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**Women's peace work in Oregon:  
a sketch of women's local activism against militarization and war in  
Eugene and Portland**

**Cynthia Cockburn**

I was invited to Oregon in May 2004 to attend a conference on 'human security'. This gave me the chance of spending a week in the company of a number of local women active on a range of issues. From this experience I have pieced together the following sketch (no more) of some of the circumstances prevailing in one state of the US at this moment in time and the way they are experienced by, and shape the actions of, some women activists.

I learned in particular about two cities: Eugene, with a population of 140,000 and Portland, the largest city of Oregon, with around 700,000. The Democratic vote is strong in these cities, I was told, and in Corvallis too. Eugene, with an important university, has a high proportion of educated professionals and liberals. It recently elected an anti-Bush mayor and council. Back in the 1970s this area had a reputation for 'hippie' culture. But other parts of the state are conservative and religious. Some religious groups, such as the Methodists and Quakers, are very active against war. But there is a large evangelical Christian community that supports Bush's policies.

The economic situation was a live issue here in May 2004. Millions of manufacturing jobs have been lost in the USA in recent decades, unemployment is high and wages have been held down. The strategy of employers has included down-sizing their operations, moving jobs abroad to countries where labour is cheaper, shaving overtime hours and evading benefit liabilities. Oregon is one of the two states in the US with the highest incidence of 'food insecurity' – an official euphemism for hunger.

Meanwhile US trade unions have been seriously weakened, and the rate of union enrolment has fallen dramatically. I was told 'the Bush administration, along with its other wars, is waging war on labour here'. Some people see a relationship between the two kinds of war. A deliberately-heightened fear of attack by 'terrorists' is used to justify and enable increased control of the home population and its discontents. The new Department of Homeland Security, created after September 11, amalgamated a large number of individual agencies and in doing so crushed the unions that had formerly represented their employees. Local newspapers at the time of my visit were mentioning labour unrest, as well as popular anger at increased petrol costs, resulting partly from the Iraq war. There was growing interest in the Republican and Democrat campaigns for the presidential elections the coming November.

There are marked differences of wealth and standard of living here in Oregon (it was pointed out to me) between white Americans and the major minorities, African American, Latino (many of the Spanish-speakers are from Mexico) and Asian (including many Japanese). There are numerous organizations concerned with minority and immigrant rights, pressing their case on the government, but these have been set back on their heels by the wave of xenophobia following September 11, during which many Muslims and Arabs, against whom no case has been proved, have been harassed, incarcerated or expelled from the country as suspected 'terrorists'.

### **CALC: Community Alliance in Lane County**

Lane County is an administrative area that includes the towns of Eugene and Springfield. CALC derives from an earlier organization that existed nationally, as well as in Eugene, uniting 'clergy and laity' in concern about the Vietnam war. The local group in Eugene kept the initials, which now stand for Community Alliance of Lane County, an organization with a focus on 'peace and social justice'. CALC comprises women and men working together, with a degree of gender consciousness, addressing the whole spectrum of exclusion and oppression. One of their programmes is called Back to Back: Allies for Human Dignity, opposing bigotry of all kinds and working specifically on anti-Semitism and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer issues.

CALC also have three programmes dealing with militarism: one countering military recruitment; one counselling on draft evasion and conscientious objection; and a campaigning programme called Progressive Responses (PR). The organization has an office, four part-time paid staff and numerous volunteers. Carol van Houten is a volunteer and a member of the CALC board. My interview with her gave me a good sense of an 'anti-war/anti-militarization' strategy that is deeply embedded in a locality, alert to local conditions and diverse communities, and taking a holistic view of exclusion and oppression.

#### *Counter Military Recruitment Project (CMRP)*

Carol told me that the combination of high unemployment, poverty and endemic racism means that the African American, Latino, Native American and other minorities are specially vulnerable to the military's recruitment efforts. There is both a stick and a carrot at work here. In the case of recent migrant groups such as Latinos, citizen status insecurity makes them specially prone to look favourably on military service. The inducement is an implicit suggestion that holders of 'green cards' (i.e. documented as opposed to undocumented immigrants) will be offered citizenship sooner than would otherwise be the case. Latinos are increasingly filling the lower ranks out of which African Americans are beginning to climb. As a result there has been a noticeable proportion of Latino dead and injured in Iraq (I was told). If the 'carrot' of a living wage and eventual US naturalization draws Latino migrants to the military, it is a threat that drives Native Americans in this direction. Recruitment is high on the Indian reservations because past experience has

shown that those reservations that refuse to demonstrate proper loyalty in times of war are later penalized by loss of land rights.

