

Marxism and the Struggle for Gay/Lesbian Rights Capitalism & Homophobia

Revolutionists must seek to understand the gay question for both scientific and programmatic reasons. Marxists have always sought to understand society as a whole, and to develop a historical materialist analysis of all social phenomena—from the relations of production to religion, the family and so on. As Lenin noted in *What Is To Be Done?*, it is not sufficient to give attention only to questions immediately affecting the proletariat:

“The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe every other social class in all the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of all aspects of the life and activity of all classes, strata, and groups of the population.”

We uphold the Leninist conception of a party of the proletariat as the “tribune of the people,” which seeks to lead the working class in the fight against all forms of oppression under capitalism, and to link the struggles of the oppressed to the struggle for working-class rule. Marxists oppose all capitalist oppression, and in that spirit clearly oppose the persecution of both male and female homosexuals and others who are oppressed on the basis of sexually related behaviour, such as transvestites and transsexuals, sado-masochists, etc. As long as there is informed consent between participants, we adamantly oppose state intervention.

Capitalism does not concentrate the pain it causes in a single identifiable class easily mobilized as a united force. If that were the case our task would be simple. Capitalism distributes its pain in seemingly chaotic patterns, leaving its victims to fight for their interests in isolation, each separated from the others—disabled groups, immigrants, religious minorities, the elderly and the young. It is the task of the revolutionary party to champion the interests of all the oppressed, and to organize their struggles around the axis of proletarian revolution.

Tribune of the People

As Lenin explained, a Marxist must be a:

“...tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth before all his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for all and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.”

—*What is to be Done?*

This conception was not some temporary tactical stance adopted by the immature Lenin; the defense of

democratic rights and the oppressed was integral to Bolshevism. Lenin explicitly disagreed with the notion that as a Marxist, you should “concern yourself only with your own class,” and rejected the Menshevik’s advice to “abandon ‘Blanquist dreams’ of leading all the revolutionary elements of the people....” (*Collected Works*, v. 16).

The classical case in which the issue of the Marxist vanguard as tribune of the people was posed was the Dreyfus case. In 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer of the French general staff, was court-martialed for treason, degraded, and sent to prison. When it subsequently became clear that he was innocent, the right-wing, clericalist, anti-Semitic general staff did their best to suppress the truth. Throughout 1898-99 there were frequent street clashes between the Dreyfusards (intellectuals, socialists and bourgeois radicals) and the French right. While some leftists argued that the working class had no interest in defending a bourgeois military officer who had no connection to the workers’ movement, this conflict shook the Third Republic almost to its foundations. The majority of French socialists understood that it was important to uphold democratic rights and to connect this struggle to the movement against capitalist rule.

Historically homosexuality has been persecuted because of its “unnaturalness,” and the supposed threat it poses to the reproduction of the species. These two rationalizations are in fact closely related, as what is supposed “unnatural” about homosexual activity is that it is not procreative. In fact there is no reason to think that homosexuality has any more impact on reproductive statistics than recreational heterosexual intercourse, masturbation or celibacy.

It is simply not possible to know for sure how organic and social conditions interact to determine sexual preference, although, while there is no demonstrated biological function for a unidirectional sexuality, it is clear that in contemporary society there is very substantial social pressure encouraging an exclusively heterosexual orientation. A more tolerant social atmosphere may lead to an increase in homosexual behavior, but that does not necessarily imply an increase in the proportion of people with a homosexual preference, or a decline in reproductively significant heterosexual behavior. Certainly the need to reproduce the human population is not threatened by homosexuality; the quantity of heterosexual activity necessary for reproductive purposes is a small fraction of what goes on.

Homosexuality Before Capitalism

The intensity of social prejudice, and the legal sanctions employed against male and female homosexual behavior, has varied considerably with time and place.

