

## **Equality for some, inequality for most...**

An interview with Lisa Daniells, operational director of the Women's Press Collective (WPC), Brooklyn, NY (USA).

By Natalie Benelli

Women's Press Collective is an all-volunteer, non-government funded, membership organization in Brooklyn, NY, that was founded in 1982 to advance the cause of low-income workers, especially women workers, through organizing alternative publication resources.

WPC's membership includes low-income workers, community and labor organizers, writers, graphic artists, printers and other media workers throughout New York City.

WPC members organize a free-of charge Publication Benefit Program where members teach members writing, graphic design, printing, and publication production, aiding in the production of publications that can be used as organizing tools. In addition, the organization publishes *Collective Endeavor*, a quarterly magazine entirely produced by its members.

As Operation Manager, Lisa Daniell is in charge of WPC's day-to-day operations, strategic planning and expansion. Daily activities include membership and volunteer outreach; running and expanding the benefit system; fundraising; teaching classes on labor history; outreach to leaders in the labor movement and in women's organizations; recruiting and training new organizers.

### **You have been a full-time organizer with Women's Press Collective for 17 years. What circumstances drew you to WPC?**

I joined WPC when I was 24. But I didn't just wander into that office one day and decide to change my life for no apparent reason. It had to do with the things that I had seen when I was growing up. Things that made me angry. I was raised in Palo Alto, a suburb of San Francisco, California. Unlike a lot of suburbs it had a great disparity between wealthy and poor people. Palo Alto is in the heart of Silicon Valley. Its economic motor was the computer industry. IBM had facilities there. Stanford University is there. Stanford was a job base and also its research funding could be used as a motor for industrial development in Silicon Valley. Around Stanford lived high-income people. And then there was East Palo Alto which was very poor, Black, Latino and Pacific Islander. In the early 1990s East Palo Alto had one of the highest per capita murder rate in the entire United States. And that was a result of poverty.

My family was economically and geographically in the middle of these areas of money and great poverty. Palo Alto was separated from East Palo Alto by Highway 101, and we lived just on the Palo Alto side of the highway. So from my upbringing as a child I was conscious of economic disparity.

Politically Palo Alto was also an area of conflict and contradictions. On Stanford University Campus was the very conservative Hoover Institute named after Jay Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI during the era of the Counter Intelligence Program (1956-1971)<sup>1</sup>. Hoover directed the infiltration of the Black Panther Party<sup>2</sup> and the Civil Rights Movements<sup>3</sup> of the 1960s. At the same time, there was radical organizing going on in and around Palo Alto through the 1960s and the 1970s, including the student movement at Stanford, the Black Panther Party which was active in East Palo Alto doing food distributions through the People's Free Food Program, as well as labor organizing in production facilities for the computer and defense industries. Although I was too young to be directly influenced by the activism of that time, the atmosphere and consciousness of the need for change affected my parents who in turn raised me as a socially aware individual.

**You came to New York City in 1991 at the age of 21. How did entering the working world make you understand economic reality and the power of organizing working people?**

While growing up in Palo Alto made me aware of economic disparities, I couldn't really understand why things were the way they were. Nobody around me was giving me a good answer as to why reality was what it was and what could be done to change it. When I got into the working world myself I started to understand how economic disparities are created by the economic system itself.

I moved to New York in 1991 to go to art school, but left in the semester because I realized that this was not something I could spend my life doing. So I started doing jobs through temporary work agencies. I would get assigned out to different industries to work as a secretary for three months or two months or two weeks. A lot of the assignments were at Wall

---

<sup>1</sup> The Counter Intelligence Program – or COINTELPRO – was a series of covert and often illegal projects conducted by the FBI, aimed at surveilling, infiltrating, discrediting, and disrupting domestic political organizations, in particular communist and socialist organizations and organizations and individuals associated with the Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>2</sup> The Black Panther Party is an African-American revolutionary organization founded in 1966 in Oakland, California, by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale.

<sup>3</sup> The Civil Rights Movement in the United States (1955-1968) aimed at outlawing racial discrimination against African Americans.

Street firms. I had one assignment working on a trading floor. It was a giant, stadium-sized room. All through the room were desks, desk up against desk, row after row after row. At these tight little desks with several computer screens and phone lines, brokers were trading, making deals, buying, selling, screaming, yelling, cheering. It was pure chaos.