After September 11 2001, along with the notorious Patriot Act, the Bush administration passed a new education law, with the slogan 'No Child Left Behind'. One of its provisions penalized schools that refused to accept recruitment visits by the military. The US forces require 200,000 new recruits annually. Previously, Portland education authority had successfully refused recruiters (on the legal ground that the military discriminates against lesbians and gays). The new law overruled their position. What is more, for the first time, school administrators were obliged to give recruiters, on request, the names and contact details of students, unless withheld by the specific request of individual parents. When the new law came into operation CALC took a political action to the local School Board and 'sat in' until the Board would agree to discuss the issue. They agreed to CALC's requests (1) for equal access to schools to that of the recruiters, and (2) to notify parents that they had a right to refuse to allow the release of their childrens' details.

The military are adept at appealing to teenagers of the poorer communities. Much of the CMRP team's work therefore is working closely with the leaders and advocates of minority groups, especially Latinos, African Americans and Native Americans. Carol is one of the CALC volunteers who visits local schools to work with teachers, administrators and career counselors and pupils against the insidious effect of the military recruiters. She works as a team with a male veteran, whose war experience gives credibility to their words. She told me

The recruiters are so clever. They listen to what a child wants and promises they'll get it. They say "you can study any subject, electronics, whatever you like", "you can go to training with your best friend", "you can just be in the police". But when they get you in you're just sent to whatever they decide. Our aim in CALC is to lay before students the facts the recruiters leave out – for instance that you're signing up to an 8-year commitment.

Girls as well as boys are the targets of recruitment, and the proportion of females in the services is growing year by year. Carol and others in the CMRP, when talking to girls in schools, stress the the harassment and rape that many women in military service experience from their male colleagues as well as, in the case of black and minority women, racism. They use an explicit leaflet issued by the War Resisters' League, titled 'Battered by the Pentagon'. Carol says, 'recruitment to the military is an opportunity for black women, but at what risk! There is a terribly irony in this.'

### *Draft Refusal and Conscientious Objector Counselling*

But for the 'poverty draft' described above, there is currently no conscription in the USA. Males at eighteen years are only obliged to 'register', in preparation for a draft. It is feared however that, if the war on 'terror' continues, the administration might be obliged to introduce compulsion.

Preparing for such a moment, CALC work closely with two national organizations, the Centre on Conscience and War (CCW), whose counselling materials they use; and the Central Committee for Conscientious Objection (CCCO) who run a telephone hotline. Carol, working with a Spanish-speaking counterpart, responds to those, usually young men, enquiring how they could avoid conscription should the draft be imposed. She is considering training to enable her to work with military personnel who 'want out'. Quakers also offer these kinds of support, but, Carol says 'I offer a non-religious alternative'.

### *Progressive responses*

Once over the immediate shock of September 11, Carol and others, women and men alike, organized an action group they called Progressive Responses, and got it accepted as a CALC initiative, with the purpose of public education, 'visibility', networking and political lobbying. They launched vigils and rallies against war, and forums and teach-ins analysing the issues. As many as 5000 people attended the largest of these events, a rally in October 2002, at which speakers identified the US corporate/militarist agenda, denial of human rights and support for oppressive regimes in many countries, as giving rise to support for acts of terrorism against the USA and its allies.

As I understand it, what PR enabled CALC to do was to work co-operatively with local and national allies at this moment of crisis. Others in their immediate Eugene vicinity are Eugene Peaceworks, founded 1981, promoting non-violent strategies against militarism and social/environmental oppression. There is WAND - Women's Actions for New Directions – a longstanding group originally protesting against nuclear weapons. WAND were active in the post 9/11 environment, with postcard campaigns, sending symbolic, sanctions-breaking consignments of rice to Iraq, and protesting the use of depleted uranium and bunker-buster bombs. There is a religious initiative, Faith in Action. And there is Justice Not War, formed as a coalition against the war on Iraq.

On the wider Oregon scene, CALC is part of an alliance called Cascadian Network for Peace and Justice (CNPJ) which called out 25,000 people in the state capital, Portland, in late 2002, and nearly 40,000 as the invasion of Iraq approached. Even today there is a regular march and rally every Friday evening in Portland by the Portland Peaceful Response Coalition, part of CNPJ. They have speakers, with a megaphone. There is Oregon Peaceworks, that publishes a newspaper, *The Peacemaker*. In Portland, on the women's front, there is a Code Pink group (see separate profile) doing their 'fresh, creative and fun' thing (motto: 'if I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution'); there is also a chapter of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; and two Women in Black groups (see below).

Carol said, 'we are a locally-driven scene with input from national movements.' She mentioned first United for Peace and Justice (UJFP) coalition, with a strong input from ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), important for assembling massive demonstrations in Washington DC

and elsewhere, in which the various Oregon groups participated, along with those of every other state. Second, a key actor at the national level has been [Moveon.org](http://Moveon.org). Started by two young men who lost their computer jobs, this Internet phenomenon has contributed dramatically to awareness raising and networking, building a nation-wide (indeed international) anti-Bush-anti-war movement.

