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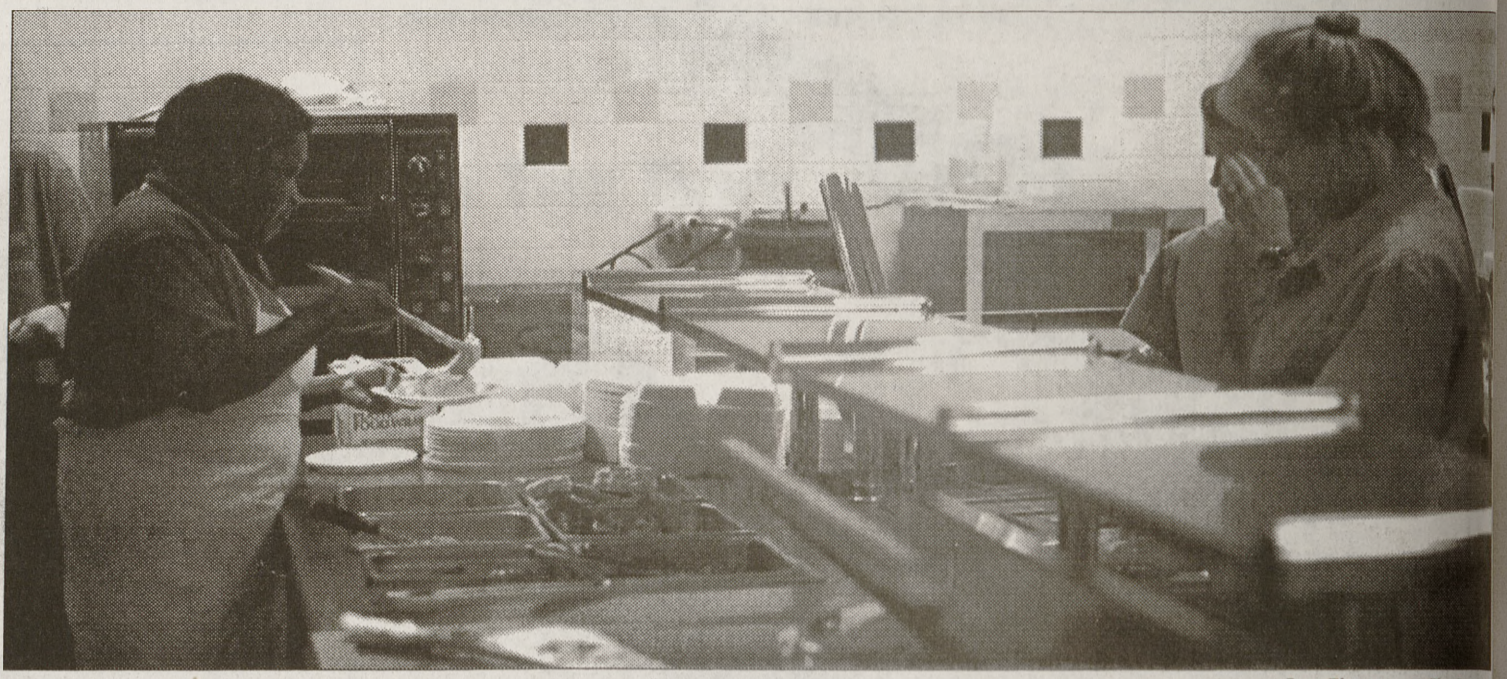
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Last-minute visas, little money, an uncertain welcome

Feminists load up on Beijing-bound workshop on wheels

□ The 6,000-mile journey began in Paris and includes stops in Warsaw and Poland. Travelers will lobby delegates to the Sept. 4-15 U.N. Women's Conference in Beijing.

BERLIN (AP) — Ann Stafford is going to China without a visa. The Irish sociologist is on the Women's Train, a Beijing-bound workshop-on-wheels for 160 determined feminists with modest means and big dreams.

The 6,000-mile journey began in Paris on Friday — next stops are Warsaw and Moscow — with a head of diplomatic steam nearly matching the energy and joie de vivre of participants.

On Sunday, after more than a day in Berlin spent networking — a party in a university courtyard, news conferences, hanging out at a lesbian-run cafe — the backpack-toting women rolled toward Poland.

The travelers — mostly western Europeans, ranging in age from 19 to 75 — sang "We Shall Overcome" before about 50 women blowing whistles sent them on their way.

Those on board belong to groups that will lobby delegates to the Sept. 4-15 U.N. Women's Conference in Beijing. The meeting they'll attend on the sidelines of the conference already has Chinese authorities on edge.

China has effectively kept thousands of women from attending the Non-Governmental Organization Forum by not sending them the lodging confirmations that they need to get visas, women's groups say.

It has also relegated the forum to a provincial town more than an hour by bus from Beijing.

Women's Train riders, dozens of whom got visas only last week after French and German intervention, have a good idea what they're up against.

"We're expecting no workspace, no computers. But we're also expecting 40,000 women who've gone through hell and high water to get there," said Isabel Stramwasser, a 24-year-old Canadian who helped organize the Women's Train.

The women plan to make a lot of noise.

China's human rights record — including more than 20 executions over the last month — will be a main target. They'll also push for an all-female replacement for the U.N. Security Council, and peacemaking efforts they consider a failure.

The past week was an exhausting blur for Maya Salvado. The 29-year-old Spanish-born sculptor who launched the Women's Train project. Up to the last minute, she wasn't sure the money for visas would come through.

"But neither France nor China wanted the train to get started," said Salvado, because it had received so much publicity.

Donations are defraying the \$1,500 cost of the round-trip journey (the return portion is by plane) for those with limited means.

Celebrities including U.S. feminist Germaine Greer and rock star Chrissie Hynde of The Pretenders have lent support. Cartier jewelry company, gave \$20,000 and French government agencies have provided more than \$40,000.

But not all the promised money has come through. The European Union has yet to deliver its promised \$40,000, Salvado said.

Several special trains have been organized by various groups converge on Beijing for the conference. But only this one has its musical groups, a 400-volume library and two workshops to occupy the five days crossing Siberia.

No satellite connection to the Internet, though. Not enough cash



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