

# 300,000 at Pro-choice Demo—Plus Us

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On Sunday, November 12, approximately 300,000 pro-choice demonstrators, participating in a “Mobilization for Women’s Lives,” filled the lawn beside the reflecting pool facing the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC.

At one point during the four hour rally, the folk group, Peter, Paul and Mary sweetly sang choruses from Holly Near’s, “We Are A Gentle, Angry People,” but it was clear that the main sponsor of the event, the National Organization for Women (NOW), wanted the emphasis on “gentle” and not “angry.”

NOW and its liberal allies decided to forego a march, such as the one last April which brought out 600,000 people to the capital in support of abortion rights, and instead have the only event of the day be a rally where those attending would be held captive to speeches by an endless parade of mainstream feminists and Democratic Party politicians. It is usually the case that after experiencing the exuberance of a mass march, participants tend to drift away as rally speakers begin to drone on. This time, NOW assured that to attend was to sit and passively listen.

The decision by NOW to nix the idea of a march came about as the liberal feminist organization perceived a positive shift in national attitudes on the abortion issue before and particularly after the November elections where pro-choice candidates were victorious in New Jersey, Virginia and New York City. NOW and groups such as the National Abortion Action League (NARAL) began to de-emphasize the Washington demonstration in favor of local actions, and decided against a march where things could “get out of hand,” in other words, out of their control.

Certainly, the decision to decentralize wasn’t a bad one since 1,000,000 people turned out that same day for pro-choice actions in over 100 cities including Los Angeles where 100,000 participated.

Since the rally stage was to be festooned with elected officials, the possibility of an “incident” or a confrontation with the police must have been worrisome to those whose idea of securing women’s freedom is through currying favor with politicians.

Such a strategy is so risky for women that it is surprising that even liberal organizations like NOW and NARAL feel-comfortable with it. They must realize that it is only the grass-roots opposition of women and men which has caused politicians to suddenly become “born-again” for women’s rights.

If the tide of public opinion were to suddenly sweep the other way, many of the political hacks present in Washington would be standing at an anti-abortion podium giving out the opposite platitudes. One need only look at the rank opportunism and vacillation these politicians display on every major social issue from the Cold War to aid to El Salvador to abortion itself to realize the futility of depending on those who are motivated only by their re-election prospects.

For instance, the ebullience on the part of liberals at the election of Douglas Wilder of Virginia, who became the nation’s first black governor and ran as a strong pro-choice candidate, should be tempered by a look at the rest of the politics he represents. Shortly after his election, Wilder addressed a meeting of the Democratic Leadership Council and according to the Nov. 14, 1989 *New York Times*, urged his party to get “in the mainstream.” (!!!) He advised Democrats to focus “on fighting crime and drugs” and the “protection of the free enterprise system.” The left hand giveth (a little) while the right hand taketh away.

## **The Anti-Authoritarian Contingent**

Those of us who attended the rally as part of a hastily organized anti-authoritarian contingent initiated in Detroit felt as though we were part of a Sunday picnic in the park. We knew well in advance of the event that the march had been canceled but we still wanted to attend given our strong feelings on the issue and with a hope that we could provide a rallying point for those opposed to the mainstream politics of the organizers. We came with the idea of presenting an anti-statist position on the abortion issue which clearly called for the right of women to control their bodies without government intervention or legal restraint.

We were successful in our endeavors, but only in a very limited sense. Our numbers never exceeded more than 70, but creative banners, and placards with such slogans as “Smash The State” and “Free My Uterus and All Political Prisoners” certainly distinguished us from the average rally participant.

Those of us who came from Detroit joined with several individuals who responded to a limited mailing we sent out and with a group of wild, black flag waving wimmin from Minneapolis, (Storm Warning, P.O. Box 7624, Minneapolis MN 55407) whose energy and spirit added measurably to the day.

