LESSONS of BUFFALO



The strategy and tactics that booted "Operation Rescue" out of Buffalo

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the strategy and tactics that booted anti-choice bigots out of Buffalo







Dedication:

To all of the pro-choice women and men of Buffalo, New York who made history in the spring of '92.

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A note on language: This pamphlet was originally written and printed in 1992. Since then, language has shifted as collective conciousness around this issue and gender in general have. Workers World Party demands reproductive justice for all genders. We support and defend the right to self determination of any person who can become pregnant. To read more of our current coverage or to learn more about our organization's continued dedication to this struggle, please check out workers.org.

Lessons of Buffalo

By Valerie Colangelo and Dianne Mathiowetz

The writers are members of Workers World Party. They helped form Buffalo United for Choice and each played a leading role in that dynamic coalition. Colangelo, a nurse, was the coordinator of the major April 11 BUC rally. Mathiowetz, an auto worker, was the primary press spokesperson for BUC.

Abortion rights, reproductive freedom, pro-choice, the right to choose — it's easy to get lost in the terminology.

But the real idea is simple: All women must have the right to choose when and if to bear children. The struggle for women's rights is meaning-less without the right of a woman to have this fundamental control over her own body.

The fight for reproductive rights is part of the overall struggle for decent health care for poor and working people. To blockade a clinic is to deny women health care.

The victory of Buffalo United for Choice (BUC) in Buffalo, N.Y., was won due to unity and solidarity — that is the "lesson of Buffalo." Thanks to the thousands of people who joined together to teach that valuable lesson.

Who is Operation 'Rescue'?

The anti-abortion group Operation "Rescue" (OR), a national organization dedicated to the overturning of women's rights on many levels, came to national prominence in 1988 when OR founder Randall Terry and hundreds of his followers were arrested for blockading clinics in Atlanta during the Democratic Convention.

The strategy of "direct action" by the right wing developed out of a frustration with the lobbying and counseling policies of the Catholic-based National Right-to-Life Committee, the main anti-abortion group in the country following the 1973 Supreme Court decision.

Although Ronald Reagan campaigned on an anti-abortion program, the right-wing fringe felt he was not acting fast enough. So, in the early 1980s, anti-abortion extremists began a terror campaign of bombing women's health facilities across the country. While hundreds of clinics were destroyed or damaged, public opinion remained staunchly in favor of a woman's right to choose and overwhelmingly rejected the violent tactics of the clinic bombers. Public revulsion was such that finally the National Right-to-Life Committee as well as the White House had to issue statements disassociating their anti-abortion position from the tactic of bombing clinics. Nevertheless, police agencies made very few arrests. Still fewer of those engaged in this criminal conspiracy were convicted.

The strategy and tactics of Operation Rescue were fashioned to achieve the same goal as the clinic bombers — to shut down women's health facilities that provide abortion services — but without the negative publicity that accompanied arson and vandalism.

Backed up by the inflammatory anti-abortion statements of Reagan, Bush and Quayle, Operation Rescue could count on support from the highest levels of government for its escalating campaign of intimidation and harassment of patients, staff and doctors.

A key element in the OR strategy is the manipulation of the media; they hoped a small number of extremists physically preventing women from entering a health facility could be parlayed into a sizable bloc of public opinion that would support banning abortion.

The creation of an activist right-wing constituency provides a cover for budget-cutting, racist, sexist politicians to carry out their big business agenda, as well as a continuing menace to all progressive struggles.

Right-wing shock troops

Operation Rescue seeks to discourage, frighten and silence those who would advance equality for women. By describing themselves and their methods in religious and moral terms, Operation Rescue seeks to disguise the thoroughly reactionary, abusive and terrorist character of their program.

This veneer of "saving babies" hides a patronizing view of women as second-class citizens as well as an opposition to birth control, sex education and all social policies such as publicly funded daycare and affirmative action that would allow women access to jobs and education.

The appeal of Operation Rescue is directed to fundamentalist religious groups which can provide zealots for OR's large scale arrests. In turn, extensive media coverage of these "Christian martyrs" getting arrested promotes the massive and ever-present exhortations for money that accompanies each of these "rescues."

Following Atlanta in 1988, Operation Rescue attempted major blockades in Los Angeles, Boston and New York City without much success or national publicity. Organized clinic defense by women's groups in these cities played a key role in preventing OR from shutting down abortion services.

Desperate for publicity in the summer of 1991, Operation Rescue decided to concentrate its forces on a mid-size "Heartland" city, Wichita, Kansas, where it could overwhelm the legal apparatus and dominate the media. For more than six weeks, a relatively small number of anti-abortion fanatics were arrested over and over again for blocking entrances to Wichita clinics. The national media filled the airwaves and news pages with pictures of anti-choice activities.

While the clinics in Wichita were never all closed even temporarily and prochoice activists did organize some rallies, the predominant message coming out of Wichita was that the anti-abortion movement was successful and represented a large section of public opinion. In December 1991, Randall Terry included Buffalo in a list of cities possibly slated to be the next "Wichita."

The Buffalo struggle begins

In January 1992, Operation Rescue announced they were coming to Buffalo to close down women's clinics where abortions are performed.