On the whole, homosexuality (in particular patterns) was accepted in classical antiquity. In 1980, a Yale University professor, John Boswell, published *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, which described how, from the mid-eleventh to the mid-twelfth century in Catholic Europe, there was a veritable flowering of explicitly gay activity and writing, including erotic poetry, in the priesthood. This corresponded with the enforcement of the ban on priestly marriage, which until that time had been permitted (as it still is in the Eastern Church). Homosexual priests were among the strongest supporters of the ban on heterosexual marriage, but the fundamental basis for the shift was the need for the church to adapt itself to the feudal mode of production. In most feudal societies land was inherited by the eldest son, and that principle could have rapidly depleted church landholdings. Consequently it was necessary to prevent the clergy from marrying and having sons.

The outlawing of heterosexual activity in the priesthood required either accepting homosexuality as a norm, or, alternatively, banning homosexual activity as well. The matter was decided at the Third Lateran Council in 1179, which imposed sanctions against homosexuality. The decision was not immediately reflected in local legal codes, but between 1250 and 1300 sodomy passed from being legal to being punishable by death in most countries in feudal Europe.

Although its origins lay in the requirements of the church, it is hardly surprising that the doctrine of sodomy as a particularly iniquitous sin applied universally, or that it soon became an ecclesiastical crime for the whole population, and later a crime before the king's courts. Neither is it to be wondered at that there was an uneven tendency over time for the prohibition gradually to lose its force.

Capitalism and the Nuclear Family

Persecution of homosexuals declined from the 14th to 19th centuries, and then increased sharply in the late 1800s. This outburst of homophobia was clearly linked to the promotion of the nuclear family as the social norm, and the associated prohibition on extra-marital sex.

In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Marx and Engels described the proletarian family (as distinct from the bourgeois family) as a vestigial and decaying institution. However, within a couple of generations the nuclear family was firmly established as the characteristic form of proletarian domestic life under capitalism.

The capitalist mode of production does not require any particular form of domestic arrangement for the working class. As long as there is a sufficient supply of new workers ready to sell their labor power, the manner in which working-class reproduction takes place should not, at least in the abstract, be a matter of vital concern to the bourgeoisie. In the early days of the industrial revolution, proletarian domestic life was characterized by decaying pre-capitalist, multi-generational family forms. The transition from the field to the factory was a traumatic one, marked by massive social dislocation and domestic disorder (with associated drunkenness, child abuse, etc.). The employment of men, women and chil-

dren for very long hours at subsistence wages proved an impediment to the development of the nuclear family. This is what the *Manifesto* described as "the bourgeois clap-trap...about the hallowed co-relation of parent and child" when the development of large-scale industry meant that "all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour."

The absence of strongly patterned domestic arrangements in the early proletariat did not serve capitalism well. It did not prove easy to integrate childbearing, nursing and child-raising into the factories and other enterprises. Over time, bourgeois society accepted that these functions could best be carried on outside the factory. This is the material basis of the proletarian nuclear family. That is its origin, and even today that is its sustenance.

The historical development of the family was conditioned by the necessity for socializing young proletarians, looking after the aged, and providing healthcare and emotional support for the laboring population. It was shaped ideologically by the practices of the ruling class (developed earlier to meet its own needs).

The nuclear family also provided a measure of social cohesion and stability for the bourgeois order. A male wage earner, demeaned at work, could accept his lot more readily if he had his personal needs met at home where he was "boss." He thereby became an important participant in moulding the next generation of workers into acceptance of the hierarchical nature of class society. At the same time his domestic responsibilities reinforced the power of the employer—a worker had to consider his dependent wife and children before slugging the foreman or voting to go on strike.

For all its utility, however, the nuclear family proved difficult to entrench in the proletariat, and required considerable ideological as well as legal and material support. In England there were a battery of props—from the Factory Acts limiting hours of work for women and children, to the emphasis on plebeian chastity, temperance and self-sacrifice by the various non-conformist Christian denominations. By the end of the 19th century, as the hegemony of the nuclear family was gradually established, childhood became prolonged, motherhood was promoted as the proper full-time occupation for women, prostitution become an outcast occupation, and homosexuals were despised and victimized.

