

The Women's Press

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225 COLLEGE ST. #204 TORONTO ONT CANADA M5S 1P6

PRESS RELEASE
MAY 16, 1988

We are writing in response to the Press Release of May 11, 1988 from the "Popular Front-of-the-Bus Caucus".

At the May 11th meeting of the Women's Press, one of a series of meetings held over the past year to chart new anti-racist directions for the Press, some members found themselves excluded from continuing in this process. Charges were made against a number of us; no opportunity for response was allowed. The majority then walked away from the table to set up a separate caucus. Because the situation has reached this state of impasse unique in the history of the Women's Press, we feel we need to clarify our position to concerned members and friends of the Press.

For over a year, the Publishing and Policy Group and other members of the Press have been involved in debate over what explicit forms a more conscious anti-racist policy should take. It is very clear that racism is a deeply systemic problem woven into the fabric of our society and our lives. The debate has never been over whether a new policy should be adopted, but rather over how this should happen. We as feminists must respond with new initiatives in this area. The Press has struggled to deal with this question, and many of us have been active participants in this process of examination of our practice and politics. The process of education and change is a complex, dialectical and sometimes painful one, but we have struggled in good faith around many difficult and contentious issues.

However, we have found that opposition to particular ideas both in these committee meetings and in the Publishing and Policy Group was construed as resistance to the anti-racist project itself. An atmosphere quickly developed in which it became very difficult to propose concerns and differing opinions without incurring severe personal attacks. It became clear that embracing the correct position overrode any concern for moving the debate forward in a way which respected us as speaking from a position of conscience and as allies. That the ends were considered more important than the means came as a shock to those of us who valued a sense of feminist process.

TELEPHONE (416) 598-0882

The Women's Press has always attempted to act as a vehicle for debate in the women's movement. We must allow for the expression of differing opinions both within our own organization and on the part of our authors. In recent months we have seen writers for the Women's Press treated with open disrespect, and heard the books we've published over the years dismissed as being of little value because they are not sufficiently anti-racist. In our current struggle to incorporate personal and political anti-racist practice into our work, how valid is it to treat sixteen years of development in the women's movement dismissively?

The Press is now divided into those who believe they have the correct position on combatting racism and the rest of us who stand accused of "resisting" and not "getting it right." This division has resulted in considerable time being spent on an internal process of cleansing, historical blaming and scapegoating, instead of more positive contributions to building an anti-racist women's movement. In this highly charged environment it has been increasingly difficult to separate out a politic of guilt and self-recrimination from the constructive unlearning of racism which is our task.

We are deeply saddened by these events. Over the course of our history since the publication of Women Unite in 1972 the Press has been through many difficult periods. It has always struggled to reflect growth and change in the women's movement through its publishing and practice. Many of us have been connected with Women's Press since the mid-seventies. Some have been committed volunteers, others have dedicated much of our working lives to the Press. We believe that our commitment to anti-racist education must include the community of our writers and readers and reflect a range of opinion and strategy. It is through thoughtful debate and struggle that we will build solidarity in a women's movement that is anti-racist, non-heterosexist and anti-capitalist. Differing views will never disappear; there must be a place for them in a Press which continues to reflect a dynamic women's movement.

Judi Coburn, Connie Guberman, Liz Martin, Lois Pike,
Graziela Pimentel, Christa Van Daele, Margie Wolfe, Carolyn Wood.

For further information, write Margie Wolfe c/o 172 Browning Ave., Toronto M4K 1W5.

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PRESS RELEASE
MAY 11 1988

The Women's Press is just one of the many organizations in the women's movement which has found it necessary to examine its own racism and its contribution to racism within the women's movement. We believe that this process should not go on behind closed doors and see ourselves as joining other organizations who are working on similar struggles. It is only by going public that we are able to join with other organizations as part of an anti-racist network. We cannot change through closet "anti-racist" discussions.

A series of confrontations made the white women in the press enter into the process of consciousness raising on the issue of racism in the fall of 1987. A series of meetings with an outside facilitator led to an analysis of how racism is structurally endemic in the press. We then held a series of meetings of the entire press to discuss our politics, particularly around issues of racism. These meetings became increasingly unproductive.