Operation Rescue thought it would be easy. They felt Buffalo was centrally located so that OR members could come from all over to help the local antichoice elements; a high percentage of Buffalo's population is Catholic; Buffalo's mayor, reactionary James Griffin, had already indicated he would welcome anti-choice forces. In the February 19, 1992 edition of USA Today, Griffin is quoted as saying: "Buffalo is a pro-life city. I'm not going to shut the door on anyone."

Also, local police under Griffin's influence had done little to protect the rights of women since an October 1988 blockade by local anti-choice forces.

Clearly the right wing forces felt buoyed by their extended attacks on women's rights in Wichita, Kansas, in the summer of 1991. They saw Buffalo as the next target in their continuing threats to women's rights. They hoped to garner even more media attention and more forces in their reactionary campaign, hoping to use a victory in Buffalo as a stepping stone to attacks on New York City clinics around the July Democratic Convention.

But the women's movement in Buffalo clearly understood OR's intentions. We prepared to do battle immediately.

Initial discussions among women activists in Workers World Party, Women's Health Action and Mobilization, NOW, The ProChoice Network, ACT-UP, All People Congress and others began immediately to figure out how best to respond to this threat to women's rights.

By the time the official announcement was made by Randall Terry on the steps of City Hall on January 3, 1992, that Operation Rescue had chosen Buffalo as its target city, substantial agreement had already been reached by the most activist-oriented women's rights groups and supporters that mass clinic defense was absolutely required to meet the right-wing assault.

Key to the analysis of what needed to be done was a broader class perspective on the struggle for abortion rights that recognized OR as part of an overall, on-going right-wing attack on workers and poor people. This fundamental idea, initially raised by Workers World Party at a BUC meeting, was understood and promoted by other organizations including local NOW, ACT UP and WHAM chapters who all became part of the recognized leadership of Buffalo United for Choice.

This meant that issues such as sterilization abuse, racism and anti-gay bigotry and demands for national health care, childcare and decent housing and jobs for all were part of the fightback. This perspective also included a recognition that this was a national struggle and allies from other cities and organizations would be welcome.

The birth of Buffalo United for Choice

It was on this basis that Buffalo United for Choice (BUC) was formed on January 27, 1992. At the first coalition meeting, attended by over 80 women and men, there was a thorough discussion of what was needed to fight back.

Representatives of various organizations attended: the National Organization for Women, Women's Resource Center of the State University College at

Buffalo, the Media Coalition for Reproductive Rights, the Pro-Choice Action Committee of the State University of New York at Buffalo, Women's Health Action and Mobilization, Workers World Party, All Peoples Congress, ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), International Socialist Organization, Planned Parenthood, Hallwall's Contemporary Arts Center, Marxist Leninist Party, Pro-Choice Network, and many individuals who were committed to reproductive freedom.

BUC's first coalition meeting typified the spirit of solidarity and unity that was to carry the coalition to victory. Spirited discussion was held about what was needed to mount a mass clinic defense campaign and committees were formed to carry out the necessary tasks.

Discussion centered on the need to organize physical defense of the clinics as soon as possible. A review of the events in Wichita, Kansas, proved that the movement needed to develop hundreds of trained "clinic defenders."

Wichita had lacked mass organization to defend its clinics which allowed a six-week siege by Operation Rescue. Buffalo United for Choice was unanimous in its distrust of the police to keep the clinics open, which underscored the urgency of mass mobilization. This, as it later proved, was the key to victory in the battle for Buffalo's clinics.

Discussion also focused on the need to identify Operation Rescue as an enemy of not just women, but of the progressive movement in general. OR's leaders, Randall Terry and Keith Tucci, were likened to David Duke's leadership of a Klan-type movement to hold back the overall progressive struggle.

In a dramatic statement to the coalition, Vera Spruill, an African American leader of the All Peoples Congress attacked Randall Terry's likening of himself to Rev. Martin Luther King: "Randall Terry is the David Duke of the North: anti-woman, anti-Civil Rights, anti-lesbian and gay, anti-union and certainly anti-choice. Randall Terry's statements comparing himself to Dr. Martin Luther King are an outrage. Dr. King fought to expand people's rights, not restrict them. He fought to increase and improve health care, not restrict it." (See appendix)

This statement set the tone for the months of work that followed. That night and in meetings that followed, committees were drafted to organize rallies, fund raisers, phone banking, banner and sign making, outreach, press, publicity and the all important clinic defense. The battle lines were drawn. Buffalo United for Choice was forging ahead with the idea for the coalition's main slogan: "Boot 'em out of Buffalo!"

Fighting for a class perspective

Historically, the leadership of the women's rights movement has been dominated by a middle-class political view. This has narrowed the struggle, often focusing on the political and economic concerns of professional women. Yet for the millions of women in this country; some of whom form the ranks of women's rights groups, the struggle for safe legal abortion is meaningless unless free and accessible abortion is the reality for all women, including poor, young

women of color.

For the vast majority of working and poor women reproductive choices are predetermined by low wages, unavailable health care, inferior housing and lack of childcare. All women should have access to healthcare, education and jobs without fear of violence and harassment. All children deserve healthy, safe and loving surroundings.

