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LAYING A FOUNDATION, 1980–1981

“We believe we can pull off a worldwide coalition to help disabled people. We’ve already done what people thought impossible. And we’ve done it in about six months.”¹

— Ed Roberts, February 1981

The Steering Committee to establish DPI met three times throughout 1980 and 1981 to prepare a constitution, to draft a statement of philosophy and to organize a founding world congress. The Steering Committee consisted of eleven members after the RI World Congress, but three vacancies on it remained – one each from Latin America, Asia and Oceania. Two of the vacancies were filled over the next half-year.

The Steering Committee members were of varied backgrounds and disabilities and a few had had experience in international organizations through RI and the International Federation of the Blind. Others had years of experience with national organizations of disabled people. Most of the members were professionals in various fields, their ages ranging generally between thirty-five and forty-seven years.

The DPI Steering Committee members were elected because they were seen by the other disabled people at the RI Congress as representing their interests, and to some extent they were charismatic leaders who were needed at this stage of DPI’s development² – leaders who could be trusted and who would set a direction for the membership. The leadership was from what would be called the middle classes of society, which is typical of many social movements. Also typical was the fact that it tended to be from the professions.³

Steering committee meetings

Henry Enns, a representative of North America, and Chairperson of the Steering Committee, made the initial contacts with the UN and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to raise funds for the Founding Congress of DPI. Enns, a wheelchair-user as a result of arthritis, had been involved with self-help organizations in Canada at the provincial and national levels since 1975. A social worker by training, in

1980 he had just started working as a consultant on disability issues with the Mennonite Central Committee Canada (MCC), which had its head office in Winnipeg. Through the Mennonite Central Committee, Enns gained the first contacts for funding the Steering Committee meetings of DPI (then the World Coalition). John Wieler, Overseas Director at MCC, encouraged him to contact the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), referring him to MCC's CIDA contact, John Mackrae.⁴ Support from MCC, an organization well known to CIDA as a reliable non-governmental development and relief agency, helped the World Coalition to obtain a CIDA grant of \$17,200 (Cdn.). It was granted for the World Coalition to hold the first Steering Committee meeting in Ireland in 1980.⁵

Several important decisions were made in Dublin. Ron Chandran-Dudley, a visually-impaired Singaporean, offered Singapore as the site for the founding world congress, and the Steering Committee accepted the offer. It was believed that Singapore was a good place for the congress because, while industrialized, it still belonged to the developing world. It thus provided a bridge between the developed and developing worlds.⁶ The World Congress would be held in December 1981, that is, at the end of the United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons.

The Steering Committee also decided to accept the constitution written by Liam Maguire, which would be presented to the congress in Singapore.⁷ The constitution was modelled on that of the International Labor Organization, since Maguire, a wheelchair-user, was deeply involved with labour concerns and with the ILO. DPI's structure would comprise five regions, with regional councils for each region, and a "world council" with five representatives from each region. Furthermore, Maguire's constitution suggested a name change for the organization to Disabled Peoples' International. The change from World Coalition for Persons with Disabilities was proposed because to the Europeans "coalition" meant a short-term agreement on cooperation between political parties to enable a government to function; it did not signal a lasting relationship. As Henry Enns reiterated, "It was felt the word coalition had a negative connotation being associated with short-term make-do arrangements characterized by instability."⁸

There was little enthusiasm and considerable skepticism on the part of some of the members before the Steering Committee meeting in Dublin. The prevailing attitude was that it would not really be possible to start an organization, yet this meeting was a turning point. There were certain occurrences that lent legitimacy to DPI. It actually received funding

from CIDA, Aer Lingus then offered discounted airfares, and the Mayor of Dublin hosted the Steering Committee. Everyone left the meeting feeling determined to give this organization their best efforts to get it going.⁹

Another Steering Committee meeting was held in San Francisco on February 15–17, 1981. It was funded by the United Nations Trust Fund, which was administered by the UN Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs in Vienna, and which had been set up for the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) in 1981. UN member-governments contributed to the Fund. DPI ultimately received support as a result of contacts made by Henry Enns, the DPI Chairperson, while attending UN meetings in the summer of 1980. The UN granted \$21,000 (US) to bring the Steering Committee members to California, and the Department of Rehabilitation in California contributed \$5,000.¹⁰