The secretaries sat at the perimeter of the room on a raised platform. So we actually had this kind of bird's view of this market of speculation. And you could see that huge sums of money were trading hands. The brokers, mostly men, their job was to invest the money of wealthy people, and they'd get a cut out of what they made. But they were still highly-paid working people trying to get their kids through college, because in this country higher education is very expensive. Many people borrow thousands of dollars, even more than 100,000 dollars to go to college. This year, college loan debt has exceeded credit card debts in the U.S. The highly paid brokers are often the first to be laid off when there is a down-turn at Wall Street. So here was a concentrated base of speculative transactions with millions of dollars trading hands. But what was the impact on people from all of this money changing hands? What happens to small farmers in Mexico when there is major trading in the coffee futures market, or if the value of the Mexican Peso sinks? The impact on people is not a factor considered in these transaction. It just isn't a factor.

I was part of the workforce that would show up every morning to Wall Street, answer their phones, type their letters or whatever they wanted me to do. And I would get out of the subway in the morning and look up these huge buildings, 60 stories tall, 80 stories tall, the center of high finance and concentrated economic power. I can remember thinking what if all the secretaries, all the maintenance workers, all the people who repair their computers, all the people who sweep their floors, what if all of us just refused to go in there? This whole thing would come shuttering down! The systemic nature of the problem became very clear to me. So it was at Wall Street that I first realized the potential power of organizing workers together.

### **What was your experience as a political activist back then?**

At the time I wasn't politically active. I didn't have that kind of background. But I did some volunteering. And I saw approaches that wouldn't work. For example I volunteered at an organization called "Women In Need." They would bus white women from Manhattan up to the South Bronx, one of New York's poorest neighborhoods, to baby-sit the children of black and latina women while they went to their Alcoholics Anonymous or their Narcotics Anonymous meeting. I understood that this was not going to solve any of these women's

problems. This sort of band-aid, charitable approach wouldn't touch the cause of why these women were poor or why they turned to narcotics.

When I met Women's Press Collective in June 1994 it was the first time that I encountered people who called themselves organizers and who talked about strategies and tactics for changing things. And who not only talked about it, but were doing something about it. It made a big impression on me that there was actually the option to engage one's life in organizing for succinct social and economic change.

**You still had a job when you met Women's Press Collective. What made you decide to quit the job and become a full-time organizer?**

I met WPC at a literature table. I walked through a street fair in my neighborhood and somebody came out of the crowd with a leaflet and a pitch. I signed up and started volunteering. From the beginning I could see it wasn't volunteering in the same way that I had done before. From the first day it was clear that I was talking to people who were serious about changing things and giving me the opportunity to take part in what they did. That was very attractive to me.

At the time I worked as a secretary on contract at Scholastic, a major U.S. publisher. You sign a three months contract and they give you a paycheck for three months. No health care benefits, no nothing. When I left the job to become an organizer I didn't give up something that would have offered me a future.

With WPC I started to learn about the idea of strategy and tactics in organizing. I learned through self-study and the books, classes, and information available at WPC. The history of organizing gives you a perspective and an understanding that you don't just have to accept things the way they are. We don't have to be just objects of a system. As an organized people we can affect change. We can reposition ourselves such that we are subjects who have a possibility to determine where our society is headed. That's what I learned. I started full-time volunteer organizing after two months, in August of 1994.

**That is when you decided not to have a salary anymore, not to have your own money any more. Why would someone renounce the possibility of a middle-class life?**

The middle-class of the post World-War-II generation—which was my parents'—was a temporary reality for a small portion of the U.S. population. My generation does not have that expectation. We don't expect to go a step up economically from where our parents were. My

father was a computer programmer. He left IBM and tried to start his own company, but he's probably the last generation that could have had a cradle-to-grave job.

In the 1970s job opportunities started to be taken away from the "middle class" or higher-paid working people. The average working person in the United States today has seven to eight different employers. People have more and more difficulties in finding a job, regardless of their level of education, their work history, or their work ethic and dedication. My father was a contract worker. After the dot-com collapse in Silicon Valley in 2001, he could not get contracts. He has a Ph.D. from Stanford. He's highly regarded in his work. He's hard-working and smart. But there was no more place in the job market for him.

