

Interview of Cora Weiss by Larry Bensky. Notes made from tape.

Cora Weiss, Dave Dellinger, co-chairmen of
Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in
North Vietnam
365 West 42nd Street
New York City, New York 10036

The committee does not publish a newsletter but maintains a mailing list and sends out materials such as documents, including Congressional records, and magazine articles by members. Those requesting such material should send one dollar.

The committee was formed 15 Jan 70, in the Federal Building in Chicago where several members of the committee were then on trial, including Dave Dellinger, and where Mrs. Weiss was testifying on behalf of Tom Hayden. The date is that of Martin Luther King's birthday. Committee was established as result of trip to North Vietnam in December 1969 of several women representing Women Strike for Peace, Madeline Duckles of Berkeley, Ethel Taylor of Philadelphia and Mrs. Weiss, at invitation of the Vietnam Women's Union. During this visit they made arrangements to open a channel of communication with POWs and their families, to increase the flow of mail, to increase the volume and quantities of packages, and to receive information on behalf of families of those declared missing in action.

On their return meetings were held with various factions of the anti-war movement and the committee was set up, including Dave Dellinger and Cora Weiss as co-chairmen, and

Mrs. Ann Bennett of Berkeley
Trudy Young
and
Richard Fernandez, co-chairmen, Clergy and Laymen Concerned
Dan Berrigan
Rennie Davis
Steward Meacham, American Friends Service Committee
Franz Schurman
Richard Barnet, Institute for Policy Studies
Richard Falk, Princeton University
Dr. Robert Lifton, psychiatrist who has worked extensively with
POWs after Korean war
and others.

The committee has sent its members, arranged for trips by other, or taken advantage of invitations to other Americans, to go to North Vietnam at least once a month in the past three years. Americans have been going to North Vietnam on a regular basis during this period except during times of flood and of heavy bombing. Since war has not been declared Americans cannot be prevented from going to North Vietnam.

The Administration is grateful for the information they bring out, "because it's the only information that they have, and grateful for the fact that we're keeping the families happy because we're supplying mail." On the other hand, the committee has been "harassed" by such incidents as telegrams taking up to six days to arrive at committee office instead of the normal 24 hours or less, mail frequently arrives "alphabetized," arrives "first class first, second class second, third class third, in a neat package," or more mail is delivered at the end of the week than at the beginning. "That kind of pattern raises questions as to whether or not there are other people who are interested in our mail aside from us." Mrs. Weiss says that, according to a recent issue of Stars and Stripes, when the committee received the phone call last month to go to North Vietnam to pick up the three pilots, she and Dellinger were followed from New York to Paris and she implies surveillance was continued there, but she says she has no personal knowledge of any of this.

On VIVA: It's an organization "that is perpetuating myths and propaganda about prisoners, about prison conditions and about the American attitude." The organization collects "not thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars but millions of dollars ... from the sale of trinkets." It started out ostensibly as a student organization but incorporation papers show names of industrialists or their wives; was started by its executive director, "a gentleman who was supposed to be a Vietnam veteran."

On The League of Families: "To a large extent that is a government sponsored and created organization that has certain political purposes and needs. It does not represent all of the families; I daresay it does not represent the majority of the confirmed POW families - it is, larger and larger every day, a representation of MIA families, and there is a difference. There is another organization that people forget to talk about ... called Families for Immediate Release. They have leadership in California and on the East Coast and they are people who, from among the confirmed POW families, are supporting ... the concept that in order to get their husbands home the United States has to withdraw from Vietnam."

Bensky asks her opinion of the course of the peace talks and "Kissinger's announcement and subsequent collapse of negotiations." "I am very, very pessimistic and I'm very angry, and I think that Americans should also be angry. I'm angry because the United States government once again, for the umpteenth time, has deceived the American people and has tricked the Vietnamese people. Deceived us again because they have held up the hope of peace, they have made us promises knowing full well they have no intention of keeping those promises. And the press went along with it and ... so many peace people went along with it, too. 'Maybe Kissinger does have something up his sleeve this time,' because it just sounded too good not to be true. "

Mrs. Weiss tells of trip to Paris on Friday (27 Oct) by herself, Richard Barnet and Prof. George Kahin of Cornell, for discussion with Deputy Minister Vy (phonetic) of the DRV and Mme. Binh. "We found out then what is known today, that Kissinger had completely agreed to the nine points of the accords, and that all that was waited for was the signature of Secretary of State Rogers and Foreign Minister Trinh (phonetic). [We also found out] that this wasn't the first time that Mr. Kissinger had agreed to sign those accords, that it in fact wasn't even the second time, but rather that it was the third time, and that on three separate occasions since October 9th Kissinger ... had actually set a date to be in Paris to sign these accords. "

In answer to question whether the United States could break with Thieu and sign a separate peace with North Vietnam: "I don't see how. It has always been understood from the beginning, before Kissinger and Le Duc Tho went into these talks with each other, that Kissinger would represent Washington and Saigon - because Kissinger refused to negotiate directly with the PRG* - and that Le Duc Tho, accepting that and tolerating it, would represent Hanoi and the NLF. Now, of course, that we have recognized the PRG at least in the unsigned accords, maybe that will be changed, but it seems to me that a separate agreement is not possible, that it's one war and it's one party that has to sign and that's the combined forces of Saigon and Washington."

Larry Bensky in asking a question includes the fact that Father (Dan?) Berrigan was not permitted by the court to join the group leaving for Vietnam 1 Nov 72. Group includes Tom Hayden and Jan Austen (of Asia Information Group, Berkeley).

In answer to question as to who pays for these trips, Mrs. Weiss says those who go raise the money (\$1,500) themselves; Hanoi has never paid for the flight of any American to go to Vietnam, including members of the Committee of Liaison.

*Flora Lewis, NYTimes 27 Oct 72, this file: "The Vietcong spokesman, Ly Van Sau, said that his delegation had sought direct secret negotiations with the United States but that Washington had refused. Therefore, he said, [the NLF] had agreed that North Vietnam and the United States should each represent its ally in the South in the talks."