The Proletarian Nuclear Family and Homophobia

The bourgeois family discussed by Marx and Engels was based on the premise that an individual bourgeois male must have exclusive sexual access to his wife (in order to guarantee that his property be eventually inherited by his own blood relatives). This did not require prohibiting extra-marital sexual activity (whether heterosexual or homosexual) for the husband. Such activities did not threaten the line of property succession, so there was no obvious necessity for their prohibition. However, the establishment of the nuclear family as the primary domestic social institution for the proletariat and other plebeian strata required such taboos.

In part it was simply a matter of suppressing alternatives to the nuclear family, with their potential counter-exemplary effects. If you are trying to convince a population that bliss consists in a man working in a factory, with a woman looking after five children at home—not an inherently easy task—then it is not useful to permit more agreeable domestic configurations. Homosexual couples or bachelor groupings with access to prostitutes, or other more bohemian combinations, might be seen as more interesting, fulfilling, or more materially comfortable, than membership in a proletarian family.

There is another, related strand to the genesis of modern homophobia. Under nineteenth-century capitalism the central conditioning fact of proletarian domestic life was that the entire cost of raising the next generation was a private rather than a social responsibility. Children could not sustain themselves financially, nor could their caregivers. The nuclear family required that mothers and children be supported by a male, who must be productive enough to command a wage sufficient for that purpose. This required that childbearing be delayed, which, in the absence of modern technologies of family planning, required a high degree of teenage chastity. This was not easily achieved. It involved a certain level of frustration and social tension, and required the backing of authoritative religion as well as state intervention through age-of-consent laws and the like.

There are difficulties with banning teenage heterosexual intercourse while permitting homosexual activity, unless teenage homosexuality is carefully institutionalized, as in English public schools. Consequently, in the latter part of the 19th century, there was considerable fear that without powerful counter-pressures, libidinous male teenagers would channel their energies in a homosexual direction. The fear that heterosexuality would succumb before the homosexual onslaught was frequently cited as the justification for anti-homosexual measures in this period. The fear of the “corruption of youth,” together with the importance of maintaining the power of the father in the family as against any homosexual competitor, were themes of the prosecuting lawyers, judges and newspapers during the trials of Oscar Wilde in the 1890s, which were crucial in the articulation and structuring of anti-homosexual moralism in Britain and elsewhere (see, for example, H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde*, 1976).

Women were seen as less socially significant, and as essentially asexual. Their sexual lives were therefore not subject to such active persecution. Young women were far more closely supervised than men and much more likely to be confined to the home. The greater success in suppressing teenage female sexuality meant that lesbianism was largely ignored, and in general the extremes of homophobic prejudice were reserved for men. Lesbian activity was generally described as women engaging in “male” behavior.

Early Socialists and Homophobia: the Schweitzer Case

There is a considerable history of opposition in the workers’ movement to the oppression of homosexuals,

particularly in Germany, home to the largest and most influential socialist movement in the period before World War I. In August 1862, two elderly ladies enjoying a quiet stroll through a public park in Mannheim came across a talented young lawyer named Jean Baptiste von Schweitzer and an unidentified youth in a highly compromising situation. As a result Schweitzer spent two weeks in jail and was disbarred. It was suggested that this incident made him unfit for membership in Ferdinand Lassalle’s General German Workers Association (see James D. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany*, 1975). Lassalle defended Schweitzer as follows:

“What Schweitzer did isn’t pretty, but I hardly look upon it as a crime. At any rate, we can’t let ourselves lose someone with such great ability, indeed a phenomenal person. In the long run, sexual activity is a matter of taste and ought to be left up to each person, so long as he doesn’t encroach upon someone else’s interests. Though I wouldn’t give my daughter in marriage to such a man.”