Millions and millions of Americans at all levels, from low-paid unskilled workers to highly educated, specifically trained workers are finding that there is no place for them. It's *possible* that I could have made it at some level, having a comfortable life and working at a job that provided enough income so that I wouldn't have to worry about the bills. But maybe not. And we definitely couldn't *all* make it within the current U.S. economic system.

My desire was to see what we can do to make sure that we can *all* make it. That we can *all* live with some level of basic decency, dignity, and respect. For many people who considered themselves "middle-class," it never occurred to them that they would be homeless. Now there's millions of people in the U.S. today who are homeless who never thought that they would be in that position.

**As a full-time volunteer organizer, you depend on the community to have a bed, food, health care, everything. That's not the way it's supposed to be according to dominant Western values like self-sufficiency and economic independence.**

Economic independence and self-sufficiency are fictions. If I were to have pursued a job in publishing I would be participating in a process of production and my paycheck would come to me out of the value created by many many many people, from the workers of the paper manufacturer that the book is printed on, to the maintenance staff that cleans the office. In today's global economy there's no way that somebody is literally self-sufficient in how they support themselves. Here in the US, we're part of a larger economic process that is not under control for working people. You have money as long as your employer decides he's going to give you money. As soon as you lose your employer you don't have money anymore. As a full-time volunteer organizer I have food, I have a place to stay, I have the basic things I need. And I can invest my time and work in organizing alternative media that will truly advance the

voice and the leadership of working people and can cut-through some of the mis-information and dis-information of the corporately-controlled media.

The U.S. media promulgates a notion of what one's life should be like which is also a fiction. Let's take the television show *Desperate Housewives*. These women apparently don't work. They have these big houses, and they can be totally self-concerned about themselves week after week without losing their house or having no food. It's a fiction. The vast majority of women in the United States are dealing with making an income one way or the other, raising a family, getting food, getting shelter.

**Women's Press Collective is an organization for both women and men. Can you tell us why the organization's name refers only to women and what your position is on women's issues in general?**

The genesis of Women's Press Collective was inspired by the "Second International Conference of Agricultural and Working Women" that was held in McAllen, Texas in 1981 with representatives of women's organizations from North America, Mexico, and Central America attending. The conference was hosted by Texas Farm Workers Union which had a strong base of rank-and-file female leadership from farm workers. 53% of agricultural work in the United States is done by women. Worldwide it's an even larger percentage.

The women from developing nations brought a very different perspective to the conference than that of the mainstream US women's movement which in the early 1980s had become largely a middle-class movement. For these poor working women from Latin America countries women's issues were not about the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), bra-burning, wearing pants to work or how high you can rise in a company before hitting the "glass ceiling". Nor was parity pay with men doing the same job an issue, when neither men nor women were being paid enough to live on. The mainstream women's movement issues didn't have anything to do with their lives. Most women are not in line to be the next CEO of some big corporation.

Some of the women at the conference were from Latin America where their families for generations had made a livelihood through subsistence farming on small plots of land. By the early 1980s huge multinational agribusinesses like United Fruit had come in, bought up land, and destroyed the ability of these families to make a living through subsistence farming.

These women needed to wrest economic and political control from their governments and the foreign investors they catered to, and return it to the workers and indigenous populations of their countries. That was the kind of struggle that needed to be taking place to really make a

difference in their lives. So our founders wanted to build a women's movement that would truly uphold the interests of women, a majority of whom are poor.

Only a very small percentage of working women have the option of climbing up the corporate ladder. But once they're up there, in order to keep those positions they must engage in the same economic policies as male CEOs, they are now responsible for the investors' economic interests. For example, Mattel Toy Corporation had a female CEO in the late 1990s. The company used the labor of Malaysian women making Barbie Dolls in their homes. Trucks would deliver giant garbage bags full of Barbie Doll parts to the villages of these women whose job it was to assemble the dolls for 50 cents a bag. So there is an example of a woman who made it, who got up the corporate ladder, breaking through gender barriers. But she did it on the backs of tens of thousands of poor women in the developing world, creating products that fund seven-figure salaries and generate wealth. The goal is not to have a situation where a handful of people are making billions of dollars out of the work and the poverty of millions of people who have not enough to eat.

