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United States : How the Strike for Equality Relaunched the Struggle for Women's Liberation in the US

Thursday 4 March 2021, by [MILLER Ruthann](#), [ROSENSTOCK Nancy](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2020).

An interview with Ruthann Miller by Nancy Rosenstock.

In August 1970, campaigners for women's liberation mounted a huge demonstration that recharged feminism in the US. Ruthann Miller, the protest coordinator, was a socialist activist. She talks to Jacobin about the march, and the need to combine feminist and socialist politics.



The Strike for Equality put forward three main demands: free abortion on demand — no forced sterilization; free, community-controlled 24-hour childcare centers; and equal opportunities in jobs and education. (Eugene Gordon / The New York Historical Society / Getty Images)

The Women's Strike for Equality in August 1970 was a landmark in the development of second-wave feminism. On August 26, fifty thousand women marched down New York City's Fifth Avenue, defying the efforts of the police to confine them to the sidewalk as they mounted the largest feminist demonstration that the United States had seen.

The protest in New York was flanked by actions in ninety US cities, coming fifty years to the day after women had won the right to vote. This time, the Strike for Equality put forward three main demands: free abortion on demand — no forced sterilization; free, community-controlled twenty-four-hour childcare centers; and equal opportunities in jobs and education.

Ruthann Miller, a young socialist activist, was the coordinator of the New York march, but her role in the Strike for Equality has never received the attention it deserves. Now, telling her story for the first time, Miller describes the events leading up to the historic demonstration and on the day itself.

She also discusses the challenge of combining her socialist activism and her commitment to women's liberation, in the face of criticism from "feminists who said I couldn't be a feminist and a socialist, and socialists who said I couldn't be a socialist and a feminist."

Nancy Rosenstock (NR)

You were the coordinator of the August 26, 1970 Women's Strike for Equality in New York City. Can you tell us how that came about? What was your involvement in the women's liberation movement prior to August 1970?

Ruthann Miller (RM)

In 1969, I joined Redstockings, a radical feminist group that organized small consciousness-raising groups. Being involved in this group gave me the insight, self-esteem, and self-confidence that carried me through my life.

In late 1969, I was the full-time staff person for a coalition of women's groups in New York — People to Abolish Abortion Laws (PAAL) — which organized to support the legal case challenging the constitutionality of the New York State law that made abortion a crime. In February 1970, we organized a public demonstration that drew five thousand women, an astonishing number at the time, and the largest women's rights march since the suffrage movement fifty years earlier. I was twenty-two years old, the mother of a beloved baby smiling at me from her basket in the office as I worked at organizing.

Betty Friedan, a feminist author, had the idea to have a one-day women's strike and march down Fifth Avenue to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of winning the right to vote and to demand equality for women. Initially, she went to NOW (National Organization for Women), an organization she had founded, to propose they organize it. NOW said no.



Betty Friedan photographed in her home in 1978. (Lynn Gilbert / Wikimedia Commons)

To say Friedan was annoyed at that would be putting it politely. She knew about the demonstration that PAAL had organized in February, and somehow she found out that I had been the staff organizer. She also knew that I was a member of the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), a group of students and other youth that had played a huge role in organizing massive anti-Vietnam War demonstrations during those years.

Friedan invited me to her house to discuss “a proposal.” Along with myself, there were four other people at this meeting: Friedan; Ivy Bottini, president of NOW, although she was not officially representing it; Judy White from the Socialist Workers Party; and Rita Mae Brown, now a well-known author.

It was made clear to me that I was there representing young radical women whom Friedan decided were essential to making the march a success. I wasn't sure which hat I wore that day — Redstockings, staff organizer for the abortion rights coalition, YSA, young mother, or conduit to those who organized the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations.

NR

A diverse coalition of women's organizations came together around the three demands for the march: free abortion on demand — no forced sterilization; free community-controlled twenty-four-hour childcare centers; and equal opportunities in jobs and education. Can you describe the challenges that were involved in getting agreement on these demands? What were some of the different groups that were involved?