—John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)*, New York, 1974

In 1864 Lassalle died as a result of a duel (over a woman) and Schweitzer became the leader of the Lassalleans for the next eight years. While the Eisenachers, the grouping supported by Marx and Engels, engaged in sharp political exchanges with the Lassalleans, the public polemics do not seem to have been polluted by homosexual baiting. In May 1875 the two groups fused to form the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD), which became the leading section of the Second (Socialist) International.

The SPD and the Homosexual Question

August Bebel (a leader of the Eisenachers and the preeminent leader of the SPD) spoke up on a number of occasions in the Reichstag in defence of homosexuals and against the penal provisions of the criminal code. He is quoted as saying on one occasion:

“But gentlemen, you have no idea how many respectable, honorable and brave men, even in high and the highest positions, are driven to suicide year after year, one from shame, another from fear of the blackmailer.”

—Lauritsen and Thorstad, *op cit*.

One case taken up by German Marxists was that of Oscar Wilde in England, prosecuted in 1895 under the 1885 Labouchere amendment which illegalized homosexual activities. Eduard Bernstein, leading theoretician of the SPD’s right wing, wrote a substantial article defending Wilde in the April and May 1895 issues of *Die Neue Zeit*. Bernstein commented that:

“Although the subject of sex life might seem of low priority for the economic and political struggle of the Social Democracy, this nevertheless does not mean it is not obligatory to find a standard also for judging this side of social life, a standard based on a scientific approach and knowledge rather than on more or less arbitrary moral concepts.”

—Lauritsen and Thorstad, *op cit*.

He rejected the notion that homosexual acts should be persecuted as “unnatural,” and pointed out that very

little done by human beings is “natural”—including carrying on a written discussion. He observed that judgments of what is natural or unnatural for human beings are reflections of the state of development of society rather than nature, and made the point that “moral attitudes are historical phenomena.”

Bernstein noted that in most of the great civilizations of antiquity (the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans) homosexual love was freely practiced and remarked that: “same-sex intercourse is so old and so widespread that there is no stage of human culture we could say with certainty were free from this phenomenon.” He denounced theories of homosexuality as illness, as a form of disguised moralism, a point taken up by another Social Democrat, Adolf Thiele, in the 1905 Reichstag debate on the subject. Karl Kautsky, representing the SPD’s left wing, also came out against the oppression of homosexuals. Yet despite the public statements of many of its most prominent representatives, the party as a whole did not take a position on the subject.

The founders of the Marxist movement shared many of the prejudices of their times on the question of homosexuality. Marx apparently made only a single written reference to the subject, although in 1869 he had passed on to Engels a copy of a book on the subject by K.H. Ulrich, who was the first person to seriously work for a liberalization of the law on homosexuality. There is no indication that Marx actually read the book (almost certainly *Die Geschlechtsnatur des mannliebenden Urnings*) lent to him by Wilhelm Strohn, a German communist who lived in Bradford. In a letter to Engels dated 17 December 1869, Marx remarked: “Strohn will be returning from here to Bradford, and desires you to return him the *Urnings* or whatever the paederast’s book is called.”

Engels had commented on the book in a letter to Marx of 22 June 1869. He prefaced his remarks with a complaint that Wilhelm Liebknecht, their German co-thinker, was being too conciliatory with the Lassalleans, who were led by Schweitzer:

“The *Urnig* you sent me is a very curious thing. These are extremely unnatural revelations. The paederasts are beginning to count themselves, and discover they are a power in the state. Only organisation was lacking, but according to this source it apparently already exists in secret. And since they have such important men in all the old parties and even in the new ones, from Rosing to Schweitzer, they cannot fail to triumph. ‘*Guerre aux cons, paix aux trous-de cul*’ will now be the slogan [translated by the editors of the *Marx-Engels Collected Works* as ‘War on the cunts, peace to the arse-holes’] It is a bit of luck that we, personally, are too old to have to fear that, when this party wins, we shall have to pay physical tribute to the victors. But the younger generation! Incidentally it is only in Germany that a fellow like this can possibly come forward, convert this smut into a theory, and offer the invitation *introite*, [enter] etc....If Schweitzer could be made useful for anything, it would be to wheedle out of this peculiar honourable gentleman the particulars of the paederasts in high and top places, which would certainly not be difficult for him as a brother in spirit.”