### ***WILPF and WiB***

There has been a Women in Black group in Eugene, holding silent vigils (typically of six to ten women) in front of the County Courthouse. I was unable to meet anyone from this group, but was told that it is predominantly Quaker, and is currently in abeyance because its key activist, Peg Martin, is serving a prison sentence for action against the School of the Americas in Georgia.

I did however have meetings with Yvonne Simmons and Pat Hollingsworth, who are active in WILPF and WiB in Portland.

Pat is a long time WILPF member. The Portland branch formed over 50 years ago. In the nineteen-eighties the chapter were preoccupied, like many others, with nuclear weapons and disarmament. Today their concerns are guided by the agenda decided by WILPF internationally, expressed locally in opposition to Bush's 'war on terror', and to US interventions in Colombia and Haiti. They give the Jane Addams Children's Book Awards to local schools. In addition to monthly organizing meetings, WILPF mounts a weekly vigil on a Wednesday at the Pioneer Court House Square. They do not ask for silence on their vigils. They use purpose-designed placards to put across their message, with leaflets that deal with different themes week by week. Some men attend the vigil, usually members of Northwest Veterans for Peace. The week I was in Oregon (May 11, 2004) they were responding to the photos that were all over the media that week showing Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib prison being tortured by US soldiers, male and female. Their leaflet read

We have sanitized war for too long...The goal of a war is to win and no matter how civilized we try to make it, with rules and conventions, it is still war. ..When you expose men and women to brutal conditions for prolonged periods of time, they start to act in the savage way in which their whole world operates....They are becoming monsters because that is what we are asking them to be.

There is also a Women in Black presence in Portland. It began in 1993 when Pat and Yvonne were both appalled by the wars in Yugoslavia and set up a group in solidarity with WiB in Belgrade. At first it was 'kind of under the WILPF umbrella'. Now, although both women continue to be involved in both networks, WiB has acquired its own distinct identity.

Yvonne has travelled a good deal for anti-war work, and in particular spent time in Bosnia bringing material aid during the siege of central Bosnia. Yvonne describes herself as 'political and humanitarian, both'. I was struck by the way she combines political activism with personal, individual support.

Everywhere she goes she takes material gifts and makes contact, especially with children, spending time with them, organizing games, singing, parties. She is well connected to the international WiB network, subscribes to the international e-lists, and is a member of the wibcaucus-US e-list besides. She attended (and reported back from) the international encounter at Massa in August 2003.

This WiB holds vigils in front of the Federal Building from 12 noon till 1 pm every Friday. They are a very small group, recently shrunk to two or three women. At one time it included a dog that wore a waistcoat proclaiming him a Dog in Black. Occasionally men will attend, usually a Northwest Veteran for Peace. They do not hold meetings except to get together occasionally to rewrite the flyer.

There is however a second, separate, Women in Black group in Portland, of whom typically five or six stand in vigil, within sight of the Federal Building group, at a similar time, between 12.15 and 12.45 pm, also on Fridays. Their chosen position is the Women's Park between SW 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, Main and Madison, in downtown Portland. I was unfortunately unable to meet any of the members of this WiB and am therefore dependent for a description on their website <[www.nexconnexion.net/info/wib](http://www.nexconnexion.net/info/wib)>, as well as on my informants in the Federal Building group (Yvonne and Pat).

The difference (say the latter) is that this Women's Park WiB prefers to stand as women only, and to observe silence – a contrast to their own chatty vigil. The Women's Park group is more 'spiritual' in approach than Federal Building WiB, 'rather New Age' and less 'political'. They are more prone than Federal Building WiB to express themselves 'for peace' rather than 'against war' and to show less open opposition to US government policies. It may be indicative that the group's website is hosted by New Connexions. The text giving information on WiB is a straightforward extract of several paragraphs from the the international site [www.womeninblack.org](http://www.womeninblack.org). But New Connexions home page [www.newconnexion.net](http://www.newconnexion.net) carries an article by Vicky Thompson, the author of *The Jesus Path: 7 Steps to a Cosmic Awakening*, who 'helps people open a powerful connection with Spirit'.

An important practical point of differentiation between Federal Building WiB and both Women's Park WiB and WILPF is that the former choose to maintain a tough public stand on Israel and Palestine, risking unpopularity with many among the Jewish community in Portland, which is Zionist, in the main, and does not oppose Sharon or Bush. Yvonne believes that many anti-war groups in the US are cautious about protesting Israeli actions 'because the Jewish lobby here is so strong, and also they don't want to risk appearing anti-semitic'.

