The Persistent Power of Socialist Feminism
Radical Women National Conference
San Francisco, California
Women & revolution - alive and inseparable!
October 3, 2008

By Nellie Wong

Good morning! Buenos dias! Jo sun!

It's wonderful to be here with all of you to celebrate Radical Women's 41st Anniversary. Radical Women, turning to a ripe, vibrant age of revolutionary feminism. From the first Socialist Feminist Conference held in 1975 in Ohio where six convening organizations met, we're the only one still alive! As in Stephen Sondheim's beautiful song, we're still here.

In the days ahead, we've a sumptuous feast of revolutionary ideas, scintillating discussions and just desserts to work together. We'll talk about why women and revolution are alive and inseparable. We'll plan and act and organize for the total liberation of women. Because when women are free, everyone will be free!

First, I'd like to dedicate this opening to the women revolutionary fighters of the world. Some of these women are Lolita Lebron, Lucy Gonzales Parsons, Rosa Luxemborg, Jiu Jin, Clara Zetkin, Mariana Grajales, Clara Fraser and Celia Hart Santamaria. Celia Hart, daughter of Cuban revolutionaries, in September, died along with her brother in a tragic automobile accident.. She was a physicist, teacher and writer and a dedicated and eloquent feminist whose work was shining the light in Cuba on the work of Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian Revolution. In one of this remarkable woman's essays, "We are always living the Revolution in Cuba, she says:

> Being a revolutionary is the nicest and hardest thing, it is the greatest duty, but there is no cheaper way to be happy.

To be happy. Isn't that the quintessential goal? But women do not seek a false happiness, a bourgeois happiness, thrown in our faces to keep us compliant and supposedly satisfied. Be happy with crumbs thrown us at home, at work, on the streets or while crossing the border to find work?

Of course not. The kind of happiness that Celia Hart refers to is what I call revolutionary happiness that millions of women all over the world seek.

> To be free from slavery as girls, as women, as mothers, as daughters
> To be free from exploitation as wives, as lovers, as workers, as immigrants
> To be free from a global economic system—capitalism—that engenders race,

sex and job exploitation and violence against our bodies
To be free to be radical, to be revolutionaries

Whether we're straight, queer, black, white, Jewish, Arab, Latina/Chicana, Indian or Asian Pacific Islander, of mixed race, native or foreign born, disabled, young, old, or in our mid-years, women comprise the most oppressed half of every society.

Aren't we fed up with the same ol' same ol' economic system that may give us a crack at the vice presidency or more seats in the boardroom—if we behave and non-threatening to the status quo--and look good while we're at it?

Aren't we fed up with the mortgage crisis and the government bailing out to the tune of $700 billion the richest CEO's, bankers, and demagogues in finance institutions such as Bear Stearns, Fannie Mae, Freddy Mac and the like?

Hundreds of protestors took their outrage to Wall Street on Thursday, September 25. Here are some quotes

> These people are thieves and belong in jail, said Sol McCants, 54, McCain's trying to make it look like he's doing a great thing, but he's not. That scumbag doesn't want to face the questions because he was behind the savings and loan.

And this one I especially like:

> I don't think the Democrats are much better, said Eva-Lee Baird, 68, of the Granny Peace Brigade—noting that many of the Depression-era controls on imprudent investments were taken away under Bill Clinton. ("Protesters Take Their Outrage to Wall Street," Steven Wishnia, *Alternet*, 9/26/08)

Aren't we fed up with thieves in business suits who take from the poor and the workers—us—to enrich themselves and their minions? It's Robin Hood in reverse and it stinks!

If it's socialism only for the rich, we reject it. We need socialism for the entire globe and socialist feminism is key to the long, hard fight for a better world. Because it's capitalism that must be overthrown. Because the worse financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s represents that financial wizardry has run amok and there is no "Yellow Brick Road" to capitalist salvation.

Women and revolution are alive and inseparable! Women and youth, hit the hardest from the economic fallouts are central to the building and ushering in of an economic system that will be vibrant and fulfilling, that will have us planning an economy to feed, house and educate all of us because profits will be booted out of the fabric of our lives. As Celia Hart says, there is no cheaper way to be happy.

