

ERA coalition faces controversy

by Joy Livingston

The Vermont Coalition for the Equal Rights Amendment has grown from a relatively small group of dedicated ERA supporters to a large group representing more than 40 organizations, regional groups, and numerous individuals. The Coalition has a board of directors, an executive director and a staffed office in Montpelier, and a very well organized regional and town network of coordinators and local groups. The Coalition meets as a whole about once every two months, although in our early development we met much more frequently.

Many of those who crated the coalition have been working on the Vermont ERA for years to get the amendment through the legislature, fighting more than one grueling battle. Last fall, this core group began to organize the state-wide coalition. It was at this time that full coalition meetings were held more frequently.

These early meetings were designed to create the Coalition's organizational structure. A main focus was the inevitable by-laws discussion, including such crucial issues as who could be a member of the Coalition, and what were the criteria for voting power. The Coalition never considered the possibility of operating by consensus. But as more women learned of the Coalition, interest moved from structure to policy. In particular, many women wanted to know how the Coalition would deal with the connections between the ERA and abortion and gay/lesbian rights.

Needless to say, meetings were full of tension. Building coalition is no easy matter, particularly when trying to find common ground for radical activists, professional organizations, and political party members and political party regulars. We all had different ways of organizing, different ways of making decisions, not to mention very different ways of looking at the Equal Rights Amendment. While many of us are anxious to get to the crucial policy issues, others were equally anxious to create a workable structure. Personally, I was anxious to get to deal with policy; however, hindsight has given me an appreciation for the delay.

The policy issues we most wanted to discuss dealt with the way the Coalition was going to handle the "red herrings" (abortion and gay/lesbian rights). The Reactionary Right has chosen these issues because they are emotional. They are emotional issues for everyone. The Coalition was no

exception. I think the by-laws debates, especially around membership and voting power, gave us a place to find common ground. We began as a diverse group with no basis for trust; indeed, we all had histories that would lead us to mistrust others in the group. The by-laws discussion gave us more distant issues with which to build a group process. By the time we got to the "red-herrings" I think we had found ways to talk with each other, and had acted out some of our mistrust.

The first genuine discussion of the Coalition's policy on the ERA's connection to abortion and gay/lesbian rights was full of diversity. Heather Wishick had made a very strong case for the legal connection between the ERA and gay/lesbian rights (see OITM, April '86). There were many at that meeting who felt it was important for the Coalition to take a stand clearly in favor of gay/lesbian rights, advocating the need for the connection. On the other hand, there were strongly reasoned arguments on the lack of legal connection between the ERA and gay/lesbian rights. Basically, the argument referred to the legislative history that clearly denied a connection. In between these two rational arguments were many, many statements of personal/political stands. I shall no doubt do injustice to the diversity of expression, but I will still try to summarize what I see as the two basic points of view. On the one hand there were those who see a need to advocate for gay/lesbian rights. Most of these people did not see the ERA as a tool for such advocacy, but they did see the need to take a strong, proud stand, which might be best summarized by the following: "I'm not sure if the ERA will guarantee rights for gays and lesbians, but it sure would be terrific if it did!" The other side of the debate centered on the concern that making a connection between ERA and gay/lesbian rights would serve to fuel the fires of the Reactionary Right and thereby spell defeat for the ERA. The people on this side of the debate felt the need to keep the issues separate, perhaps best summarized by the following: "The ERA has nothing to do with gay and lesbian rights; 'sex' in the amendment refers to gender not sexuality."

The debate ended with a vote on a proposed policy. The policy stated that the Coalition viewed the ERA as a separate issue from abortion rights and gay/lesbian rights. A majority of Coalition members voted in favor of the policy.

Even though there had been a vote, it was clear that the Coalition was still divided over the ways to deal with these issues. A number of us volunteered to serve on an ad hoc committee in order to come up with a compromise solution. The committee represented both sides of the debate, and included several of the more outspoken members.

The ad hoc committee meeting began with a discussion of our concerns around abortion and gay/lesbian rights. Come addressed the difference among member groups in their stands on abortion rights. All agreed on the need to advocate for gay and lesbian rights. Then we began to discuss how the Coalition should deal with both issues. We spent a good deal of time discussing the ways in which the Right will try to use the issues to defeat the ERA, and we clarified the need to define our own agenda and not to let the Right define the agenda. By the end of the discussion we had reached a compromise we could all live with. We would propose that the Coalition expand its policy statement on the separation of the ERA and these two issues.

The proposed expansion would state that the Coalition was composed of diverse groups, all having different interpretations of the connections, but all committed to the passage of the ERA. In terms of abortion rights, the proposed expansion would go on to say that abortion rights were already guaranteed, and that state funding of poor women's abortions would be decided by the Courts prior to the ERA vote. In terms of gay and lesbian rights, the expansion would point out that the Coalition came together out of a commitment to all people's civil rights. The final statement in the proposed expansion pointed out that the Right was opposed to equal rights and would attempt to divert our attention from the ERA.

We brought the proposed extension to the next general Coalition meeting and it was accepted by consensus of the group.

Since this last vote the Coalition has rarely discussed these issues at general meetings. The meetings now focus on specific organizational efforts going on in towns and regions. Board meetings have focused on developing strategies for media campaigns. For the most part, we look at the messages we want to promote, not the ways in which we will react to the opposition. Generally, it is outside of the Coalition that in-depth discussions of the ERA and gay/lesbian rights occur. For example, in Burlington, Peggy Luhrs recently led a very well-attended discussion on the ERA and homophobia.

Slowly but surely Coalition members have grown a bit more familiar with one another. We have begun to find ways to work together on the one issue upon which we agree, and we have begun to develop enough respect to hear each other. And I continue to be watchful; we cannot let our commitment to one set of rights be lessened by our attempts to win another set of rights. All our rights to live freely are connected; one cannot be sold to pay for another. We must work together to resist moves to destroy our rights and to build a world safe for us all to live in.