The Buffalo branch of Workers World Party has been a longtime leader and participant in local, regional and national struggles in the trade union, lesbian and gay, women's and anti-war movements since 1959. This vast experience in organizing successful activities and coalitions on a variety of issues proved to be very beneficial to Buffalo United for Choice.

Party members worked diligently both to include all those who supported women's rights in BUC and to persuade participants that mass clinic defense was the correct strategy. Efforts were made to gain the participation of the Pro-Choice Network (PCN), which provides trained escorts for area clinics on Fridays and Saturdays and initiated the legal work that resulted in a federal injunction against OR blocking clinic doors.

Despite these efforts, the PCN leadership withdrew from Buffalo United for Choice in late February. Their position was that the court injunction was sufficient to deter Operation Rescue from blockading the clinics. They were reluctant to call out large numbers of pro-choice activists to come to the clinics. In fact, they publicly urged their members to stay home and let the police handle the situation.

The injunction's provisions certainly looked effective on paper. Among its sections are prohibitions against anti-choice demonstrators being within 15 feet of a clinic entrance; a "cease-and-desist" order to so-called sidewalk counselors if a patient indicates in any way that she does not want to receive any "counseling"; and \$10,000 fines to be paid to the affected clinic by violators of the injunction.

The public defection of the Pro-Choice Network — from the strategy of organizing a human harrier against the blockaders and a human corridor fart the patients —had little effect on 131 IC's mobilizing. In fact, the call to defend the clinics was answered by many of PCN's rank and file members who had long been eager to take action io defense of women's rights.

However, the debate over the injunction versus clinic defense served to illuminate a broader issue at stake.

Whom should we rely on?

The attitude toward the injunction held by the Pro-Choice Network and that advocated by Buffalo United for Choice indicated two very different perspectives on the struggle for women's rights. At the very center of the division is the question of class perspective.

The leadership of BUC consciously sought to include and involve all those under attack by the right-wing, big- business forces represented by OR. The struggle in Buffalo was presented politically as part of a broader struggle that

would have consequences nationally and internationally.

In addition to those who had felt welcome in the women's movement in the past, BUC attracted many young women who were workers and/or students, a number of them women of color. Lesbians and gay men were prominent in BUG's leadership. An encouraging number of trade unionists participated. And a significant number of professional, suburban women also joined the defense ranks.

For many activists in Buffalo United for Choice, the idea of relying on the local police or the courts was ludicrous. Where had these "guardians of the law" been while women patients had been accosted by anti-abortion bigots for years? The impact of the video-taped beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police, the televised attack on Anita Hill and the anger with dozens of recent Supreme Court rulings that deprive women, workers, people of color, lesbians and gay men, immigrants and prisoners of rights previously held — all such influences contributed to a gut instinct in BUG that reliance on governmental agencies was a dead end.

At best, an injunction is useful for propaganda purposes. It helps expose blatant infringements on women's rights and the vicious character of the assaults on patients. It can serve to isolate the activities of these "lawbreakers" from public approval. However, to the committed terrorists of OR, an injunction is "just a piece of paper."

When it comes right down to it, an injunction offers no obstacle to anti-abortion blockades. In fact, only five national OR leaders were charged with violations of Buffalo's injunction toward the end of the "siege." It's unclear what impact this will have — if any — on curtailing the anti-woman activities of Operation Rescue. OR national leaders have been arrested and fined before. In almost all cases the fines go unpaid.

At worst, the existence of an injunction creates a false and dangerous reliance on the legal system to work on behalf of women's rights. It can blunt recognition of the critical need to organize and act independently, as it did in the case of PCN.

The underlying message of mobilizing mass clinic defense is that the people, especially women themselves, not only can do it loot me the only ones who will do it. To call for mass clinic defense says, in essence, that the police, the courts, the state don't act in the interests of the people or of women. Workers World Party members, who had helped shape the BUC perspective on the injunction and the role of the courts and police in theory then had to help develop tactics for how to deal with the realities of a federal injunction and a massive police presence that was hostile to clinic defense.

How we organized

By mid-February, BUG had done much organizational groundwork. We set up a Buffalo United for Choice Hot Line phone number and a post office box. We were immediately inundated with calls from all over Buffalo and other parts of the U.S. from people who wanted to help defeat OR. We received letters of

support and contributions daily.

At the kickoff press conference announcing the formation of BUC, we made it clear that the pro-choice community of Buffalo would not be intimidated and that clinic defense training sessions had begun. We took advantage of every opportunity to speak on radio and TV about our struggle, including the "Today Show" and "Nightline."

Despite our efforts, the local press coverage was usually slanted toward Operation Rescue. Many individual reporters were pro-choice and told us privately that their stories had been edited to reflect anti-choice sentiment.

The bigoted media coverage only made us more determined to be out in the streets talking to people face to face about the issues. We did a series of targeted leaflets to appeal to various audiences: the African American community, the lesbian and gay community, students, working people and so on.

BUC organizers spoke at meetings, classes, unions and fundraisers about the need to defeat OR. We did a national mailing inviting supporters to Buffalo to help defend the clinics. Postering was done to build for a rally scheduled for April 11. We developed a special flyer to distribute at the huge April 5 March for Women's Lives held in Washington, D.C. Our Buffalo contingent also sold buttons and recruited nationally for clinic defense at the demonstration. More than 150,000 leaflets and posters were printed and distributed.