In his published work, Engels made only three unenlightened and moralistic remarks (all within a short

section of the second chapter of his groundbreaking *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*).

Homosexuality in Czarist Russia

In Russia under the Czars, the climate was relatively liberal. Russia had not experienced the feudal wave of homophobia that swept Western Europe. The Romanov dynasty by the late 19th century was attempting to implant capitalist industry, but it was not seeking to promote the proletarian nuclear family. There were only two articles in the Tsarist criminal code related to homosexuality. Article 995 prohibited anal sex (but not other homosexual activities), and article 996 covered homosexual rape and the seduction of male minors or mentally retarded men (see: Simon Karlinsky, in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, London, 1989). One historian cited by Karlinsky claims that the only known prosecution under these articles in the 1890s concerned a male schoolteacher who seduced a thirteen-year-old pupil—within five years the teacher was back on the job.

In the 1890s there were a number of prominent gay sets in Russia. The flamboyant Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich frequently took his current lover to public functions. The group around Diaghilev did not hide their homosexuality, and there was also a highly significant gay literary milieu including national celebrities like Kuzmin and Kliuev. “Their homosexuality was known to everyone and caused no problems in their social or professional lives” (Karlinsky, *op cit.*).

In this relatively liberal climate the Bolsheviks (like Marx and Engels before them) were not compelled to address the question of the oppression of homosexuals, and neither Lenin nor Trotsky are thought to have written anything on this issue either before or after the October Revolution. It is quite clear, however, that Trotsky had a relaxed and tolerant attitude to the question. In *Literature and Revolution*, published in 1924, he produced some literary criticism of some openly homosexual poetry without any homophobic bias. He also wrote a sympathetic—almost tender—obituary in the 19 January 1926 issue of *Pravda* for Sergei Esenin, an openly bisexual poet (see *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, New York, 1972).

Homosexuality after the Russian Revolution

After the Russian Revolution, the revolutionary regime repudiated all Czarist laws deemed to “contradict revolutionary conscience and revolutionary legal awareness” (Decree on the Judicature issues by the Council of People’s Commissars, 5 December [22 November], 1917). This implicitly decriminalized homosexuality, and when a new criminal code was promulgated after the Civil War in 1922, all mention of homosexuality was deleted.

The new regime’s progressive attitude on the question of homosexuality was indicated by the appointment in early 1918 of Georgi Chicherin, a flamboyant and open gay, as People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs. No bourgeois state would have put such a figure in charge of foreign affairs.

(Chicherin's early relationship and continuing correspondence with the preeminent Russian gay poet, Mikhail Kuzmin, is documented in John E. Malmstead, "Mixail Kuzmin: A Chronicle of His Life and Times" [in English], in volume III of Kuzmin's collected poetry, *Sobranie stikhotvorenii* [in Russian], edited by Malmsted and Vladimir Markov, Munich, 1977. An account of his unconventional attire and style of work as Foreign Commissar can be found in Alexander Barmine's, *One Who Survived: The Life Story of a Russian under the Soviets*, New York, 1945).

Scientific opinion in the early Soviet Union was not determined by the "general line," but many early Soviet sexologists seem to have had a progressive attitude on homosexuality. In 1923 Dr. Grigorii Batkis, the Director of the Moscow Institute of Social Hygiene, wrote the following approving description of the new legal code:

"Soviet legislation bases itself on the following principle: *It declares the absolute non-interference of the state and society into sexual matters, so long as no one's interests are encroached upon.*

"Concerning homosexuality, sodomy, and various other forms of sexual gratification, which are set down in European legislation as offenses against public morality—Soviet legislation treats these exactly the same as so-called 'natural' intercourse. Only when there's use of force or duress, as in general when there's an injury or encroachment upon the rights of another person, is there a question of criminal prosecution."