Many of us work long hours in a hotel cleaning rooms and still have to clean, cook and feed the family, do the laundry and help the kids with homework. Many of us sit at computers all day long making sure that deliveries are made or that our bosses's manuscripts are typed. Many of us still, like that Ms. Magazine cover years ago, balance children, irons, pots, laundry with both arms. Many of us pluck chickens, snap tops on bottles or insert miniscule parts into computers in factories.

Many of us are told to work harder and smarter with less pay and to pay more into health care at $10 an hour or less. Many of us immigrant women lose our homes and our families and get deported, even if our children are born in the U.S.

Oh, yeah, Mr. Capitalist, Major Exploiter, Land Robber, CEO Scoundrel, War Monger, Bail-Out-Wall-Street Rascal, you love working us to death. Make us sell our bodies to feed the kids or get an education. Force us to buy pencils and books and medications. Profit is your king and we know it and we say enough!

Women say no! Like our sisters before us, those revolutionaries, many of whom are unsung, we are alive, able and willing to fight for a better world! Celia Hart and the other women leaders leave us a legacy: one that is beautiful, one that empowers us, one that will lead us toward victory of socialism and feminism. This weekend, we continue the fight for women's liberation because it's as necessary as breathing,

Home grown

In my own revolutionary path, I am home grown in Oakland, the first U.S.-born daughter of immigrants from south China. My father immigrated in 1912 and my mother in 1933, towing my three older sisters from a small, impoverished village in Toisan in the province of Guangzhou. Three more children were born in Oakland. We seven children grew up in Oakland's Chinatown during the '30s, '40s aned '50s. Most of the Chinese immigrants worked as domestics, washing laundry, caning chairs, fishing, canning, sewing and operating small herb and food stores.

With each birth of a daughter, my mother wept because more than anything, a son was desired to carry on the family name. I did not know what this meant when I was a girl. But I began to ask questions albeit in silence. Cultural norms – from a small village in China to Chinatown in Oakland, California and, yes, sexism – prevailed while Asian immigrants took the taunts of "Ching Chong Chinamen" and told to go back where they belonged. Girls don't talk or make their opinions known. Movie and teen magazines told me how I should behave, how I should look and if I didn't snag a man to marry me, woe and self-pity were my reward.

Fortunately, things changed. The personal is political, and my experience—and that of other sisters and brothers—interpenetrates our very lives. We are not isolated, we are not alone nor are we condemned to live as victims on planet earth—because of our race, because of our gender, because of our economic class.

It was damned exciting for me to finally go to college—in my mid-thirties--for the first time. Here I was, a mere secretary, so I thought, going to school! Wow. I'd meet young women and men who'd show me the way. I'd find out what the world is about. I'd exhilarate in what the experts in the humanities, in art and literature, would tell me how to contribute to society. Hell, somebody had to tell me what to do!

Meeting Radical Women

Meeting Radical Women at San Francisco State in the early 70s was pivotal to turning my life around. And, of course, learning about our history as women, as working people, as people of color, as agents of change, radical change—coalesced in community with others. I never knew such a socialist feminist organization existed.

I'd been a joiner in high school and as a young woman. Groups like the Oakland Chinese Bowling Club attracted me. Becoming an active part of a political women's organization opened up opportunities that I'd not been aware of: those of speaking out, debating and making decisions and organizing to get what we need. That I had a role in making things happen appealed to my once-private self and which led me to become the first organizer of the Women Writers Union that began at San Francisco State.

Radical Women has a rich history. It started in 1967. Clara Fraser, Gloria Martin and Melba Windoffer, socialists, mothers, working women and organizers all, founded RW because it was desperately needed to fight sexism in the left and in society. Leadership was a concept that burned brightly for these highly conscious activists. RW grew, first at the University of Washington campus, and blossomed into the community. Abortion rights was first won in Seattle, WA., and the lively, socialist feminist organization, led with African American women fighting poverty as well as daring to be revolutionaries. Veteran RW members fought alongside the Black Panthers against racism and for breakfast and educational programs and made possible that women could do what was considered men's work at Seattle City Light.