RM

There were fifty-four groups that endorsed the August 26 coalition, including NOW. The biggest differences were between the radical feminists like Redstockings and the conservative feminists like NOW. The disagreements weren't at all around the demands, although some disagreements arose around the modification of demands, such as adding "free" to the abortion demand as insisted on by Redstockings, or adding "community-controlled" to the childcare demand, which was championed by black women's groups.

It turned out that we won support everywhere: Church Women United, suburban women, university women, stockbrokers — all types of women. Friedan did her best to get support from every segment of the Democratic Party.

For me personally, my role was to deepen everyone talking together in spite of differences. It was more the everyday small disagreements that, if not handled properly, could easily break apart this new, fragile coalition. I would go home each night with my head pounding, from getting Church Women United chatting happily with Robin Morgan — the radical feminist who authored the 1970 book, *Sisterhood Is Powerful*.

The disagreements came from a real difference in perspective. Betty Friedan and the NOW leadership were very concerned about public appearance — about promoting the idea that reasonable, educated, somewhat older women were for these ideas, and about getting the established political parties involved. The younger radical women, the university and high school women, were tired of pleasing everyone and wanted instead to convince the public of the fairness of the demand for women's equality by bold, imaginative actions before the march.

For example, "Women of the World Unite" and "March on August 26 for Equality" were two forty-foot banners that were hung from the Statue of Liberty days before the march. "Freedom trash cans" were set up all over the city, where symbols of women's denigration were thrown.

Women organized everywhere. We began a newsletter to communicate, which was put together by women in the media. This newsletter eventually morphed into *Ms.* magazine.

"I was the youngest speaker that day, an unknown who has slipped out of the history of that day. But that day has never slipped out of my story."

NR

You worked full-time in the office organizing the demonstration. What was that like? What was your relationship with Betty Friedan, who had originally come up with the idea for the march?

RM

My relationship with Friedan was good. It was her choice to propose and champion me to be the coordinator. It turned out to be right, because August 26, 1970 was successful beyond our dreams. She seemed to see in me a skill, something I was just beginning to develop and see in myself, and she took a chance on it, giving me one of the most wonderful experiences of my life.

So I will always be grateful to her for that. She believed I could organize the young women, and she could organize the older women. It actually turned out that I was able to get all the women working together. Who knew? Friedan had wanted to propose to the coalition that money be raised for my childcare expenses. That was really very kind of her. But it wasn't necessary. By that point, I would have done it for free.

NR

Having a small child at the time posed some significant challenges. How did that work out?

RM

My little baby, Jennie, came with me each day to the organizing office for August 26, 1970, which was in a church. She slept in a basket by my desk or played in her playpen. The church had a small daycare center, but she was too little.

The center was run by some great women who would take her on little outings with the older kids to give me a break. One of the Redstockings women, Alix Kates Shulman, an author, lived down the street. She would sometimes take Jennie to her apartment with her children when she picked them up from school and give me some time to concentrate on one thing at a time.

I was very lucky in the sense that Jennie's dad is a wonderful father. Like a lot of men at that time, he was just beginning to try and walk the line between being the traditional good father that he had himself, and the new man that his raving feminist partner wanted. He also had to contend with me being a public spokesperson for the new women's liberation movement. He was also at the time involved in politics around the clock.

NR

On the day of the march, despite having secured permits, the police tried to keep the protest on the sidewalk. What happened? How did the march end up taking to the streets?

RM

On the day itself, I held my breath. One of the many tasks I had on that day was to be in charge of the marshals. We had met with the mayor's office and gotten all the permits, but they refused to

agree to block off the road. "The girls" could march on the sidewalk with their signs.

Very early before the scheduled time, it was clear that large numbers were amassing. I was talking with the police commander, and he kept saying, "Hey lady," as he insisted we march on the sidewalk. I was at first trying to be my quiet, usual, polite self, but I got so exasperated that finally I said to him, "Please just turn around and look behind you."

I made a gesture pointing to the crowd. People around me started chanting, "Look behind, look behind!" The police commander turned his head and saw these thousands of women, and within two seconds, he gave the order to block off the street. Shortly after, I gave the signal, and the fifty-thousand-strong March for Equality began. Women once again marched into history.