By contrast, when I was there the Fed Building WiB leaflet was stressing the emergency in the Gaza Strip, with the Israeli Defence Forces attack on Rafah. On the previous International Women's Day they had organized non-violent direct action, getting on and off carriages of the railway line known as MAX, ululating, and applying stickers reading "Maxine Mobile Vigil – end Israeli

Occupation of Palestine". Afterwards, Palestinian women joined them, and together they walked around the Square and to the mayor's office to hand her a letter from Bat Shalom.

### **Some things the visit to Oregon made me think about**

#### *Perceiving a landscape of activism*

I was specially interested here by the picture my contacts helped me assemble of a 'landscape' of activism, that stretches from the very local (streets and schools) to the national (Washington DC) and (in the case of WiB) international. I was able to see in Oregon what I take to be characteristic of the USA – a variety of groups that address a range of issues; some of them long standing, some of them sparked by recent events; some of them women-only, some of them mixed; some of them religious and some secular. They each 'do their own thing' yet are capable of supporting each other and, at certain moments, constituting broad coalitions.

#### *The significance of a local, anti-racist, pro-rights strategy*

Carol van Houten said of CALC 'our analysis is particularly local. We would be asking ourselves "who here are we not reaching?"' 'Acting locally' cannot fail to mean taking account of inequalities of opportunity, wealth and power in the local population. Groups, organizations and networks specifically addressing war and militarism report finding it very difficult to draw in African Americans, Latinos/as and individuals of other minorities, despite their earnest wish to do this. There is talk of 'multiracial, multi-issue movements', Guadalupe Quinn, a rights activist, told our conference, but the painful truth is that whites too often take over. They just 'know' how things should be done.

At the same time, there is little if any specific autonomous anti-war/anti-militarist activism among minority groups – who have other issues at the top of their political agenda. Two examples:

- Before the incidents of September 11 2001 there had been liberalizing moves on Mexican immigration; immediately afterwards this stopped. The loss of attention to their problem has been resented by Mexicans.
- There are 2 million African Americans in prison - an unprecedented incarceration of a nation of its citizens. In Portland, the chief of a police force deemed racist and brutal, soon after the mass march protesting the invasion of Iraq, bizarrely offered a peace award to some members of the Cascadian Network for Peace and Justice. Most refused this frank co-optation, but three accepted. 'That kind of thing divides black and white.'

Some predominantly white, predominantly anti-war groups, like CALC, are learning that it is necessary to reach out to particular communities, study and understand their agendas, and genuinely put effort into supporting their issues. The challenge is to convert a perception of the connections between

racism and war, between curtailments of human rights at home and abroad, into something more than rhetoric.

*Offering partnership to 'the enemy' at home*

Dalia Hashan, of the American Civil Liberties Union, told our conference of the appalling treatment of Arabs and Muslims in the USA in the wake of September 11.

In Eugene, CALC had been quickly aware of this retrenchment of civil liberties throughout the USA and that 'it was going to be a scary time for Muslims'. Quite early on they had made contact with the Muslims who gathered at a local centre they used as a mosque. They lined the street outside, as a signal of caring and protection – no placards, no noise, just a supportive presence. Some of the CALC women put on headscarves as a sign of empathy. 'It wasn't organized. Some women just did it. At the mosque, women helped us.'

In Portland, Federal Square WiB have worked at building relationships with women among the fairly large Portland Palestinian community and the smaller Afghan community, two peoples at the receiving end of violence from the US and its allies. Both CALC and WiB feel that this kind of partnering of people resident in the USA, bearing names associated with enmity elsewhere in the world, helps their groups avoid being merely rhetorical in their opposition to war.

**Contacts**

This profile is based on a one-week visit to Oregon in May 2004 as part of the fieldwork for my current research project *Women Opposing War: Organization and Strategy in the International Movement of Women against Violence and Militarism*. During the visit I had interviews with Carol van Houten of Community Alliance of Lane County, and Pat Hollingsworth and Yvonne Simmons of Women in Black and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Portland. I also benefited enormously by invited to attend a conference on "Borders of Human Security" at the Center for the Study of Women in Society, University of Oregon, where I met Joan Acker, Sandy Morgen and other inspiring women. Thanks to you all!

I have checked out the contents of this Profile in draft with Carol, Pat and Yvonne and I believe they now feel comfortable enough with it for me to put it on my web log. Of course, with the understanding that it is ultimately my own perspective and I am responsible for any errors that remain. Please, it is still open to correction – if you can improve it, get in touch.

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This document is one of a series of local and regional profiles that will appear on this website in coming months. They are interim products a two-year research project *Women Opposing War: Organization and Strategy in the International Movement of Women against Violence and Militarism*, being carried out by the author from her base in the Department of Sociology, City University, London, during 2004/5, with the support of several charitable trusts. The profile is not intended for publication in its present form. I would be grateful if you would not quote it in published work without first seeking my agreement.

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