Fund raisers were organized. Many musicians and club owners donated their services and establishments. Individual supporters held fund raising house parties. BUC raised enough to finance the entire campaign!

Organizers from the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) contacted BUC and offered to help. They had spent several years out-organizing OR's attempts to close many California clinics, from which they had developed a system of clinic defense we felt could be adapted to Buffalo who quickly sent a series of tireless organizers to Buffalo who remained throughout the several months. The FMF also helped negotiate with the local YWCA for the donation of a large office space and some necessary equipment. They were instrumental in providing resources to get the coalition moving and in constructing an internal structure to raise funds and support.

The establishment of an office allowed the coalition a much needed organizational center. This was vital in coordinating day-to-day tasks.

Training for clinic defense

By late February the clinic defense training sessions were underway. These sessions trained the troops who were to fight OR. The training was led by women from BUC who had a long history in escorting clinic patients and in clinic defense.

These local leaders watched videos of OR assaults from other cities and studied tactical advice from several national organizations.

The tactical structure proposed for defending each clinic was hierarchical, composed of site leaders, quadrant leaders (four at each clinic to feed information to the site leader) and peace keepers (rank and file clinic defenders who

served to keep the defense lines strong, to keep chants going and to disseminate information. to the clinic defenders).

Various tactics were reviewed by the patient escorts who had been helping to get patients safely into the clinics for several years.

Mass clinic defense training took place at several Buffalo and Rochester locations. The technique of several rows of defenders, arms and legs linked in formations around clinic doors, was practiced for weeks by hundreds of people. It could easily be likened to a people's militia. Hundreds of people, committed to a cause, had no faith that the police or the courts would keep the clinics open. Pro-choice supporters saw the need for the people to do it themselves.

This concept was really key to what the coalition had undertaken — call it people's power, if you will. It was the people setting up an alternate power structure. It was a revolutionary concept: To seize and defend women's rights through mass mobilization.

Coalition meetings were held frequently, so many people could have input into the political and organizational role of the coalition. Everyone had a chance to speak. Participation was encouraged. A steering committee, consisting of representatives from each of the committees, met before each coalition meeting to set the agenda and rotate the chair.

In this manner it was possible for many people, especially women, to come forward and assert leadership qualities. Women felt their impact was important and that the coalition was tolerant and accepting of new ideas.

Because the coalition had a strong foundation of trust among its members, OR's attempts to red-bait and lesbian and gay-bait the Coalition failed. Paul Schenk, a local anti-choice "leader," used these tactics in a paid radio ad several times to attack the coalition. It had no adverse effect and instead drew the coalition members closer together in solidarity. We were, in fact, proud that we had developed such a diverse coalition in which socialists, lesbian, gay men, feminists, and people of all races felt they could work together comfortably.

Our leadership was in stark contrast to the leadership of the enemy. OR hastily flew in white males from several states who had led blockades in the past. Local anti-choice forces did not know these men.

The turning point

The Coalition mobilized a contingent to attend the National Organization for Women (NOW) March for Women's Lives on April 5 in Washington, DC. Armed with banners — "Boot 'em out of Buffalo! Stop Operation Rescue — Come to Buffalo, N.Y.!" — and signs, buttons and flyers, BUC representatives reached out to the thousands of pro-choice marchers from all over the U.S. with 50,000 leaflets specially printed for the event. Literature urged marchers to attend the April 11 Buffalo Pro-Choice Rally and to assist with clinic defense scheduled from April 17 to May 2.

This approach, coupled with a massive postering and publicity blitz, helped to turn out 2,500 people for the April 11 March and Rally. Despite the cold and pouring rain, the determined presence of so many showed the dept It and

breadth of pro-choice sentiment. Marchers stayed until the end, though they were cold and drenched. And they signed up to help with clinic defense and other tasks.

Speakers representing various segments of the pro-choice movement were greeted enthusiastically by the crowd. The audience heard speakers representing Planned Parenthood, YWCA, Movement fora Peoples Assembly, unions, Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, patient escorts, WHAM!, All Peoples Congress, lesbian and gay community, Workers World Party and many other organizations. One of the most poignant speeches was delivered by Dawn Marvin, who is Randall Terry's aunt and a leading pro-choice organizer from Rochester, N.Y.

The impact of thousands of people willing to march in inclement conditions was not lost on the local establishment. They began to take B UC much more seriously from then on. It was clear that many more people would have attended the event in fair weather.

The police asked for a meeting with clinic directors and then at-tempted to intimidate them and force them to break ties with clinic defense and BUC. But clinic directors and staff, tired of years of abuse by anti-choice picketing of clinics and harassment of patients, refused to collaborate with the police. There was no reason to believe police claims that they would defend the clinics. They had no history of doing so.

Visible splits began to develop in the Operation Rescue leadership. Their original call for the "Spring of Life" blockade listed dates of April 20-May 16. The media now reported local leaders as shortening the date to May 2. Also, local leaders disagreed with national OR, stating their intent was not to blockade, but to wage "peaceful protests" at the clinics. So it became clear that mass mobilization of pro-choice forces as was done for the April 11 demonstration, served to divide the opposition on several fronts. They now saw BUC as a serious force to be reckoned with.