Learning the history of RW radicalized me further while I studied and continued to work as a secretary at Bethlehem Steel. A fighting women's organization—how powerful, how exciting, how revolutionary was that?

Organizing, for example, against rightwing fundamentalist bigots who told women that we had no right to decide what to do with our own bodies. Holding the line against anti-woman and racist taunts at women's clinics, having rightwingers—women and men—skoosh between our legs as we defenders of reproductive justice linked arms and chanted, "Our Bodies, Our Lives, Our Right to Decide!" And being asked if we had AIDS since we defended women's right to choose! This was the kind of education that socked me in the eye. This was the kind of education that said, "Fight back!"

What I was taking part in wasn't for action for action's sake because RW offered theory and practice. RW offered study and activism and artistic expression. And most beautiful of all, RW made leadership a reality, one that sisters could breathe and believe.

Being on the revolutionary path with Radical Women, and with our sister organization, the Freedom Socialist Party, is the best gift in the world. As Clara Fraser, a co-founder of RW, has said

> …I learned that the act of fighting injustice is full of hope
> And joy when it is voiced and properly so, as a slice of innate
> historical condition, an ancient reaching out for universal
> human fulfillment. (*Revolution She Wrote* by Clara Fraser)

Today, we need RW's bold vision and tenacity more than ever.

Seeking liberation. Finding life. Working at low-paying secretarial jobs. Getting demoted because I was *planning* have a baby. Being asked by my female supervisor: If we had a fight, which side would you be on? His, because he is Chinese? Or mine because I am a woman? Being told I could not attend meetings of sales representatives because I wanted to know too much!

Seeking liberation. Finding voice. Organizing with the Women Writers Union at San Francisco State. Demanding the inclusion of more women and people of color faculty in Creative Writing and Literature. Debating with lesbian separatists for the right to be a straight feminist.

Seeking liberation. Finding community. My gender, my ethnicity, my working-class roots. Fighting racist and sexist stereotypes in film and literature. One Asian American's story is not all Asian Americans' stories. Charlie Chan a fake Asian played by whites. Defending a revolutionary Japanese American Wendy Yoshimura. Supporting Asian and Latina garment workers from race, sex and wage exploitation. Organizing for a sexually abused African American woman who defended herself. Co-founding an Asian American feminist writing collective, Unbound Feet.

I stayed active all these years because I realized there was power in working in an organization. Doing things alone—bowling alone, if you will—changes nothing. Working with sisters and brothers toward a common goal accelerated my quest for personal freedom toward collective power.

I sought out the art and literature of women of color in particular and those of other countries, especially workers and revolutionary fighters. One of the poems I discovered was "Woman":

> How sad it is to be a woman!
> Nothing on earth is held so cheap.
> Boys stand leaning at the door
> Like Gods fallen out of Heaven
> Their hearts brave the Four Oceans.
> The wind and dust of a thousand miles.

No one is glad when a girl is born;
By *her* the family sets no store.
When she grows up, she hides in her room
Afraid to look at a man in the face.
No one cries when she leaves her home—
Sudden as the clouds when the rain stops.
She bows her head and composes her face,
Her teeth are pressed on her red lips;
She bows and kneels countless times.
She must humble herself even to the servants,
His love is distant as the stars in Heaven,
Yet the sunflower bends toward the sun.
Their hearts more sundered than water and fire—
A hundred evils are heaped upon her.
Her face will follow the years' changes
Her lord will find new pleasures.

--Fu Hsuan
Died A.D.278
Translated by Arthur Waley

Although the poem is ancient, it describes the degraded condition of women in old China.

But women have not always been victims of mistreatment and sexist degradation at the hands of men, under a patriarchal, feudalist and hierarchical system.

In the ancient matriarchy, women were leaders. Radical Women agrees with Marx and with Frederick Engels's classic work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* that the first division of humans into oppressed and oppressor occurred between men and women. We women held property communally. Then patriarchy descended and property was placed in private hands.

