

AIDS Groups Challenge Fed's

CAS CONFERENCE CHALLENGES THE FEDS

TORONTO—Close to 100 delegates and observers attended the Canadian AIDS Society (CAS) meeting in Toronto on May 14-15th. The CAS is made up of the community-based AIDS groups across the country. After years of silence and politeness in the face of the federal government's inaction and obstruction of the fight against AIDS this meeting marked the beginnings of a more activist turn on the part of the CAS.

There were important discussions over the weekend about the goals and direction of the Society, discussions of safer sex guidelines, drug access and clinical trials, housing issues for People Living With AIDS (PLWAs), and homophobia in AIDS organizing. In many of these discussions a more militant mood was expressed fueled by years of federal government neglect of the fight against AIDS and federal refusal to recognise the importance of the community based groups in this fight.

The meeting began with reports from the community-based groups across the country. We heard reports from Nova Scotia about the provincial government's homophobia. The provincial government prepared an AIDS mailing without even consulting the community-based AIDS groups. In Newfoundland the Minister of Health has made heterosexual comments that homosexual and bisexual men are less deserving than heterosexuals of support in the fight against AIDS. In Ontario we heard about the 14 member Ontario AIDS Network of community-based groups, the formation of AIDS ACTION NOW!, and the safe-sex project of the Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes (CORP). We were told about the offensive remarks of Saskatchewan premier Grant Devine, and his health minister. A common refrain from groups across the country was the lack of communication and support from the federal government's Federal Centre for AIDS, and problems with the Canadian Public Health Association. Another common refrain from many of the groups was the lack of human rights protection in their provinces, both for lesbians and gays and for PWAs.

The reports from British Columbia were the most frightening of all. Kevin Brown of the Vancouver PWA Coalition spoke of the fear that the quarantine legislation (Bill 34) has caused among PLWAs who now have even more concerns about going on demonstrations or being publicly visible. Brian Peel of AIDS Vancouver reported on the homophobia sponsored by what he called the "fascist" Vander Zalm provincial government. Peter Ducek, the health minister said that gays "can look after their own" as the



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AIDS ACTION NOW! protesting federal inaction in Ottawa

province provides no funding for the community-based groups. The quarantine legislation and the government's hostility has produced a heightened climate of violence against the lesbian and gay communities so that the AIDS Vancouver and other groups now must confront questions of their own security and safety. The province has excluded the community-based groups from any consultation about AIDS and acts as if AIDS Vancouver, AIDS Vancouver Island and the PWA Coalition do not exist. Peel also reported on the provincial government's refusal to fund AZT, the only officially approved AIDS drug in Canada.

Unfortunately, in response to what he described as "fascism" Peel criticized those who adopted a more activist approach. Instead he argued for a moderate approach. He seemed to have no notion of the need to build a sustained grass roots opposition to the provincial government's policies regarding AIDS. Instead he pushed the same behind the scenes, back room approach that AIDS Vancouver adopted in response to the quarantine legislation. This is unfortunate since AIDS activism not only needs to

heat up against the federal government but also against the blatant heterosexual policies of the provincial government's like that in B.C. However, Peel did report on the development of some allies in the community who are supporting the community-based AIDS groups. AIDS Vancouver has gained some support from the trade unions in the province and the B.C. Civil Liberties Association may be willing to take legal action against the provincial

government over the AZT issue.

In discussions of the goals and priorities of CAS many delegates talked about the need for more advocacy and activism. CAS will be setting up an office in Ottawa for the first time and has hired Richard Burzynski from C-SAM, the main community-based AIDS group in Montreal, as its executive director. It was hoped this would allow CAS to co-ordinate its activities more effectively and to be able to put more pressure on the federal government. Some delegates suggested that 1988 should be the year of action for freeing up AIDS-related drugs and for more research funds. Prostitute's rights activists pointed out that if CAS wanted to support education among sex workers about AIDS they needed to call for the decriminalization of prostitution and support prostitute-run initiatives. Concerns were also raised about the need for a political response to pressures in various institutions and agencies towards mandatory-testing and to reveal antibody status, and the situations of men in prisons who continue to be denied condoms.

In an important issue meeting on AIDS drugs Kevin Brown and Michael Lynch of AIDS ACTION NOW!, talked about the criminal neglect and obstruction by various agencies of the federal government of PLWAs and those testing anti-body positive to AIDS-related drugs and treatments. Kevin Brown spoke of feeling that the "government was playing us along" as months go by and nothing happens on the release of new promising drugs. Brown also referred very positively to the B.C.

Civil Liberties Associations position paper on the "catastrophic rights" of PLWAs. This is a very useful and powerful argument for the rights of PLWAs if they so choose to have access to drugs that could potentially lengthen their lives. Michael Lynch while stating that there was "no magic bullet" for AIDS said that a combination of different drugs and therapies could improve and lengthen the lives of PLWAs. This was a new focus for AIDS activism in Canada which focused on increasing the chances of survival for PLWAs. AIDS was no longer necessarily always a fatal disease but with the right combination of drugs could become a chronic but manageable illness. Standing in the way of the lives and survival of PLWAs are the policies and bureaucracy of the federal Ministry of Health and Welfare.

Stephen Manning of the AIDS Committee of Toronto, speaking on behalf of CAS talked about a "shift among the member groups." They felt "they had played the game according to the rules but after more than five years of federal condescension and only token action they were very angry." They "felt betrayed" with the governments moralizing and foot-dragging, its lack of significant funding for the community-based groups, its refusal to release promising AIDS drugs, and the exclusion of the community-based AIDS groups working on the front-lines from any decision-making. Manning expressed the anger that was brewing in the CAS and pointed out it was directed at Jake Epp, Minister of Health and that "the problem is Epp."

At a strategy session facilitated by AIDS ACTION NOW! plans were developed for CAS to endorse the demonstration mentioned in the last issue of *Rites* during the Canadian AIDS conference that followed the CAS meeting. Plans were also made for a National AIDS Phone-in for May 24-25 when the community-based groups from across the country would call their MPs and demand action on AIDS issues. Both these plans were adopted by the CAS meeting. In combination with the protests planned by AIDS ACTION NOW! (see the last issue of *Rites*) this increasing militancy within CAS set the stage for the Canadian AIDS conference becoming a forum for opposition to the federal government's policies regarding AIDS (see the accompanying article on the National AIDS conference).

Many delegates from CAS grilled federal representatives during this conference which was co-sponsored by the federal Ministry of Health. On May 17th during the conference the CAS held a packed press conference to denounce the federal government's inaction and the policies of the Vander Zalm government in B.C. Let us hope that this trend of militancy which has swept through the CAS can be sustained and that CAS delegates will be able to take this new AIDS activism back to their local communities.

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