As members of the Women's Press we want to acknowledge our divisions on the issue of racism. We have formed a caucus. There was a long period in which we struggled within a consensual process. Very reluctantly and painfully we came to realize that this issue is not one on which a consensus can be reached within the Women's Press as presently constituted.

A year ago a discussion about a particular manuscript precipitated a new level of debate on the question of racism at the Women's Press. Attempts were made to move the Press forward on an anti-racist politic. It quickly became apparent that the women of the Press were deeply divided on understandings of, and perspectives on, anti-racism.

On-going discussions revealed a general denial of the internalization of racism at the Press and a lack of acknowledgement of what that meant. It was very difficult to identify how racism had been internalized within the Press and within our membership. Resistance to this self-examination was serious. The discussions kicked off an examination of the politics of the Press; and a concomitant resistance to that political examination.

TELEPHONE (416) 598-0082

For example, our struggle to have an all Women of Colour Almanac began in the Fall 1986. Women who resisted this project argued that business considerations precluded an almanac by an all women of colour collective. These business concerns worked primarily to mask mistrust, fears of loss of control and an inability to work with an "outside group". We continued to struggle for a consensus on an all woman of colour collective writing and producing the 1989 almanac. A professed desire to challenge racism did not move all the dissident women toward overcoming their reluctance to support this proposal. On the condition that the almanac group begin to work a year in advance of the usual starting time, we were able to take the decision by a majority vote. The Press' lack of confidence in working with a group of women of colour was clearly evident.

That an all women of colour collective was necessarily perceived as a group of "outsiders" reflected the isolation of the Press from the women's movement. The Women's Press was really a white women's press. We are working to break out of this ethnocentric isolation.

We realize that our changing politics and dynamics may have led to frustrating and difficult situations for women who have been dealing with us. By making the process public we wish to offer explanation and apology for problems which we, as a divided Press, have created.

We are the Popular Front-of-the-Bus caucus. We feel that our continuing engagement with women who resist the implementation of anti-racism at the Press is now working to the detriment of the Press and the women's movement. As positions are now polarized and entrenched it is necessary for us, as a majority caucus, to take a leadership role by making our position public. The caucus was formed on May 11, 1988 with the following statement:

IN VIEW OF OUR RECOGNITION OF ENDEMIC RACISM IN THE SOCIETY IN WHICH WE LIVE, AND OUR ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF OUR INVOLVEMENT IN THOSE SOCIAL FORCES, WE DECLARE OUR INTENTION TO FORM ALLIANCES AGAINST RACIST OPPRESSION, TO TAKE A PUBLIC STAND REGARDING OUR ALLIANCES AND TO FIGHT RACISM WHEREVER IT EXISTS, IN OURSELVES, IN OUR ORGANIZATION AND IN OUR PUBLISHING.

The Women's Press anti-racism guidelines will be available June 10, 1988 to all interested women.

We invite you to join with us.

Yours in Struggle,

The Popular Front-of-the-Bus Caucus:

Larissa Cairncross, Ann Decter, Maureen FitzGerald, Chris Gabriel, Heather Guylar, Rona Moreau, Michele Paulse, Susan Prentice, Katherine Scott, Wendy Waring.

We the undersigned would like to express our concern over recent events at Women's Press as outlined in the press releases of May 11 and 16, 1988. We wish to declare our support for a process of developing anti-racist directions for the Press which does not exclude differing points of view or the members who hold them. We wish to reaffirm our support for the books and writers published by the Women's Press over the years, and to recognize the important role they have played in the articulation of issues central to the development of the women's movement in Canada.

We are also very concerned about the charges made by the 'Popular Front-of-the-Bus Caucus' against other members of the Women's Press. The women who are the subject of these charges share years of work in the Women's Press, work that reflects a profound commitment to the women's movement. We wish to recognize the contribution of these women to the books that have meant a great deal to us personally and to Canadian feminism. Their work must continue.

The broadening of Women's Press to include more work by women of colour need not entail the exclusion of long-standing members. Feminists are allies in the anti-racist struggle; they must not be seen as enemies.