At the California meeting, the program for the World Congress was approved. This would focus on how to organize disabled people's organizations, issues of concern to disabled people, development and peace, and DPI's relationship to other international organizations such as the UN and the ILO. Tempers flared over language issues and this became a watershed for discontent in the Steering Committee. Tambo Camara, a French-speaking African from Mauritania, expressed his displeasure that documents sent to him were not translated from English into French. The working language of the Steering Committee was English, and all the other Steering Committee members spoke English. He had raised this in Dublin, but he felt the translation situation had not improved since that time. However, other Steering Committee members were tired of hearing his complaints. Furthermore, at this point the Steering Committee members began asking what they were going to get out of this organization, and how it would benefit their organizations. Finally, after heated debate, people began to realize that they wanted a world organization, and to organize it they had to work together.¹¹ It was agreed that French, English and Spanish translation would be provided when needed.¹²

There were no such conflicts at the next meeting held in Toronto on July 31 and August 1, 1981. This meeting was held with UN funds, in conjunction with a Mobility International (MI) conference. Mobility International was an international travel organization that brought disabled people together to meet each other, to socialize, and to discuss barriers to disabled people's participation. MI paid the airfare and

accommodation costs of several DPI Steering Committee members who spoke at MI's conference. Some of the Steering Committee members could not be present, and thus there was no official quorum. None the less, the meeting was held because it offered the last chance to plan for the upcoming World Congress in December 1981.

A subsidy program to bring delegates from the developing world to the Singapore World Congress was discussed. The first priority was to fund the actual on-site expenses of the Congress. Secondly, DPI would attempt to fund one delegate from each country in the developing world. While it was difficult for all disabled people to obtain funding to attend a congress, it was especially so for people in the developing world because their governments and economies were also poor.

The morale at the meeting was quite upbeat. Ron Chandran-Dudley and a volunteer organizing committee in Singapore were busy making logistical arrangements. Some funds had been promised by CIDA, by the World Council of Churches and by the UN International Year of Disabled Persons Trust Fund, although these had not yet been received by DPI. Everyone thought that 200 people would be a good turnout. And at the time of the Toronto meeting, DPI had heard from thirty-six countries of their interest in attending DPI's founding congress.¹³

Promoting DPI regionally

The Steering Committee members publicized the Congress to disabled people around the world and helped groups of disabled people to organize. João Ferreira, a wheelchair-user, organized a Latin American Symposium on Rehabilitation in Costa Rica as part of his role as an International Labor Organization consultant to the Costa Rican government. He travelled extensively in Central and South America publicizing this event and DPI's upcoming Congress. Many disabled people attended the Latin American Symposium. Henry Enns, Chair of the Steering Committee, spoke at it about DPI. Some disabled participants organized an "American Association of Disabled People", a coalition of people from Argentina, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Costa Rica.¹⁴ Jacqueline de las Carreras also organized a multi-disability organization, with a rights-oriented philosophy, in Argentina during 1981 called *Corporación Argentina de Discapitados (CADIS)*.¹⁵

In the Asian region, the Japanese organized a loose coalition of existing organizations of disabled people called the "Japan Committee

for the Development of DPI".¹⁶ They raised funds through a benefit concert, and as a result, the Japanese appeared strong in Singapore with a total of 105 delegates.¹⁷ Senator Eita Yashiro, a wheelchair-user and former television entertainer, also raised US\$60,000 for the production of a film about the Congress.¹⁸

In Australia, Gustav Gebels at first had difficulty in interesting people in attending the Singapore Congress. He initially approached the government-sponsored International Year of Disabled Persons group which was not a self-help group. Ultimately, however, local self-help groups of disabled people became interested in attending the Congress, and the Australian Government granted \$10,000 (Australian) for twenty disabled people to attend. They joined another twenty-five interested Australians who raised their own money, and thus forty-five Australians would be able to attend the Congress.¹⁹

In Africa, both Steering Committee members were organizing in their regions. Tambo Camara helped complete the formation of a regional organization of disabled persons' groups in French-speaking West Africa, the West African Federation for the Advancement of the Handicapped (WAFAH), in November 1980. This coalition included organizations in Cameroon, Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta), Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.²⁰