Engels does not ascribe the battle between the sexes to any inherent evil in one gender, but rather to the inexorable development of technology (the forces of production) and the corresponding upheavals in culture and family formations. This method of analysis is called "historical materialism." (*The Radical Women Manifesto,* pp. 21-22).

We women were once equal. Our position in society stems directly from our role in social production, not from biology. Class difference did not exist. The source of women's power was in the original, gender-based division of labor. But when surpluses first developed through the introduction of domestic herds of cattle, it was the division of labor that gave rise to conflict and the subjugation of the female sex.

Primitive communism was supplanted by private property and mother-right was overthrown by father-right (patriarchy). The monogamous family unit emerged as a cruel mechanism devised for the perpetuation of private property through the sexual fidelity of

the wife. A brutal system of control over women was imposed and eventually crystallized with the invention of the state to serve as the ultimate repressive authority.

Pre-revolutionary China, the native country of my immigrant parents, is but one example of how women were treated: as property, bought and sold into domestic servitude and into prostitution, without rights, without voice, numerous women, for a thousand years, had their feet bound to keep them in place. Education for women was the province of the upper class. My mother and her female ancestors were uneducated peasants who worked the land to survive.

Understanding the origin of women's oppression is crucial for the road ahead. That understanding, coupled with women's experience throughout the world, leads to socialist feminism from which flowers our work for total liberation of the female sex.

Fighting the world is women's work

As a secretary for most of my working life, I experienced, along with my female co-workers, just how discriminated we were. Being low paid was one thing. Fighting for breaks and even the right to dress in pants was another. Child care? That was our personal responsibility. Unions did not exist in most of the places that I worked. A secretarial perk in the form of lunch with the boss on National Secretaries Day was the norm.

But I had my skills: typing, shorthand, filing, bookkeeping and coordinating meetings and conferences. And while I was a wage slave, I could think and I could talk with my co-workers and realized that I did not have to go with the status quo and that we workers could organize. One of the most important revelations of my being a white-collar worker was this: we office workers—mostly women and people of color—could shut this country down! But this was only possible by my meeting other radicals, talking to them, studying feminist, labor and radical history. And having an open mind. My mind was so closed before so the ideas propelled forward linking my experiences to those of other working women, Asian, Black, Chicana, Native, white, Jewish, lesbian women, and sisters with disabilities.

Karen Brodine, socialist feminist worker-poet, from her extraordinary book, *Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking,* writes:

> when she sits at the machine, rays from the cathode stream
> directly into her chest. When she worked as a clerk, the rays
> from the Xerox angled upward, striking her under the chin.
> when she waited tables the micro ovens at stomach level.
> when she typeset for Safeway, dipping her hands in processor
> chemicals, her hands burned and peeled and her chest ached
> from the fumes.
>
> well we know who makes everything we use or can't use,

as the world piles itself up on the bones of the years,
so our labor gathers.

while we sell ourselves in fractions. They don't want us all
at once, but hour by hour, piece by piece. Our hands mainly
and our backs. And chunks of our brains. And veiled expressions
on our faces, they buy. Though they don't know what actual
thoughts stand behind our eyes.

then they toss the body out on the sidewalk at noon and at five,
then they spit the body out the door at sixty-five.

Indeed, this worker-poet's voice rises not from any ivory tower, but deep from the workplace, and from the real experiences of most women, poor and working class.

Karen had urged me to write about work. I had asked her why. And she said it's about our lives. What I once thought as personal, having to work as a secretary to make a living—until I got married--transformed my life's work as a feminist toward being a socialist feminist revolutionary.

The movements and triumphs of women workers the world over are many. But in a sexist world, dominated by the ruling class and a patriarchal, global economic system hell-bent for insatiable profits affect our very lives: inside the home, in the workplace and in our communities..

But women survive, women organize, women fight back, and women lead!