`We are ready!'

The first few weeks of April were spent organizing and fine-tuning tactics for clinic defense. Phone calls continued with names of volunteers coming from all over: New York City, Rochester, Hudson Valley, Cleve-land, Detroit, Erie and Toronto, Canada.

BUC said early in its formation that the struggle to keep Buffalo's clinics open was not just a local issue. We welcomed and encouraged out-of-town support. Despite calls of "outside agitators" from the media and the right wing, BUC felt that the attack on women's rights needed to be fought by as many people as possible. We opened our homes to out-of-town supporters. BUC did not ignore local organizing, however. The women and men of Buffalo and Erie County formed the day-to-day backbone of clinic defense. Just as the Civil Rights and union movements had done, we believed the people had to be out in the streets to guarantee our rights. Whether it was a sit-in at a segregated lunch counter or a strike, large masses of people must be organized to fight back. Phone banking

was done to the hundreds of people who volunteered for clinic defense.

Availability was confirmed and commitments were made to sustain clinic defense from April 17 to May 2. As many people as possible had been trained in clinic defense techniques, especially all the tactical leadership.

The press attended our largest clinic defense training session and publicized it, with pictures, in the only local newspaper — the Buffalo News. The TV media also gave the training extensive coverage.

The sight of over 300 people physically and psychologically training to defend women's rights was inspiring. Training leaders gave a political and organizational orientation to best prepare people for their task. Drills were practiced over and over. The psychological impact of chants to drown out OR's propaganda and prayers were discussed. Clinic defenders were prepared to do chants to oppose not just OR's anti-choice stance, but also to oppose their overall bigotry and backwardness on other issues.

The clinic defense training also sent a strong message to the right wing. Not only were there thousands of people preparing to fight them, but they knew how! OR's tactics of crawling through police lines would be thwarted by rows of people with locked arms and legs. Movable corridors of defenders would be inserted to escort patients into the clinics.

The training gave clinic defenders a clear reason to listen to the leadership and confidence in their abilities. We weren't just willing to fight, we were able to fight!

BUC's astute media committee got this message our repeatedly by skill-fully attacking the media to the mass training sessions. TV coverage included on-the-spot interviews with people in training; their message was clear. "We are ready!"

And we were.

Clinic defense begins

The equipment was checked and rechecked, the phone calls were completed, the alarm clocks were set for 4 am. And at 5 a.m. on Friday, April 17, hundreds of people stood in defense formation at four clinics.

OR had not publicized any activity for April 17 or April 18, but we wanted to be ready, just in case. We knew through our espionage that OR's attempts to blockade would probably not start until Tuesday, April 21. But we used our time well.

Clinic defenders practiced their "drills," chanting for several hours each day until the patients were safely in the clinics. We used the time to get to know each other, our tactical leadership and become familiar with the electronic communications equipment. We gave statements to the local, national and international press.

Local anti-choice elements did conduct small prayer sessions and harassment of patients during those relatively quiet first few days. This gave us an opportunity to practice disciplined defense lines in the presence of OR types. As in a strike, we had conditioned our people that despite strong temptation

to engage in verbal and physical harassment of these bigots, our duty was to defend the clinic doors. We would not be distracted from that task.

The OR people tried to provoke clinic defenders many times; they would send one of their members over to videotape what they hoped would be a confrontation. But our practice drills had paid off: our lines were solid and disciplined. Whenever OR would attempt to provoke us, we would start a chant to drown them out. When they harassed a patient, we would chant, "Stop harassing women!"

We also had trained pro-choice forces not to allow anti-choicers to insult people with bigoted or prejudicial language. They often engaged in anti-les-bian/gay remarks. We chanted any number of chants similar to "Gay, straight, Black, white, same struggle, same fight!" Our solidarity was genuine.

On Tuesday, April 21, Operation Rescue attempted its first clinic blockade. Since we had all doors of all clinics protected by 5 am, their tardy attempt was ineffectual. In what was to become OR's regular tactics when they were frustrated, they knelt, en masse, in the street outside Dr. Shalom Press's clinic. While these tactics had no impact on clinic operation, it did allow hundreds of them to be arrested for a media extravaganza.

OR had not taken into account that they were unable to mobilize quickly. Because most of their members were from out of town, they were unfamiliar with local geography. Their tactical leadership was poor and they had to travel caravan style to whatever clinic they decided to "hit" that day.

Our intelligence network knew where they were headed and relayed the information to that clinic site coordinator. Their cumbersome caravans were slow to reach a site and they could only target one site at a time. Our sources had also told us that at their kickoff rally the night before, OR leaders were disappointed that so few "rescuers" were willing to risk arrest.

Out-organizing OR

On Thursday, April 23, OR attempted to blockade the Erie Medical Center on High Street. They were again unsuccessful. They claimed victory by stating that some patients had delayed their appointments. This was also to be an OR tactic: faced with crushing defeat at the clinic doors, they always announced that "someone" had changed her mind.