Joshua Malinga returned to Zimbabwe inspired by the happenings of the Winnipeg Congress. He had gained a clear understanding of the DPI philosophy of disabled people speaking for themselves and demanding their right to participate in society, which he shared with his organization in Zimbabwe. Malinga also spread the word about DPI's upcoming Congress in Kenya, Zambia and Botswana.²¹

Promoting DPI at the international level

Henry Enns, the Steering Committee chairperson, meanwhile publicized DPI and its philosophy at the international level throughout 1980 and 1981, and his presence at UN meetings resulted in some international visibility and funding for the fledgling DPI. He travelled to the United Nations Advisory Committee meeting for the International Year of Disabled Persons in Vienna, held on August 20–29, 1980. Enns attended as a consultant to the Canadian delegation on disability issues.

It had been due to an unexpected turn of events that it was possible for Enns to attend the UN meeting. Originally a colleague of his from

COPOH, Percy Wickman, a wheelchair-user and Co-Chair of the Canadian Organizing Committee for the International Year of Disabled Persons (COC), was to attend the Advisory Committee meeting, but at the last minute could not attend. It then looked as though other members of the Committee, who were nondisabled, were likely candidates to go in Wickman's stead. But COPOH, through Jim Derksen, Wickman and Allan Simpson, lobbied Health and Welfare Canada to send a disabled person. They wanted to send Henry Enns, who was not a member of the COC. André LeBlanc, the Director of the Bureau on Rehabilitation, also agreed that Enns, as a disabled person and Chair of the DPI Steering Committee, should go. Nondisabled members of the COC felt they should go. Ultimately, with pressure mounting on both sides, Enns received approval for his attendance from Health and Welfare Canada and was off to Vienna.

Other members of the Canadian Delegation were two members of Parliament, David Smith and Walter Dinsdale; André LeBlanc of the Bureau on Rehabilitation, and Jim Crowe from the Canadian Embassy in Vienna. There were only a few disabled people who attended the meeting. The US delegation included Frank Bowe, a deaf man who had been at the founding meeting of DPI in Winnipeg.

The Vienna meeting was important because the twenty-three-nation Advisory Committee was in the process of drafting a World Program of Action Concerning Disabled Persons (WPA) for the International Year of Disabled Persons and its follow-up. It had already held one meeting in 1979. The WPA document was to address the definition of disability, the needs of disabled people in rehabilitation, and prevention of disabilities. Enns and DPI wanted the WPA to include recognition of disabled people's right to integration and participation in society. They also wanted recognition of the importance of building disabled people's organizations.

The meeting provided a forum for Disabled Peoples' International (then called the World Coalition of Persons with Disabilities) in 1980. The Canadian delegation was supportive of disabled people's participation and organizations, and put forward a motion that Enns be granted observer status as a representative of the new DPI which was accepted at the meeting.²² Enns was thus able to speak on behalf of DPI and represent the concerns of disabled people around the world. Overall, the support of the Canadian delegation for the principles of disabled people's participation was invaluable. It helped the fledgling DPI gain international recognition as a representative of disabled people.²³

Enns also furthered the credibility of DPI. Being in a wheelchair added to his own credibility: by inference he knew what disabled people wanted because he himself was disabled. He managed to talk about DPI, its plans and its philosophy with many representatives of countries at coffee and lunch breaks. He encouraged them to support the participation of disabled people from their countries in the upcoming World Congress.

Indeed, by the end of the meeting, the Advisory Committee decided that a World Conference of disabled persons was needed.²⁴ The Trust Fund for the International Year would fund the participation of disabled people through their organizations in 1981. Thus some contacts for funding DPI activities were made, and in the end, funding for the California DPI Steering Committee meeting was secured through Enns' discussions with UN officials.²⁵

In August 1981, Enns, again a member of the Canadian delegation, discussed funding for the DPI Founding World Congress with Otto Wandall-Holm, who was in charge of the IYDP Trust Fund. It looked as though funding of around \$60,000 (US) would be granted.