--Women textile workers started the 1917 Russian Revolution.
--Chinese and Vietnamese women fought in the revolutions of their countries
--Women fought alongside men in the Cuban Revolution
--Mexicanas showed their valor in the Mexican Revolution of 1910
--African women marched and died to end apartheid
--Palestinian and Jewish women demand an end to the occupation of Palestine
--Women of Iraq fight against Islamic Sharia law that demand their obedience without question and for the separation of church and state in Kurdistan
--In India, indigenous women of Plachimada organized sit-ins outside the factory gates of Coca Cola to protest the groundwater being heavily depleted
--Union women here in San Francisco fight for their rights for a living wage as janitors

These are but a few examples of women's leadership in the cause of women's rights, against misogyny, sexual violence, economic deprivation and eternal war and for

environmental safety, food, education, sustenance, beauty and human creativity. And our sisters all over the globe need our help and solidarity because an injury to one is an injury to all. We are of the working class and we're proud of it. Working class has been made into a dirty word by the powers that be trying to lull us into placid acceptance of a world that benefits a handful of rich people. We working women and men will pay and pay and pay for the greed and malfeasance of bankers, politicians and crooks inherent in the vicious system of capital.

Immigrant women—defiant but not defeated

Sneaking across the border. Coming in rickety boats across the water. Beaten, bitten by rats and violated by coyotes, snakeheads, and unscrupulous profiteers. Immigrant women from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, women from China and Thailand, women from Russia and Bosnia, women from Haiti, the Philippines, women from Iraq, from India, Pakistan, you name it. They're here, they're in Germany, they're in Indonesia, they're in Canada, they're in Algeria. Call it courage, call it survival, call it material.

But when our economy, the global economy. is downward spiraling, immigrant workers are scapegoated. Their labor is exploited for which the clothes we wear on our backs and the fruits and vegetables that we eat would be impossible. Their tasks involve consistent leadership and heroism.

At a time when the media is focused on women who represent the U.S. ruling class, we need to focus on why immigrant women, especially those of color, will risk life and limb to survive. Corporations go global to exploit the cheap labor of working people. Yet, workers from other countries who come here to the U.S. are supposedly stealing American jobs and causing the economy to sink. We know that this economy would not survive without immigrant labor, without our labor—of our hands and bodies and of our minds. Workers themselves are not to be blamed for the economy's ills when our government fights the war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Women politicians are not the answer

At a time when the media is focused on women who represent the U.S. ruling class, we must realize that electing women, either from the Democratic or Republican parties, do not offer solutions to the issues of women and children. Rightwing forces, from the Minute Men to the Traditional Values Coalition, support building of fences along our borders, and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid factories and plants seeking and deporting undocumented workers, separating families and terrorizing communities of color.

With all the recent hoopla over Sarah Palin as the Republican nominee for vice president, one could be lulled into thinking that conditions will improve for women, because the Alaskan governor is female. Feminist debates are raging over whether McCain's so-called smart move will garner the Republicans the female votes that had been Hillary

Clinton's. Nor does Palin's candidacy mean that feminism is alive and well because a "she" may be in the White House.

Neither a female candidate for vice president nor a Black candidate for president will alleviate the country's economic ills. Neither party of continuing war via a gentler and kinder capitalism will free all women, workers and the poor. Our homes will still be foreclosed. Our healthcare will more and more be our personal responsibility. Our homeless will still be on the streets. Our wages will still be low and women will still bear the burden of balancing it all striving to be superwomen at the beck and call of the ruling class. Young women will still be told to abstain from sex or be forced into heterosexual, nuclear family marriage.

Socialist feminism

Yes, we need to vote in this coming election. But we need to vote socialist. We need to register protest votes against the business-as-usual, inhumane policies and actions perpetrating more poverty, crime and environmental devastation. Here we are in the richest country on earth and survivors of Katrina and Gustav are still roiling of lack of governmental response to the homeless and the poor. We certainly can't depend on Sarah Palin to keep Roe v. Wade from being dismantled.

Socialist feminism is inherently international. Women all over the world understand basically why they are oppressed. Women live through oppression every day, whether it's a Mexican or an Iraqi woman who must scourge through garbage to find something to sell. Women struggle every day to find child care or else they'll lose their jobs. Women every day carry water on their backs to bathe and to wash their clothes.

Socialist feminism encourages and embraces the leadership of women in our organizations and in the mass movements. It recognizes that women are already leaders in their families, unions, community, schools and are often experts at cooperative versus patriarchal styles of leadership.