NR

Can you describe the composition of the march? Were there contingents of union members? Was it mostly young? What was the participation from black and Puerto Rican women?

RM

In addition to NOW and Redstockings, there were numerous other groups involved in the coalition that organized the march and brought people to it. We even had women stockbrokers marching from Wall Street to join us.

Student groups like Barnard/Columbia Women's Liberation were incredible organizers. Others included: New York Radical Feminists, Radical Lesbians, National Coalition of American Nuns, National Welfare Rights Organization, Older Women's Liberation, Feminists in the Arts, Women's Strike for Peace, WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), High School Student Alliance, and the Third World Women's Alliance.

NR

As one of the central women involved in organizing for this march, were you surprised by the turnout?

RM

I chaired the rally afterward. Congresswomen Shirley Chisholm and Bella Abzug spoke, as well as Gloria Steinem. There was a speaker from the Third World Women's Alliance. Betty Friedan gave a speech. I also spoke — a twenty-two-year-old Irish-American young mother, having recently discovered that I had something to say. "Look around you and feel our power," I told the crowd. Continuing on, I said: "What we see here today is the power of united struggle of thousands of women organized in our own movement."

As I looked out from the stage that day at all the women united there, I couldn't believe we had really done it. I was the youngest speaker that day, an unknown who has slipped out of the history of that day. But that day has never slipped out of my story.

After August 26, Betty Friedan got well-deserved credit. The National Organization for Women took public credit for organizing the march — which wasn't true. I didn't think it mattered, since we had accomplished our goal. Women's equality was now a national discussion.

NR

In addition to having been a member of one of the early radical feminist groups in New York City, you were also a socialist. Was that in any way a conflict at the time?

RM

For me personally there was no conflict between feminism and socialism. But to others there was, and they were not shy about telling me and trying to convince me they were right — feminists who said I couldn't be a feminist and a socialist, and socialists who said I couldn't be a socialist and a feminist. You have to remember that back then, there were very few feminists in the traditional political parties, or in socialist political parties, or in the leadership of the anti-Vietnam War or civil rights movements.

Everyone was confused. There was a small minority of the feminist movement who thought they were the only ones who knew what a feminist must be. The rest of us ignored them. Some people even thought you could tell if a woman was a feminist just by looking at her. Many men found out to their surprise that this idea was definitely untrue.

But I was very used to contradictions: I had been a nonpolitical ballet dancer who joined the anti-Vietnam War movement. I was a young Irish-American working-class woman who got a scholarship to college and was heading to law school. I was a very young mother with an infant in a sling with whom I thought I could carry on doing what I wanted to do. I was a socialist and a member of the YSA.

NR

Having played such a central role in a historic moment, can you describe to us, fifty years later, the significance of this event for yourself?

RM

The only other thing I want to say is that in 1969, I was a very ordinary average American young woman. I was in the right place at the right time. Because of the Depression, World War II, and its aftermath in the United States, including the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, the conditions were there for the rise of the second wave of the women's movement, and I was lucky enough to be part of it.

The main significance to me personally was that for the rest of my lifetime, I have been very confident in my abilities, have had good self-esteem, and believed I could do what I wanted. My experiences in the women's liberation movement and August 26 played a big role in producing that confidence. I have never forgotten August 26, 1970.

Today, as new young women organize, it does seem important to see clearly that we need to organize politically the largest number of women from different walks of life — different groups in coalitions around what we can agree on and leave our disagreements for another time. This is especially true now in these challenging times.

P.S.

• Jacobin. 11.01.2020:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/11/womens-strike-equality-liberation-betty-friedan>

- About the Author

Ruthann Miller was the coordinator of the August 26, 1970 Women's Strike for Equality in New York.

About the Interviewer

Nancy Rosenstock was an activist in Boston Female Liberation and served on the national staff of the Women's National Abortion Action Coalition. Today she is a member of Chicago for Abortion Rights. She is the author of a forthcoming book, *Inside The Second Wave of Feminism: A Participants' Account of Boston Female Liberation, 1968-1972*.