—*Die Sexualrevolution in Russland* (Berlin, 1925, apparently a reprint of a Russian original published in 1923, quoted in Lauritsen and Thorstad, *op cit.*)

At the same time, however, there remained professionals who regarded homosexuality as a serious illness. In *Sexual Life of Contemporary Youth*, published by the State Publishing House in 1923, Izrail Gel'man asserted:

"Science has now established, with precision that excludes all doubt, [that homosexuality] is not ill will or crime, but sickness....The world of a female or male homosexual is perverted, it is alien to the normal sexual attraction that exists in a normal person."

—quoted by Karlinsky, *op cit.*

Over time, as the Stalinist bureaucracy gradually took over the levers of power within the Soviet workers' state, this view of homosexuality grew in influence. One symptom of the deteriorating situation of gays was the rapid decline of Chicherin's influence after Lenin's death in early 1924. By the time the *Great Medical Encyclopedia* was published in 1929, homosexuality had been fully pathologized. Homosexuals were increasingly persecuted—the old German revolutionist Klara Zetkin intervened on behalf of some of the victims.

Finally, in 1933-34, homosexuality was formally re-criminalized. The reintroduction of state-sponsored homophobia, like the accompanying attacks on women's rights (e.g., the re-criminalization of abortion) were aimed at reinforcing the nuclear family as the basic unit of a conservative social order.

Stonewall and After

In the past few decades the visibility and political clout of the homosexual population has grown consid-

erably, particularly in Europe, North America and Australasia. An important factor in this development has been the militant political struggles waged for homosexual rights, signaled by the 1969 Stonewall riot in New York's Greenwich Village. The aggressive and self-confident gay liberation movement of the early 1970s developed in the context of a generalized shift to the left politically and a liberalization of attitudes towards sexuality in general. The explosive growth of the women's liberation movement in this period challenged the legitimacy of the "normal" patriarchal family. Elements of the women's movement embraced lesbianism ("women-identified women") as the most consistent expression of feminism.

The limited progress recorded by gays and lesbians is integrally connected to changes in the operation of the nuclear family. The growth of the white-collar sector with jobs that could be performed by either sex, the massive expansion of the female workforce, and the impossibility of maintaining living standards on a single (male) wage, undermined traditional stereotypes about men's and women's "rightful places" in the world. Another important change—connected to the increased efficacy of contraceptive techniques—was the surrender to the teenage sex drive. Widespread teenage heterosexual activity in turn reduces the "danger" that appetites which would otherwise develop in a heterosexual direction would be diverted towards homosexuality, and obviates the need for special measures to counter that "danger." Homosexual activity is still a potential counter-example to the nuclear family, but in societies where extra-marital sex is tolerated, that threat is merely one of many.

Yet the nuclear family remains a powerful institution in modern capitalist society. It is where the most important emotional needs of individuals (for love, intimacy and emotional security) are supposed to be met. Even for those whose experience of the family is one of misery and alienation, the myth continues to exert considerable influence. With the erosion of working-class living standards, the collapse of social services and growing levels of chronic unemployment within the metropolitan imperialist heartlands, the proletarian family has also become an increasingly important source of support for a substantial section of young adults who might otherwise be destitute. Moreover, at least within the layers of the working class and petty bourgeoisie affluent enough to own real estate or some other substantial material assets, parental control over a potential inheritance operates as a disciplinary mechanism in much the same way as within the bourgeoisie.