Keith Tucci, National Director of Operation Rescue, showed his frustration that day in several statements: "Our numbers are not quite as large as yesterday, but we'll see more people trickling in from out of town throughout the week." He harassed one pro-choice supporter with this bigoted statement: "Are you a lesbian? Are you a lesbian? You don't have to worry about having babies. You're all lesbians!" (Buffalo News, April 23, 1992)

Day after day OR's efforts to blockade were thwarted by the size, energy and commitment of the pro-choice community. They resorted to picketing the residence of one of the doctors — Dr. Shalom Press. They carried a large banner proclaiming, "Press Kills Babies." OR's efforts against Dr. Press displayed their right wing, anti-Semitic agenda. Dr. Press has been continually singled

out by OR. They organized a demonstration at his clinic (and only his) on the memorial of the Holocaust. This outrageous anti-Jewish activity was a major political miscalculation by OR.

Saturday, April 25, was a crucial day for both sides. Halfway through the siege pro-choice support had grown even larger. At 5 a.m., hundreds of people were standing guard at the Main Street Buffalo GYNWomenservices Clinic. Three busloads of supporters from Women's Health Action and Mobilization had traveled all night from New York City to be there.

Carloads totaling hundreds also traveled from Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Erie, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Rochester, Syracuse, Ithaca, Jamestown and from Toronto, Hamilton and Montreal in Canada. Additionally, the NOW National Board moved a previously scheduled meeting from Tampa to Buffalo to show solidarity on the lines.

The pro-choice community turned out 2,500 clinic defenders; OR was able to muster only 500. It was a crushing blow and an inspiring sight.

The role of the cops

The events that occurred that day served to highlight the real role of the police. Pro-choice forces had complained in daily briefing meetings about the disparity of treatment shown by the cops. On several occasions, clinic defenders been treated rudely, pushed and insulted by Amherst and Buffalo police while standing on defense lines. Through the whole two week ordeal thirteen pro-choice people were arrested. And most of those arrests were of clinic defenders who were lawfully defending the clinic.

At a picket line held at Mayor Griffin's house by pro-choice supporters, the cops stood by as a gay man from ACT UP had his jaw broken by a local bigot. As of July, the assailant has still not been arrested, despite eye-witnesses and a wanted poster distributed by ACT-UP.

The only time when OR could claim to have physically placed themselves at a clinic entrance was this Saturday. But they could not have accomplished it without the complicity of the Buffalo police. BUC members were forcibly pushed and shoved away from their defense lines by the police to allow OR access to sit in the driveway.

Only one day did OR get to a clinic before our forces. Though we had control of the clinic door, the police threatened BUG with arrests because "OR got to the clinic first!" This is the way the police "enforced" the injunction!

These and other events convinced the BUC leadership to hold a press conference to discuss the unfair treatment at the hands of police. Eleanor Smeal, President of the Feminist Majority Foundation, along with local BUC leaders Dianne Mathiowetz and Sharon Fawley, high-lighted several instances of police misconduct. Though the press conference was well attended by electronic and print media representatives, only a small amount of coverage was given. Nonetheless, BUG responded politically to police complicity with OR and anti-choice bias and the concerns of clinic defenders.

These events further convinced Coalition members that we could only rely

on the people themselves to defend the clinics.

The Buffalo police made it clear that their interest was to take charge of the conflict. In no way was their primary concern the protection of a woman's right to receive the medical services of her choice — or to enforce the provisions of the injunction.

OR fails miserably

BUC's leadership structure was effective because we felt everyone it lie lines was a leader in the overall fight. Many clinic defenders went to work or school later in the day and tried to explain the issues to co-workers and friends. Many of us heard similar remarks from friends, "I can't be out there doing what you're doing, but I'm very glad that you're doing it for all of us. Thank you."

BUC looked "together" because we felt together. Our ranks were in sharp contrast to the top-down, male leadership structure of OR. Their white males ran around in a disorganized fashion at the sites, flitting from place to place without a game plan, issuing orders. When it came time for arrests, some leaders did get arrested, only to be bailed out quickly, while their rank and file sat in jail for weeks. We chanted, "The leaders get bail, the sheep get jail," and also "4, 6, 8, 10 - why are all your leaders men?" We chanted in the face of the chauvinist male OR leadership, "A real man is pro-choice!"

The special sensitivity shown by pro-choice men day after day on our lines was critical. What Reagan, Bush, Operation Rescue et al. were trying to do to women served as a constant insult to our accomplishments and integrity. The unwavering support of our male friends, husbands, boy-friends and brothers on the front lines meant a tremendous amount to the women. So at BUC's victory party on May 2, we had a tribute to the pro-choice men.

The failures of OR's leadership was only one of the reasons that OR lost each successive battle. Their backwardness on all major issues made it impossible for them to be effective.

OR decided to retreat and "reassess" on Wednesday, April 29 and Thursday, April 30. They publicized this retreat as a time to "pray and reevaluate." It was obvious that they were shaken. With hundreds of their out of town people jailed (and these were usually the only ones willing to be arrested) they faced a crisis.

BUC used the temporary respite to beef up our ranks for the last day — Saturday, May 2. Our phone banks were fully mobilized to get people out in a big way.