NOTES

- 1 Ed Roberts, quoted in Mireya Navarro, "A Dream for a World Coalition for Disabled", *San Francisco Examiner*, February 1981, B6.
- 2 At this stage of organization, the leadership was mainly of a charismatic nature. According to the social movement theorist Armand Mauss, when a movement for change coalesces, or comes together, charismatic leaders take center stage. They motivate their followers. Often they also set out the philosophical underpinnings of the movement: "To what extent charisma comes from a leader's own personality traits, and to what extent it is projected by a membership or by a certain crisis situation is not clear. But he who has it is followed because the membership believes he has truth and justice on his side and that he has the right to lead them" (Armand L. Mauss, *Social Problems as Social Movements* [Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1975], 6).
- 3 *Ibid.* According to Armand Mauss, leadership in such movements tends "to be lawyers, teachers and writers and other intellectuals, who are freer, both socially and temporally to conceive and advocate new ideas and policies" (*ibid.*, 53).
- 4 Interview with Henry Enns, DPI chairperson, Winnipeg, Nov. 5, 1985.
- 5 Romeo Maione, director general, NGO Division, Canadian International Development Agency, to Jim Derksen, executive director, COPOH, Oct. 30, 1980, DPI Development Office files, Winnipeg.
- 6 Henry Enns, "Report of Steering Committee", Winnipeg, November 1981, DPI Development Office files, Winnipeg.

- 7 DPI, "Meeting of the Steering Committee Oct. 18 and 19, 1980, Dublin, Ireland", 3, DPI Development Office files, Winnipeg.
- 8 Enns, "Report of the Steering Committee", 3.
- 9 Enns interview, Aug. 29, 1985.
- 10 DPI, "List of Donations and Grants to DPI (Canada) Inc., 1980-85", Winnipeg, 1985, DPI Development Office files, Winnipeg.
- 11 Enns interview, Aug. 29, 1985.
- 12 DPI, "Minutes of Steering Committee of Disabled Peoples' International in San Francisco, USA", Feb. 15-17, 1981, 2, DPI Development Office files, Winnipeg.
- 13 Diane Driedger and Jim Derksen, "Correspondence Report", July 1981, DPI Development Office files, Winnipeg.
- 14 Enns, "Report of Steering Committee", 9; DPI, "Latin American Addresses," 1981, DPI Development Office files, Winnipeg.
- 15 Interview with Jacqueline de las Carreras, DPI World Council member, Kingston, Jamaica, Sept. 28, 1984.
- 16 Diane Driedger, "From Winnipeg to Singapore", in Kathleen S. Miller and Linda M. Chatterdon (eds), *A Voice of Our Own: Proceedings of the 1st World Congress of Disabled People's International, Nov. 30-Dec. 4, 1981, Singapore* (East Lansing, Michigan: University Center for International Rehabilitation, Michigan State University, 1982), 5.
- 17 DPI, "1st World Congress 1981 Participants List", 1981, DPI Development Office files, Winnipeg.
- 18 DPI, "List of Donations and Grants to DPI (Canada) Inc., 1980-85", DPI Development Office files, Winnipeg.
- 19 "History of DPI" in Jeff Heath (ed.), *When Others Speak for You, You Lose: Proceedings of the First National Assembly Disabled Peoples' International (Australia) Melbourne 1983* (Adelaide: South Australian Chapter of DPI, 1984), vi.
- 20 Driedger, "From Winnipeg to Singapore", 4-5.
- 21 Interview with Joshua Malinga, DPI honorary treasurer, Kingston, Sept. 30, 1984; Driedger, "From Winnipeg to Singapore", 5.
- 22 Telephone interview with André LeBlanc, former director, Bureau on Rehabilitation, Health and Welfare Canada, Ottawa, June 10, 1985.
- 23 Henry Enns, "International Disability Issues: Canadian Involvement", Winnipeg, March 1985, 5-6, Henry Enns, DPI Chairperson, files, Winnipeg.
- 24 UN Advisory Committee for the International Year of Disabled Persons, "VII Recommendations, B. 'World Conference Of Disabled People', Second Session, Vienna Aug. 20-27, 1980, Agenda Item 8", 2, DPI Development Office files, Winnipeg.
- 25 Enns interview, Aug. 29, 1985.