Clara Fraser, co-founder of Radical Women, said in a 1989 speech:

> If you're doubly exploited or triply oppressed; if you're in quadruple jeopardy, you're going to be that much more motivated. You've got that many more reasons to go out and hit the system.
> And you have a lot of determination and energy and conviction and anger that will sustain you in tough times.
>
> It is the multiply-oppressed who will be the first to rise, who will give the impetus and the direction and the push for revolutionary change.
>
> --*Oppressions: The Capitalist Connection and the Socialist Solution*

Culture and art—the revolutionary connection

Revolutionary culture and art express the reality of our lives. The following poem still resonates even though it was written in 1968 at the height of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. Jazz singer Nina Simone and poet-dramatist Langston Hughes wrote:

> Mr. backlash, mr. backlash
> Just who do you think I am
> You raise my taxes, freeze my wages
> And send my son to Vietnam
>
> You give me second class houses
> And second class schools
> Do you think that alla colored folks
> Are just second class fools
> Mr. backlash, im gonna leave you
> With the backlash blues
>
> When I try to find a job
> To earn a little cash
> All you got to offer
> Is your mean and white backlash
> But the world is big
> Big and bright and round
> And it's full of folks like me
> Who are black, yellow, beige and brown
> Mr. backlash, im gonna leave you
> With the backlash blues
>
> Mr. backlash, mr. backlash
> Just what do you think I got to lose
> Im gonna leave you
> With the backlash blues
> You're the one will have the blues
> Not me, just wait and see

Mr. backlash is none other than the capitalist system that wreaks havoc on all our lives.

Mr. backlash is none other than ruling class and big business that tell women to go back into the home and to stay there even if you have a job and look good.

Mr. backlash is none other than so-called traditional values that will imprison, gag or murder you if you choose to live and love freely

Mr. backlash is none other than warmongers that destroy people's lives and land to benefit a few wealthy people

Women and revolution – alive and inseparable!

We women have the smarts and the will and the energy to kick Mr. Backlash off the face of the earth. We women can and will organize, along with our gay, immigrant, youth and worker allies of all colors and genders, to build a world that will feed and nurture us and to celebrate humankind with our fullest potential and our creative minds and hands – for the benefit of all people. We need a revolutionary party to help make a revolution here in the U.S.

I think there are endless possibilities of a higher human culture in the socialist feminist society we are going to build:

How about 24-hour child care paid for by the government?
How about teenaged women having the right to decide whether
to bear a child without parental notification?
How about women workers themselves deciding what's best
for their jobs and having a say in decision making?
How about free public education from kindergarten through college?
How about free access to multiracial and multisexual theatre, dance, film,
literature, art and sports?
How about free health care for all?
How about access to benefits regardless of marital status?
How about communal laundries and kitchens?
How about open borders?
How about free love?

There is so much more that we can accomplish together by building a grassroots feminist movement independent of the twin parties of capital.

German poet Bertold Brecht says this in "Praise of Communism:"

It's sensible.
Anyone can understand it.
It's easy.
You're not an exploiter,
So you can grasp it.
It's a good thing for you,
Find out more about it.
The stupid call it stupid
And the squalid call it squalid.
It is against squalor and
against stupidity.
The exploiters call it a crime

> But we know:
> It is the end of crime.
> It is not madness, but
> the end of madness.
> It is not the riddle
> But the solution.
> It is the simple thing
> So hard to achieve.

But revolution, socialist feminist revolution is achievable. Now is the time!

Clara Fraser says it well:

> Goddamit, sisters,--and I might add, brothers-- let's get revolutionary! Let's understand that the profit system is at the bottom of all this horror, and let's catapult ourselves onto the main stage of history. The world is waiting for the sun rise.

The power of socialist feminism persists. As long as the Wall Streeters hold working women and men in contempt; as long as this system sends off women and men to fight wars in the name of bourgeois democracy and for profits; as long as wealth is in the hands of a few; as long as the environment is devastated; and, as long as capitalism convulses, the revolution is <u>ours</u> to make. It is our greatest duty. It is our greatest joy.