Despite their two-day rest, OR could not muster the forces for a blockade on May 2. After three rushes at the gates of the Main Street Buffalo GYN Womenservices Clinic, OR was "maxed out." Fifteen patients had successfully gotten into the clinic by 7 am that day.

Patients continued to get in all day. To quote the headline and first two paragraphs of the Sunday, May 3, Buffalo News:

"Spring of Life fails to live up to Hype

"No clinics were closed, even for a minute. No doctors were driven out of the abortion business. Mainstream Buffalo turned its back on Operation Rescue,

even as a nation watched.

"By not delivering on the expectations they raised, Randall Terry and other national leaders doomed the Spring of Life demonstrations here to poor reviews."

The Lessons of Buffalo

We did it. They had money, the backing of George Bush, the Supreme Court, the police, the Catholic Church, and still, we defeated them.

At the huge and jubilant victory party later that night, BUC used the opportunity to publicly thank everyone who had made this tremendous victory possible: the BUC office staffers, the phone bankers, the donors, the out-of-town supporters, the escorts, the Feminist Majority Foundation, the pro-choice men, the supporters' organizations and, most of all, clinic defenders.

As people cheered for each group that was mentioned, it became clear how many thousands of people helped to in this victory. It was truly a mass mobilization on the order of a general strike. Though the police claimed credit, it was the women's movement and its supporters that kept the clinics open.

From April 17 through May 2 in Buffalo, Operation Rescue was soundly defeated in the streets. Despite their boasting, OR was unable to close a women's health care clinic even for one minute. Through this period OR was out-organized and out-maneuvered.

The significance of this victory by Buffalo United for Choice, a broad women-led coalition of progressive forces, lies in the fact that they trounced OR, a well-funded national right wing hate group. They are the sort that the rulers of this country keep around to do their dirty work — like the KKK.

The Buffalo victory, like that of the Pittston coal miners and the Allegheny, New York anti-nuclear dump coalition, relied on mass mobilization and physical defense strategy. RUC's tactics were militant: we carried out a defense of the medical facilities by putting thousands of bodies in front of the doors to stop the invaders.

What the thousands of people who defended Buffalo's clinics had on their side was this: they were right. There is no gray area here. Women in Buffalo and everywhere must have the right to choose. Not just in the case of rape, incest or maternal health, but in all cases. It is a life-and-death struggle. Women will not go back to the days of back alley butchers.

Women, exhausted by the long hours of defending Buffalo clinics in cold and miserable weather, spoke with intense satisfaction about the sense of "empowerment" they felt.

"Standing up for my rights but doing it with others" was key. Everyone experienced the special bond of being comrades in struggle, linked together, shoulder to shoulder, relying on each other — and winning!

We succeeded because we fought everything Operation Rescue stands for: racism, bigotry against lesbian, gay men and transgendered people, chauvinism and sexism. These issues are all connected because it's the same power structure that attacks us all. As long as it's financially beneficial to keep all of us divided, the capitalist power structure will try to do just that.

No more. Victories happen because we are starting to see through their plan, and we can act to change it.

The victory in Buffalo, a working class city devastated by layoffs and plant closings, is evidence of a rising mood of resistance and fightback. While this struggle focused on abortion rights specifically, women were responding to growing poverty and discrimination. The initial political consciousness varied among the clinic defenders, but together we learned the critical lessons of who the cops, the courts and the media serve. Together, we stood up for our rights — and we made history. \Box

Exposing OR's racist lies

By Vera Spruill

The writer is an African American leader of Buffalo United for Choice, a national board member of the All-Peoples Congress, president of the Tenant Council of Redwood Village and a board member of the National Tenants Organization.

What is this so-called Operation "Rescue?" Is it really to rescue young girls 13 to 20 years old? Will it really rescue an older woman struggling to feed child number five? These arc the lies, that Randall Terry and Operation Rescue are telling to women who try to enter the clinics they want to blockade.

But these sexist bigots have never fought for more funding for the prenatal care, child care or social services women need in order to raise healthy children. In New Jersey, aid to welfare mothers is being cut by the state if a woman has an additional child. Have Randall Terry and Operation Rescue fought against such cutbacks?

"Rescue" is attempting to organize the African American community against reproductive freedom on the basis that abortion is "Black genocide." But isn't the failure to guarantee clothing, food and education for children no matter how poor a form of "Black genocide"? Isn't the shameful infant mortality rate in poor inner-city communities due to right-wing attacks on social programs? Isn't that "Black genocide"?

Randall Terry, despite his claims, has nothing in common with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Instead, Terry can be likened to David Duke. Terry and Duke are both bigots who want to deny freedom and power to poor people — women especially. And both are part of the right-wing push by the Reagan and Bush administrations.

Reproductive rights are the issue here. Should poor women have the same

rights that rich women have — the right to choose whether or not to have a child? Poor women have very little choice now due to inadequate sex education programs, which Operation Rescue opposes, inaccessible birth control — most of these bigots oppose that too — and the high cost of the abortion procedure.

If the Supreme Court makes abortion illegal, poor women will die by the thousands trying to have some control over their lives, trying to abort themselves, as they did years ago. Women must have equal rights. We must demand free and accessible day care. We must demand free abortion, free progressive birth control and no forced sterilization.