So WPC was founded by women, but has never excluded men. We never took the position that the fundamental cause or reason for the oppression of women is men. This doesn't mean that we are not conscious of discrimination against women in this country. There is still a wage gap between men and women. For every dollar a man makes, a woman makes 72 cents. The gap grows when race is factored in. For African-American women it's 69 cents on the dollar and for Latina women it's 58 cents on the dollar. This wage gap represents millions and millions of dollars of unpaid wages into the households of working families.

Women workers as a group are specifically targeted as cheap labor. During World Wars I and World War II, in the U.S. women were used as lower-cost labor to manufacture weapons and other war materiel. The government ramped up a propaganda campaign encouraging the patriotism of women to get them come to work in the war industry and also to discourage them from unionizing while working at industrial jobs. When the war was winding down the government changed its propaganda to tell women it was time to go back home. The war munitions corporations made billions of dollar profits off that war by abusing women's work and paying them less money to make more profit.

### **How does WPC see the role of women leadership and organizing?**

We believe that the ability to change the situation for women and men workers requires women's leadership. Women have always played a leadership role in the organizing efforts of the poor, because women are a majority of the poor. And the primary economic burden of

families falls on the shoulders of women. In the United States two-thirds of households rely on women's wages, and in 40% of households women's wages are the only or the primary source of income. Rates of male unemployment are very high due in part to the decrease in traditionally male manufacturing jobs. In Brooklyn, where WPC's office is located, official unemployment for Black men has been as high as 50%. The portions of the U.S. economy that have grown or at least haven't shrunk are service jobs, traditionally women's work: health care services, teaching, child care. These are lower paid jobs. As a result of this shift from a production to a service economy, the average real wages for U.S. workers have steadily fallen since the 1970s. In 2009 women became half of pay-check earners in the United States. Women are the growing part of the workforce and therefore, if organized can become a potentially powerful force for change. Thus the ability of women workers to do effective political organizing is critical for the whole economy as well as for individual households. At the same time, we try to build an understanding of common purpose and interest between workers regardless of their sex. Otherwise men and women workers just get continuously pitted one against the other.

**Your analysis gives a whole different meaning to the fact that women are the majority of the workforce. Generally we think it means that women are making it.**

Most women have always worked. They have done domestic work, child care, agricultural work, housecleaning. But it's low-paid or unpaid work. The right to work was one of the issues of the mainstream women's movement during the 1970s and the 1980s that didn't mean anything for poor women. For them that was crazy. , What do you mean I have the right to work? I'm already working. I work myself to death! And then I come home and have to cook.'

The fact that women are now 50% of the paid workforce also indicates the trend toward higher unemployment for men, but it is still based on the idea that women will work for less, so a company trying to increase its profits can reduce its overall labor cost by hiring more women than men.

**This analysis is part of what grounds your criticism of the mainstream feminist movement. Can you tell us a bit more about that?**

From our inception we did have criticism of what portions of the mainstream women's movement had become in practice. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the focus of the women's movement had largely narrowed into a legislative effort to pass an equal rights amendment

to the U.S. constitution. It was a focal point in the women's movement at the time. But it was harmful for women doing physical work, women farm workers for example, as shows the case of California. The Equal Rights Amendment never passed the national level, but the State of California passed the Equal Rights Amendment for California. And almost immediately the big agribusiness employers used the legislation as a way to eliminate protective legislation for women farm workers because now it was unequal to have any difference between women and men. They could declare the protective legislation to be unconstitutional. The call for equal opportunity with men made sense if you were trying to be the next bank vice-president or president. For women farm workers it didn't make sense, because the guy working next to them in the field is poor, too. If anything he's subjected to more strenuous, more dangerous working conditions, so why would I want to be equal with him? It's a slogan that doesn't make sense at that level.

