Labor and "Pussy Power"

written by Lois Weiner | January 22, 2017



The Women's March was glorious. Yes, I disagree with much said in the speeches, but that wasn't an issue because like the vast majority of people who participated, I didn't go to hear celebrities or politicians talk. I participated to show my rage and frustration at Donald Trump and the policies he and the GOP are preparing to impose on us. Women like me, disgusted, dismayed, enraged at Donald Trump's misogyny, which the GOP has endorsed, flooded to this demonstration.

We brought family, friends, supporters, male and female, protesting the human rights and climate deniers whom Trump has brought with him into office. There was some diversity but this was primarily a march of young White women who carried signs about their bodies, "Pussy power" being the most prominent at the New York march. "Pussy power" strikes me as especially apt. Like women who fight patriarchy, it's naughty. It evokes the strength in numbers. Most of all, the march birthed a new social movement which will owe its life to pussy.

But like all newborns, this infant movement has a great deal it must learn to survive, let alone grow powerful enough to challenge the arrogant elites who now aim to control our lives and bodies. The March's temerity and unwillingness to call out systemic racism was dangerous and life-threatening. Still, I was heartened to see more than a smattering of men and women of color, willing to be a small minority for now. So much resistance has already come from Black Lives Matter and immigrants' organizing from which we should learn.

"The tone of the march was not so much militant as excited, even joyous….The comment over and over was, 'Can you believe this?' Nobody was disappointed." That description is of another movement and march, (pictured in the photo), Solidarity Day, organized by the AFL-CIO in Washington DC, on September 19, 1981. It drew 250,000 participants to support PATCO, the union representing air traffic controllers, fired by Ronald Regan for striking. The AFL-CIO was pushed to use its resources for one day and showed in that brief moment what labor might bring. It rented the DC Metro, making it free to all users, and bussed in a remarkably diverse group of marchers. Labor remains, as it has been since the CIO, the least racially segregated institution in this country, less segregated than churches and schools.

PATCO and labor were felled despite this remarkable, temporary show of labor's potential and solidarity. Reagan won and the labor movement never recovered its capacity and will to use its most powerful lever, the strike. So analysis of labor's defeat should inform how we now confront the Trump administration: No single issue no matter however life-threatening, not even climate change, no single constituency however large or vocal, not women, not labor, not Blacks, or immigrants,

none by itself can defeat the powerful elites who now control the US government.

Though a few unions officially endorsed the march and individual unions sent small contingents, the Women's March lacked the institutional muscle we have to push labor to contribute, the kind it demonstrated (albeit fleetingly) in Solidarity Day. Pussy power can go only so far alone. It needs allies. To have an ally you have to be an ally, showing up in word and deed. We need a program that encompasses the needs of all humanity, commitment and information on how to resist in multiple ways. We need an electoral vehicle that will fight to turn our demands into laws. Like many in the march, I do not trust the Democratic Party, which has already started their compromises/betrayals. Creating a new party that is controlled by the people it says it serves is a huge, unavoidable challenge.

Let's not romanticize the dangers our new movement faces or the hard road in building unions that fight. But at the same time remember birth is never easy. Phyllis Jacobson, a founder of *New Politics*, once remarked to me when we were discussing labor – giving birth, that is – that if women vividly remembered pregnancy and labor, they'd never have more than one child and the society wouldn't be able to reproduce itself. Fortunately for humanity, a kind of amnesia sets in. We forget the pain and see only the great contribution we've made.

Here's to pussy power and labor.