The gains recorded by gays and lesbians in the past several decades are substantial, but they are also fragile and reversible. Extra-marital sex, and particularly homosexuality, are still ferociously condemned by powerful forces, of both a clerical-fundamentalist and secular-conservative character. The furious opposition of the Pentagon (and most of Congress) to Bill Clinton's tentative gestures toward letting open gays and lesbians serve in the military provided a reminder of just how precarious the rights of homosexuals are. Last August the U.S. Senate voted overwhelmingly "to cut off Federal

money to schools that teach acceptance of homosexuality as a way of life" (*New York Times*, 2 August 1994). One of the items cited as "disgusting, obscene material" purveyed to students was a book about a lesbian couple entitled "Heather Has Two Mommies."

As the logic of global economic competition compels the capitalists continually to increase pressure on working-class living standards, the bonds that once united people in the nuclear family are stretched to the breaking point or beyond. Homosexuals, "secular humanists," abortion-rights advocates and feminists are scapegoated for the collapse of family life, as "family values" becomes the rallying cry of social reaction.

The overlapping anti-abortion, anti-pornography and anti-gay campaigns provide a natural recruiting ground for the fascists, who are currently on the rise in Europe and North America. Gay-bashing is often used as an organizing tool by these fanatical defenders of capitalist irrationality and inequality.

The Worldwide AIDS Pandemic

The AIDS epidemic has given rise to a wave of moral panic used to foster anti-gay prejudice, to promote a general fear of sex and to reinforce religion. Prevention, care and research on HIV/AIDS has been scandalously underfunded by the capitalist rulers of the "New World Order." Like every other social evil under capitalism, AIDS hits those at the bottom of the social ladder hardest.

In the imperialist heartland it is those who are most dependent on the decaying public health services—the poor and oppressed minorities—who suffer the most. The desperately poor neo-colonies have, of course, been hit far worse than the imperialist countries, with growing proportions of the population in the most productive age groups disabled and dying.

In recent years militant gays and lesbians have aggressively campaigned for more resources to fight AIDS, and have exposed some of the most glaring examples of negligence and abuse. We respect the considerable courage displayed by these activists in confronting the medical establishment and the state, and seek opportunities to engage in common work with them in the future. It is vitally important that deeper social layers become involved in these struggles, and particularly that the organizations of the working class take up these issues as a key part of the struggle for free universal quality health care.

Marxists recognize, however, that there is nothing inherently revolutionary about homosexuality, or about the struggle against AIDS. The gains won by lesbians and gays over the past several decades have led to the development of an upwardly mobile caste of openly homosexual professionals (many associated with the AIDS industry) who desperately crave bourgeois respectability.

Tactics in the Gay Movement

The tactics of militant gay groups vary considerably in their effectiveness. One approach, involving the os-

tentatious display of gay affection in unexpected settings, is intended to shock heterosexuals into changing their consciousness. This is harmless, and we certainly support the right of homosexuals to be open about their sexual orientation. But as a political strategy it presupposes that the roots of homophobia lie in the consciousness of individuals rather than in the requirements of the capitalist social order.

Another approach involves encouraging gay men and lesbians to "come out" in less ostentatious ways—to be open about their sexuality in the course of their daily lives. Coming out is considered by most gay people not so much as a political strategy as a personal step toward self-esteem and adjustment, to be made by the individual concerned, depending on his/her circumstances. There are still many homosexuals who understandably fear exposure, who value their right to privacy, and who do not wish to come out.

Inevitably, various bourgeois functionaries are closeted homosexuals, and some of them may engage in the worst kind of homophobic politics. In recent years gay activists have engaged in "outings," i.e., publicly revealing the sexual identities of such prominent right-wing closeted homosexuals. This tactic is not new. It was known in the early German homosexual rights movement as "the path over the corpses," and was used in the early 1900s with disadvantageous results (see Steakley, *op cit*, and Oosterhuis and Kennedy, *Homosexuality and Male Bonding in Pre-Nazi Germany*, New York, 1991). Although Marxists share the gay liberationists' disgust with most targets of outing, as well as a sense of frustration with the lack of progress in gay rights, in general we oppose this tactic. It tends to add to the fears of exposure that burden the ordinary inoffensive closeted homosexual, and creates a climate for the worst kind of muckraking homophobic journalism and an anti-gay backlash.