The pro-choice stance seems like a good one for anti-authoritarians as it raises the issue of both the freedom of women and the role of the state, while liberals often reduce it to a question of “rights.” Most of us agreed that we didn’t like the latter concept as it implies a condition or status which can be granted or withdrawn, i.e., “rights granted by the Constitution.” This means that women are dependent upon a political apparatus for their freedom; a shaky proposition at best.

### **“Why Grovel?”**

The position put forward by those in the anti-authoritarian contingent was stated thusly in one of our leaflets: “In order to create a lasting community of resistance, we must establish systems for health support (midwives, health collectives, etc.), so that we are no longer vulnerable to the patriarchal medical establishment or an oppressive government. Why grovel before the courts and legislatures again to ask for that which is already ours? Let’s take control of our bodies and our lives!”

It contrasts with the leftist/liberal slogan of “Free Abortion on Demand” which means that women remain dependent on the state and a medical bureaucracy for their vital health concerns. This is consistent with the left/liberal world view where the “citizen” of the nation state is the consumer of “services” provided by the government. It is also the prescription for continuing the tyranny of statism.

The highlight of the day was our impromptu march to the U.S. Supreme Court building which lies a couple of miles across the Mall stretching between the Lincoln Memorial and the Capitol Building. Flanking the Mall lay the bastions of government—immense, doric-columned buildings reflecting an imperial style of architecture designed to give supremacy to political abstractions such as law and the state while dwarfing humans by comparison. One jolt to this landscape was the presence of several homeless people sleeping on the white marble steps of the headquarters of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

## **Chanting and Dancing**

We were hoping to generate participation from the quickly dwindling rally crowd, but after learning that a meeting was being called by the leftist Progressive Student Network (PSN) beside the reflecting pool and that they were not ready to begin a march, we decided to go on ahead to the Supreme Court and to meet the student and youth contingent there.

Several of us were wary of the PSN, a network of independent student groups on many midwest campuses, because of its traditional leftist politics and apologies for socialist states and movements. However, we were hopeful that its loose structure would make it possible to relate to individuals rather than an organization with which we have little in common.

Spirits were high as we arrived at the Court and immediately began an energetic drumming circle which led into singing, dancing and chanting. Also, spontaneous guerrilla theatre and a die-in took the edge off what was a somewhat nervous hour under the scrutiny of the cops who were getting more pushy and threatening as their numbers grew.

As we looked across the Mall, we were buoyed to see the PSN contingent of about 400 led by huge banners surging across the street towards us. They were met by a rapidly forming skirmish line of cops complete with dogs and riot gear. A few moments of pushing and shoving between us and the cops ensued until it became clear that they were not going to let us get any closer to the Court without serious hassle.

Our happiness at seeing our numbers swell and the possibility of increasing the militancy was quickly dashed, however, when we realized that the PSN leaders intended their presence on the scene to be brief and well-controlled—by them. PSN women with bullhorns fanned out through the crowd yelling official chants, denying our attempt at self-initiated activity. When one of our number objected, she was told she was jeopardizing the safety of the crowd by being “provocative.”

After giving a few quick speeches, a PSN bullhorn announced, “We can no longer be responsible for your security,” and that they were leaving. They advised us to do the same. We don’t know if PSN is a front group for any of the existing leninist organizations, but if it isn’t, some leftoid sect is getting cheated out of its dues.

It was sort of a downer way to end the day, but after the large PSN group left the scene, some of us remained and talked about the event. Overall, we felt that our participation had been positive and a way of creating a radical identity independent of the left/liberal politics which almost always dominate such mass events. Without such a distinction, one becomes just another “warm body” for the event organizers to tally.

To have been more effective, we certainly should have begun our efforts much earlier to announce the intention of forming a separate anti-authoritarian/anarchist contingent. Also, we should have had a specific, separate action planned to announce in advance and leaflets to distribute to the rally crowd. As it was, most people who saw us probably were unsure of exactly what we were all about.

But all told, it was a good experience for most of us: we met people we want to stay in contact with, learned a lot and are ready for the next event.

For further ideas: “Women’s Freedom: Key to the Population Question” by George Bradford in *How Deep is Deep Ecology*; \$5 from FE Books.

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