

Collective Trouble

by Eve Zaremba

The collective structure, based on the concept of consensus, is the preferred method of self-government in all feminist organizations (and other progressive movements), regardless of the terminology used. The underlying principle of equality validates both the right to make decisions and the decisions themselves. If we are going to learn to operate collectives without regularly tearing ourselves to pieces, we had better stop to look at them very carefully and critically.

There are as many types and varieties of collectives as there are groups or organizations who use or claim to use this structure. There are ad hoc collectives set up for a specific short term task and there are collectives which are legally constituted as businesses or government funded social services; there are closed collectives and so-called open collectives; there are collectives within mainstream hierarchical institutions like universities and there are unfunded, radical, separatist collectives. Clearly they cannot all be the same thing, cannot all work the same way or mean the same.

Calling a group or an organization a collective does not make it so. In my experience most uses of the term are misnomers. This leads to trouble. For instance, there are organizations which function with full-time, paid staff who do the day-to-day work and know the ropes. It seldom works to include occasional volunteers on an equal basis and to call this combination "a collective." The two types of members are too disparate to be functionally equal. Belong-

ing to something called "a collective" raises expectations which in these circumstances are impossible to sustain. What isn't based on reality will not work for long, if at all. Employing some variety of collective process in specific instances does not make a collective.

Being part of a collective and making it work satisfactorily at both the functional (goals) and personal (process) level is **hard!** We aren't trained or psychologically prepared for what is involved. (The same is true for workers' co-ops and similar non-traditional structures.) People join with very little idea of what it means to be part of a collective. Almost always they believe it gives them more say in making decisions (i.e. more power) than a traditional structure, seldom acknowledging the additional difficulties and responsibility this involves.

The real meaning of equality and access to power is always front and centre. It's easy to forget that when one has "more say" in decisions, everyone else also has more say. Not having an obvious boss or supervisor does not mean having nobody to answer to—it means taking responsibility on oneself. Collectives survive as long as enough members take the trouble to learn, to take on responsibilities and fulfill them—without being treated as "tall poppies." On the other hand, a certain percentage of drones must be accepted as inevitable. Nothing can guarantee equality of knowledge or effort within the collective.

In my view a collective is a group of people who have demonstrated commitment, who have an investment in the organization, who trust each other. For over and above all other attributes of a true collective-that-works is

trust. Trust between members isn't something which can be acquired overnight. It has to be earned. Members have to have worked together long enough to trust each other's judgement and dependability. There can be no confusion as to who is a member with full membership rights and responsibilities. Membership is a privilege which is clearly acquired and must be responsibly exercised.

It has become fashionable to believe that this kind of collective is somehow less democratic and accountable than an "open" one. This is a myth. Reality is quite otherwise. How can someone who wasn't here yesterday and might not be here tomorrow make decisions which will affect the future of the organization and its members? Allowing people who aren't perceived as equal contributors in on vital decisions leads to loss of group cohesion and of individual motivation. Even good feminists are human.

Of course, really closed collectives have no future. There are ways for women to plug into whatever the collective tasks are. Some will find the collective dynamic and congenial, some will not. Those who do and who stay the course become full fledged members. This is a constant process, with the collective changing and renewing itself this way.

Where there is trust and group solidarity it is possible to delegate decisions and jobs. This is a vital freedom. Without it, everyone has to be in on everything; meetings become interminable and frustrating; second guessing, blaming and guilting develops. This is fatal for both the functioning of the organization and the mental health of the members.

Being part of a working collective should be a source of personal, as well as political satisfaction. On balance, the good, fun part must outweigh the heavy, less pleasant part. In a feminist collective especially, the work and commitment of all women, whether paid or unpaid, must be recognized and valued—none of which means that a working collective can forget its goals and turn into a social or therapy group.

The practical consequences of all the above are pretty obvious and could easily be taken into consideration in the (re)structuring of any new or existing organization. Too bad that so often this sort of basic homework isn't done.

Working collectives are essential to the health of the Women's Movement (or any movement for social change, for that matter). It is thus doubly unfortunate that they are being given a bad name. Women are discouraged from active participation, and who can blame them? It is a loss for all of us when someone says "I'll never work in a collective..." and gives some of the horrible examples we see around us.

