-5110; resistinc@igc.org.

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GRANTS

A weekend of resistance was planned for Buffalo because of the city's position on the border of two NAFTA nations and because the city has been significantly hurt by the corporate welfare policies of its local government. BAN also hoped to produce a "Stop the FTAA" newspaper like the successful one generated for the IMF/World Bank in DC last year.
RESIST has been a stalwart supporter of women’s organizing projects since the early “women’s liberation” movement of the 1970s. Particularly now, when women’s full human rights are being challenged legislatively and judicially, RESIST reaffirms its commitment to funding radical organizing projects that work for the full economic, social and political empowerment of all women. Below is a partial list of RESIST grantees.

RESIST relies on its supporters to help identify potential grant applicants. Please consider which groups in your area fit with RESIST funding priorities. If you know of small progressive activist organizations that need money, please take a moment to provide us with their information. Or you can direct them to RESIST’s website: www.resistinc.org. RESIST, 259 Elm Street, Somerville, MA 02144; 617-623-5110.

RESIST Grantees Organizing Around Women and Girls Issues

9 to 5 Colorado
655 Broadway, Denver, CO 80203
For a workplace anti-discrimination outreach and education project designed to help low-wage women understand their rights and empower them to take action.

Appalachian Women’s Alliance
PO Box 688, Floyd, VA 24091
To purchase new office equipment to support a grassroots coalition of low-income and working women in Appalachia who organize on local, regional and national issues.

Association for Union Democracy
The Women’s Project
500 State Street, 2nd Floor
Brooklyn, NY 11217
To strengthen and democratize unions by increasing the involvement and influence of women union members.

Fuerza Unida
3946 S Zarzamora, San Antonio, TX 78225
For a week long training session to develop skills in gender analysis and to strategize a campaign entitled “Winning Action for Gender Equity (W.A.G.E.): San Antonio Women in Crisis.

Mothers from Hell
PO Box 21304, Eugene, OR 97402
For The Brimstone Bulletin and a developmental disabilities awareness curriculum which seek to counter the abuse and harassment children with disabilities encounter in schools.

Network for Battered Lesbians and Bisexual Women
PO Box 6011, Boston, MA 02144
To publish The Network News/Noticias de la Red, a fully bilingual newsletter that is part of a larger campaign to end domestic violence in lesbian/bisexual women’s communities.

Sisters In Action for Power
1732 NE Alberta, Portland, OR 97211
To develop a database and brochure for organization which build women and girls leadership on social justice issues.

Support Team International for Textileras (STITCH)
4933 S. Dorchester, Chicago, IL 60615
For multi-year general support for a network of US women engaged in cross-border labor organizing and support for women workers in Central America.

Women’s Institute for Leadership Development
33 Harrison Avenue, 4th Floor,
Boston, MA 02111
Funding for multi-year general support for organization which seeks to address sexism and other issues of oppression within the labor movement and to build democratic unions.

Women’s Voices for the Earth
210 N. Higgins Avenue, #206
Missoula, MT 59802
For a project to educate workers and their families about health dangers from dioxins and to link environmental and labor activists.

Working for Equality and Economic Liberation (WEEL)
PO Box 7772, Missoula, MT 59807
For Montana Mama Jam and Womynfest, an annual fundraiser that includes outreach and education about issues related to poverty; also funding to enable welfare recipients and working poor people to attend a rally entitled “WEEL Storms Helena” protesting welfare “reform” and other attacks on low income people.

I Know of a Progressive Group that RESIST Might be Interested in Funding

[ ] Please send them grant information at the addresses below.
[ ] Please send me information to pass along to them.

Organization: ____________________________
Contact Person: __________________________
Address: ________________________________
City, State, Zip: __________________________

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Address: ________________________________
City, State, Zip: __________________________
GRANTS

Vermont Mobilization for Global Justice
PO Box 604
Burlington VT 05402

Vermont Mobilization for Global Justice grew out of ongoing coalition work by many of the groups involved in protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The group includes more than 15 progressive groups that coordinated activities on the Vermont side of the US-Canadian border during the April summit of the FTAA meeting in Quebec.

The summit attracted a large number of activists, particularly from the US. Actions were planned around the message of opposition to “Free Trade” that opens borders to corporations while shutting them down to people.

A grant of $3,000 was given to rent space for a convergence center to support activists involved in the protests.

Latinos Unidos Siempre
3248 Market Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Latinos Unidos Siempre received a $3000 grant from the Freda Friedman Salzman Memorial Fund at RESIST, which is dedicated to the purpose of supporting organized resistance to the institutions and practices that rob people of their dignity as full human beings... (giving) a high priority to the efforts of Native American peoples to resist cultural as well as actual genocide.”

Formed by a group of 13 students in 1996, the organization works towards educational, cultural and social development for Latino youth to help them take a proactive leadership role in the community. Members work to uproot racist stereotypes and discrimination and act as advocates for social change.

Connecticut NARAL Foundation
135 Broad Street
Hartford, CT 06105
www.Javanet.com/-ctnaral

CT NARAL became increasingly concerned over the last 12 months about a dramatic increase in the misleading advertising for Crisis Pregnancy Centers. These centers fail to provide the full range of options that are available to women who find themselves with an unwanted pregnancy. CT NARAL has produced an excellent Abortion Services Guide, which has alleviated some of the problems posed by CPCs.

Connecticut NARAL will use RESIST’s grant of $2,000 to investigate the anti-abortion practices of the Crisis Pregnancy Centers in Connecticut and include the information in the abortion service guide, as well as distribute the guide independently.

Comite Exijimos Justicia
PO Box 7781
Chicago, IL 60680

The Comite Exijimos Justicia (We Demand Justice Committee) was formed in 1999 as a support group for families whose loved ones were wrongly convicted of crimes or were victims of police brutality. After hearing the stories of more than 20 families, members identified a pattern of police misconduct and frame-ups by the Chicago Police Department. The support group evolved into a group that demanded justice. Members created a database of specific officers who were habitual offenders. Meetings with police and state officials to demand an investigation were backed up by public marches. The first major victory occurred when the wrongful murder conviction of Angel Rodriguez, who had been sentenced to 60 years, was reversed.

RESIST awarded CEJ $3,000 to purchase office equipment. This grant was given in tribute to Mike Riegle, a supporter of prisoners’ rights, gay and lesbian liberation and the radical movement for social justice, who died of complications due to AIDS in 1992.

Buffalo Activist Network
51 Elmwood Avenue, Apt B
Buffalo, NY 14201
BuffaloActivist@yahoo.com

The Buffalo Activist Network received a grant of $2,000 from RESIST in order to organize rallies against the expansion of NAFTA’s model into central and southern America, which was expected to be proposed at the Free Trade Area of the

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