Yes, there is only one answer to this inequality, oppression and injustice, war and economic ruin that capitalism brings. It must be replaced with a new social, economic and political system - one where all oppression and inequalities are done away with. Our struggle is for workers' rights - women and lesbians and gays. Choice is our right - a right for poor and working people. This is why we must develop a fight back. Randall Terry and his hand of "rescuers" are hypocrites. They care nothing for women's lives, especially poor women. They are just puppets of the Bush administration that wants to keep the standard of living high for their rich friends at the expense of poor people.

We will fight back in a united way. We will not let them divide us. Operation Rescue is not welcome in Buffalo or any other city. □

To: Buffalo United for Choice From: The Executive Board of Nurses United, CWA Local 1168

Re: Operation Rescue

May 8, 1992

The Executive Board of Nurses I Inked, CWA Local 1168 want to thank all of the wonderful people in the Pro-Choice/Reproductive Rights movement who have worked to organize and defend the targeted health care facilities from Operation Rescue. One of the most stunning highlights of the Pro-Choice movement was in its diversity. The diversity was clearly a natural phenomenon since "choice" represents the majority in our society and the "choice" response to this diversity was tolerance. For the "lifers" there is no tolerance to diversity.

Our Local responded to the offense of Operation Rescue from three perspectives:

- That a woman has the reproductive right to "choose";

- That this right to "choose" directly affects our workforce and is directly an issue for Labor to address; and
- That this was a health care issue and the patient/woman in need of health care needs protection and quality care.

Having been through two enormously stressful strikes, we well appreciate the commitment and organization of your efforts.

After all this, we in Buffalo have a lot to be proud of. Again our heartfelt thanks to all. \Box

Lesbians & gays in the fight

By Bette Spero

Bette Spero is a member of Workers World Party and ACT-UPIW1VY and has been a long-time organizer in the Buffalo lesbian and gay community.

Because right-wing bigots also attack lesbian and gay rights, the lesbian and gay community is an essential part of the pro-choice struggle. Buffalo has a very large lesbian and gay population. But the openly hostile nature of the city administration makes this a very hard city in which to be "out." It wasn't automatic that the lesbian and gay community would feel encouraged to take to the streets on this issue.

One way Workers World Party (WWP) sought to link the struggles was through a joint event organized with ACT-UP/WNY on April 10 called "Passing Fancy." ACT-UP used its proceeds for AIDS education and WWP raised money for our involvement in pro-choice work.

"Passing Fancy" was a tribute to transgendered women, including Buffalo's first all women's drag show and a slide show by Leslie Feinberg on transgender history, emphasizing women who have passed as men. Feinberg is herself a passing woman and a member of WWP. Four hundred women and men packed the lesbian bar where Passing Fancy was held and many waited in a long line outside hoping to get in.

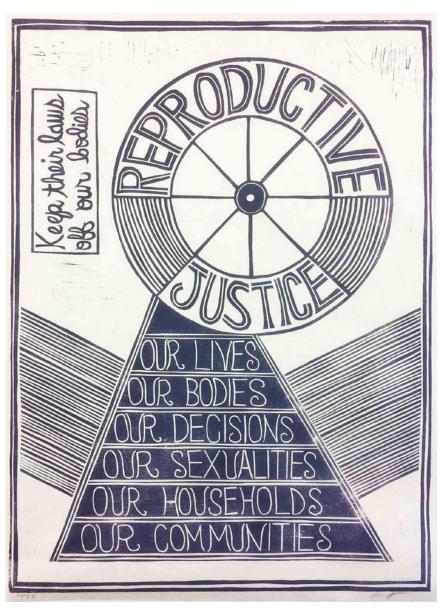
Workers World Party distributed a leaflet at the event that read in part: "Operation Rescue opposes birth control, sex education, money for AIDS research and lesbian and gay rights. If they succeed in denying women civil, medical and legal rights — we are all threatened. Workers World Party supports a woman's right to choose: her own life style, sexual orientation, domestic partner benefits, and the right to make reproductive decisions. We can't sit by while women's clinics are attacked. These right wingers are lesbian-bashers and bigots to the core. Everyone here tonight can become a vital organizer in this struggle."

The pro-choice issue was incorporated in Feinberg's talk so that the event fired up everyone to participate in the march and rally the next morning and clinic defense — which they did in great numbers.

The April 11 rally also set the tone for lesbian and gay participation in clinic defense. There were lesbians speakers and the connections between the issues were brought out in talks throughout the rally.

Lesbians and gays were founding members of Buffalo United for Choice and were encouraged to take on leadership roles in defending the clinics.

The active participation of the lesbian and gay community helped strengthen the pro-choice movement. The pro-choice forces in turn helped build bridges and strengthen the Buffalo lesbian and gay community by their principled stand against bigoted Operation "Rescue" gay-baiting in it's futile attempt to divide the movement. \Box



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LESSONS of BUFFALO

Read about:

Who is Operation "Rescue"?

The birth of Buffalo United for Choice
Confronting bigotry & forging unity
The fight for a class perspective
Tactics and training sessions
The role of injunctions, cops and courts
Theday-to-daystreet battle to keep the clinics open