As I see it, feminist collectives are, as it were, held in trust by those who control them, for the rest of us. This should never be confused with ownership. It's a temporary privilege which cannot be divorced from the duty to manage our resources responsibly.

*Eve Zaremba is the author of three thrillers, the most recent being **Beyond Hope**. She is an ex-member of the Broadside collective.*

A Letter to Authors

The following letter was received by Women's Press author and Broadside collective member Helen Lenskyj. Broadside is publishing the letter in order to provide readers with additional information on the situation at Women's Press.

August 17, 1988

Dear Women's Press Author:

Life has been hectic and full of energy these last months at the Press and we would like to keep you informed. Out of a period of change, change which has at the same time been difficult, painful and exciting, has come new publishing policies, new members to the Press and unfortunately the departure of a long-time staff member, Margie Wolfe. You may have already heard some of this news but we want you to have it first hand. We also want to talk about what this means to you as one of our authors.

Since last fall Women's Press has been struggling to introduce an anti-racist policy in our publishing and our organization. We have been known for our "non-sexist" and "non-racist" publishing but over the past

selling rights and getting your work translated into other languages is also part of our ongoing activities—for example, in 1989 we will see French and German editions of *Sex, Power & Pleasure* by Mariana Valverde.

But as we said, it hasn't been easy. While all of us at Women's Press share a commitment to developing new publishing guidelines we haven't all agreed on the means nor have we all been able to act on the need to change and to respond to new members. For the first time in many years, women of colour are working at the Press. Sometimes in such a period of change some people separate themselves and this has happened at the Press. There is a minority group, eight out of more than thirty women, which is unhappy with our new direction. We regret that they haven't been able to accept these changes. For those of you who wish more information or have questions we welcome your letters or phone calls.

One of the most difficult decisions was to terminate Margie Wolfe's employment. The small group of eight approached us on July 5th with a proposal which included splitting

Garage Sale a Success!



PHOTO BY DOROTHY VANDER

Broadside's fundraising garage sale attracted collectors, bargain hunters and passersby on a beautiful Saturday in August. Thanks to your help we grossed \$365.

The Women's Press

year with some education and lots of hard work we have been learning more about anti-racism in publishing—the kind of publishing that goes beyond looking to make sure that our books do not feed into racist stereotypes. We are moving towards a kind of publishing that actively works towards breaking down those stereotypes. This is no easy task and to assist us we are developing anti-racist guidelines. With this new direction we are *not* telling authors what to write; we are simply interested in clearly expressing our new publishing policy. If you're interested in these guidelines we would be happy to send you a copy. We also hope to schedule a few workshops on anti-racist writing and/or editing later this fall for those who are interested.

You might wonder how this affects you. What about your Women's Press book/books? Nothing has changed in this regard. We continue to stand behind our sixteen years of successful publishing and continue to promote all of our books. We are pleased to report over eighty books in print and pride ourselves in the work done promoting all of the books by all of our authors. Our efforts at

Women's Press and Margie leaving the staff with severance. This along with the difficulties over the last year and serious staff problems lead to her dismissal on July 20th with an offer of seven months severance pay. Margie accepted our offer on July 29th. We recognize the important role Margie has played at Women's Press over the past eleven years and wish we could have resolved things differently.

On a more positive note, we are lucky to have Michele Paulse who will now be promoting Women's Press books. Michele has been with us since 1985 involved in various manuscript groups and the Publishing and Policy Group and has been on staff since the beginning of 1987. We have every confidence in her ability to bring new life not only to the promotion of our books but to Women's Press as a whole.

Sincerely,
Rona Moreau
for the Publishing & Policy Group
of Women's Press.

DESIRE DIFFERENCE DECEPTION

WOMEN IN 3-D: A FEMINIST FILM SERIES
Most films at OISE Auditorium, 252 Bloor W. 8 pm.
Mostly Tuesdays, October 4 to December 6

Series membership tickets (available from OISE,
Centre for Women's Studies, Toronto Women's Book,
SCM Books, \$25)

SPONSORED BY

OISE Centre for Women's Studies
Sociology Students Caucus (OISE)
Feminist Film Group
Women's Studies (U of T)
Cinema Studies (Innis College)

Info: 923-6641 x 2204