The Struggle Against Working-Class Homophobia

It is the job of the Marxist party to inculcate scientific consciousness and to lead the proletariat in transcending moralism and mystification. This means opposing the Stalinist promotion of the "socialist family" and the attendant social backwardness toward women and homosexuals. Homophobia, like every other reactionary social prejudice in capitalist society, serves to divide, demoralize and discipline the proletariat, and undercut its capacity to understand its own historic interests. Common participation in class struggle and the fight for social and economic justice can undercut homophobia in the working class and other layers of the oppressed.

A revolutionary party must embody a scientific consciousness of society as a totality. It must seek to incorporate people who feel the oppression of capitalism in every form, and to connect their struggles to the necessity to overturn the social system from which oppression derives. Just as it is useful to have comrades of different generations, different political histories, and different cultural backgrounds, so the particular forms of alienation of gay men and lesbians gives them a variety of

perspectives on bourgeois society which significantly enrich the collective Marxist consciousness of the proletarian vanguard.

Against Sectoralism, For Transitional Organizations

Marxists fight against all forms of special oppression (whether of women, blacks, youth, aboriginal peoples or homosexuals) without losing sight of the fact that it is *class society* which lies at the root. Revolutionaries support every reform which advances the situation of the oppressed, but know that, ultimately, social oppression can only be uprooted through the fight for a socialist society—one based on production for human need, not profit.

Unlike sectoralists, Marxists recognize that, because of its economically strategic position, the working class is the decisive factor in the struggle for fundamental social change. Attempts to organize gays as gays, women as women, or blacks as blacks, inevitably lead to cross-class formations, and to confining the struggle within the framework of capitalist rationality. Yet the oppression of gays and lesbians (in common with other forms of social oppression) can only be successfully challenged with a program that transcends the limits of the existing social order.

A revolutionary party needs transitional organizations to focus the struggles of the oppressed and to recruit the most politically advanced elements to the struggle for workers' power. Where there is the possibility of intervention in a significant gay or lesbian political arena, then a revolutionary party will seek to build a transitional organization for this work. The activities of such an organization, which would be part of a common revolutionary movement with a common discipline, would center on fighting the oppression of gays and

lesbians while advancing a program that links these struggles to the necessity for working-class rule.

The Relative Importance of the Homosexual Question

The fact that Marxists fight all forms of oppression under capitalism does not imply that all forms are equally important for revolutionary strategy. Gay and lesbian oppression is not entirely analogous to the oppression, for example, of blacks in the United States, or of women. Gays and lesbians are not concentrated in particular, crucial parts of the working class, they do not constitute a large or easily organized constituency, and besides, sexual orientation is not as immediately apparent as race or sex. Moreover, on the whole, there is not an important economic component to the oppression of homosexuals—indeed there are economic advantages to childlessness, which in the current social climate is often concomitant with being gay or lesbian.

Whatever progress has been made in recent decades, homophobia remains a “hot button” for the reactionary right, and a powerful tool for the defense of the status quo. The question of the oppression of homosexual men and women is a vital one for Marxists to take up, but it is not a strategic one for socialist revolution—unlike, for example, the woman question.

The oppression of homosexuals is rooted in the requirements of the capitalist system, and their liberation can be achieved only through the rational employment of humanity's immense productive capacity to eliminate poverty, ignorance and social inequality. In a classless society, the state, along with the nuclear family, will start to wither away and be replaced by freer, voluntary forms of human association in which the remarkable plasticity of human sexuality can be expressed without the fear, prejudice and anxiety with which patriarchal, capitalist society has traditionally treated sexual “deviants.” ■