**Let's talk about independent media which is another element of Women's Press Collective.**

This also goes back to the 1981 women's conference in McAllan, Texas. An international conference of poor women wasn't something the mainstream media would cover. 90% of the media in this country is owned by 5 big corporations who are there to fundamentally serve their shareholders. They are not reliable allies to advance the voice and cause of low-income working people. We needed to establish media that was under the control of working people and didn't have ties to a corporate structure or the government. We build independent media and publications production to be used as organizing tools, rather than for intellectual debate or consciousness raising. Consciousness raising alone is not enough to change things. Everybody knows that most of the world is poor. But knowing that is not sufficient to fundamentally change things and actually eliminate the problem. So we want poor people and working people to have access to media. They need a way to get the word out, a way to produce media that serves the organizing they are trying to do. That's why we started our free-of-charge publishing benefit program where we teach writing, graphic design and printing. Somebody who is trying to organize can come and have access to the resources they need to produce media for their organizing strategy. For example over the summer of 2010 we had three women join because they wanted to start volunteer organizations to address problems in their own communities. We aided them in developing an organizing strategy and then writing, designing, and printing the initial brochures to begin the recruitment process. Our benefit program is build on the historically proven truth that there is strength in

organization. We see that every day in our office: if you bring together a writer, a graphic designer, a printer, the machines, you have the power to make something happen. Because it does matter who has the power of the media, the power of getting a message out. In the 1960s there was a film about migrant farmworkers called *Harvest of Shame*. The filmmaker and journalist, Edward R. Murrow, was very sympathetic to the cause of the poor agricultural workers, earning a dollar a day, living in terrible conditions, without potable water and in terrible sanitation facilities. He was imploring his audience to be outraged about the situation and to do something. The film was aired nationwide, prime time on television, and it did cause a reaction on the part of the viewership. But the response did not benefit farmworkers. In New York State the government passed a law which baned women and children from the farm labor camps to protect them against these terrible work conditions. So what it did was breaking up families. Dad was gone, mom and the kids stayed home in Georgia still trying to make a living. The film itself and even the response to it didn't change the position of farm workers. It didn't position farm workers to have a more powerful political voice to determine a solution to their plight. It left them objectified, as objects being interviewed, and people outside of the situation made decisions which ultimately did more harm than good in some cases. We also know that in the U.S., organizations of poor and working people have often been mis-represented or maligned by media controlled by wealth and interests. We want to bring the potential power of the media into the hands of poor people and their own organizations so that they can develop media that is going to meet their strategies and their organizing.

**As a full-time organizer, you have no income. How does Women's Press Collective enable people to become full-time organizers regardless of their material situation?**

For people with money there are fewer material obstacles to organizing. That was for example the case of portions of the Civil Rights Movement, where white middle class students from the North went South to fight the Jim Crow laws<sup>4</sup>. These students took brave actions and risked their lives. If they didn't have a family to support and came from a family with some money, they could more easily afford to take the summer off and do a voter registration drive than, for example, a student from a poor family who may have wanted to organize. Systemic organizing, the method we use, was in part developed to solve this contradiction and ensure

---

<sup>4</sup> The Jim Crow laws were state and local laws in the United States enacted between 1876 and 1964. They mandated *de jure* racial segregation in all public facilities and systematized economic, educational, and social discrimination of black Americans.

that anybody could be an organizer. The method was developed through the U.S. farm labor movement in the 1970s. Instead of paying salaries, the organization generates in-kind resources to cover all the material needs of full-time organizers : food, housing, transportation, clothing, etc. The support comes from the organizing itself.

That draws on the history and the tradition of this country as well, especially the Civil Rights Movement and the Labor Movement. People in the community would put up the organizers. They would support them not through pay, but by giving them a bed and food. Our method, systemic organizing, systematizes that. We develop support in the community as a part of our strategy. We receive food donations from grocery stores and delis for meals for all volunteers at our office during meal time. And we provide housing for full-time organizers through the hospitality of members and supporters, so that everybody can become an organizer regardless of their resources. Because we think that the people most affected by a problem have to be in a position of leadership to solve it. Organizing is a vehicle of change, a vehicle to build a different position for working people. It's a vehicle to give working people, particularly working women, the opportunity to engage in political struggle.

WPC is open 7 days a week. WPC's magazine Collective Endeavor is open to submissions of articles on working women from all over the world.

Contact: Women's Press Collective, 68 12<sup>th</sup> Street, Brooklyn, NY 11215, United States

Telephone: +1 718-222-0405