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Gay Liberation:

A Socialist Perspective



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Photo by Mark Sainoff

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GAY LIBERATION A SOCIALIST PERSPECTIVE

Millions of people in the United States participated in protest demonstrations during the year 1970. The largest of these demonstrations demanded an end to the war in Southeast Asia. Other actions demanded full rights for women, and an end to the oppression of Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos.

Among those rebelling, one group stood out for the newness of the pride and unity it demonstrated and for the courage it took merely to identify with its cause.

On June 28, 1970, thousands of people gathered in New York City's Greenwich Village to march in the country's first annual Christopher Street Liberation Day celebration. Each of the participants had to weigh many factors before deciding to join, for this was a march for homosexual rights, the country's first major gay liberation demonstration.

The official leaflet handed to the participants read, in part: "Welcome to the first anniversary celebration of the Gay Liberation Movement. Despite political and social differences we may have, we are united on this common ground: For the first time in history we are together as the Homosexual Community. . . . We are Gay and proud. No one can convince us otherwise. . . . We

are all participants in the most important Gay event in history.”

Most of the marchers knew that even the passing sweep of a television camera could mean the loss of a carefully cultivated “straight” image. And they knew that that, in turn, could lead to the loss of jobs, apartments, friends, custody of children, and family ties. Their private lives had made them outlaws, and having others learn of their choice of whom and how to love could make them outcasts. They were living examples of the hollowness of the myth of American democracy.

From self-hatred to self-confidence

This was a new generation of homosexuals. For centuries, with few interruptions, homosexuals around the world have been forced into self-hatred and humiliation, into lives of shame and fear, hiding their sexuality and their life-styles from the rest of the world. The vast majority of homosexuals, along with heterosexuals, accepted the religious mythology and pseudoscience that condemned as “sick” anyone who deviated from the norms of heterosexual monogamy—with special vituperation reserved for homosexuals.

In the 1960s, as other oppressed groups began to rise up and demand their rights and proclaim their human dignity, the myths that had weighed so heavily on the backs of homosexuals began to crack. Blacks led the way, beginning in the 1950s, by standing up to the institutions that stood between them and free lives, by declaring pride and strength in the very Blackness that society had portrayed as a mark of inferiority.

The heroic resistance of the Vietnamese freedom fighters and the huge demonstrations of the antiwar movement in this country helped millions

learn the power of people acting together for what they believed in.

The emerging women's liberation movement, like the Black struggle, helped thousands turn a degrading self-image based merely on their race or sex into pride, and further shook up the hypocritical "morality" that for so long had been drummed into everyone's head.

The massive strikes and demonstrations of high school and college students helped encourage an entire generation to discover their right to control the institutions that dominated their lives.

Many homosexuals—some openly gay, most not—had helped to build each of these protest movements and had participated in their activities. Together with the rest of their generation, young homosexuals were learning new ways of looking at the world. In questioning the legitimacy of other social norms, and in experiencing the power of large numbers of people fighting together for their rights and dignity, young homosexuals were inspired to explore, expose, and fight back against their own oppression.

Centuries of oppression

Most children grow up learning to think of sex as dirty and homosexuality even sicker. Children have been taught that the only healthy, normal human beings are the men and women who marry members of the opposite sex and raise children who do the same.

From the all-pervasive "queer" jokes to exclusion from much employment and housing, homosexuals face a range of discrimination and humiliation that has kept the vast majority of gay people in fear-ridden, degrading hiding for centuries. A few examples of discrimination faced by

gay people in the United States today are:

Their sexuality is specifically against the law in most states. With the exception of Illinois, Connecticut, Hawaii, Oregon, Delaware, Texas and, as of 1975, North Dakota and California, state laws throughout the United States prohibit homosexual acts, even between consenting adults. Punishments for homosexual acts vary greatly from state to state, but laws prescribing jail terms of ten years or more are not uncommon.

Not only are these laws ineffective in preventing millions of Americans from engaging in the "crime" of homosexual love, they actually *encourage other real crimes*, like the blackmail of gays. Moreover, because of the difficulty in enforcing these laws, and because of the lucrative extortion possibilities for corrupt cops, some police departments carry out an active policy of entrapment whereby plainclothes cops entice gays into committing "illegal" acts.

Regardless of how strictly they are enforced, the existence of sex laws on the books poses a constant threat and is an important part of buttressing the widespread discrimination gays face.

Many jobs are closed to homosexuals. Despite encouraging victories by a few individuals, most means of making a living are closed to known or suspected homosexuals. Thus, gay people have to hide their homosexuality in order to obtain jobs and must live in constant fear of being "discovered" and thrown out on the street, with chances of finding new employment severely hampered by their exposure.

Most landlords won't take homosexual tenants; those who do often charge extra. Even in the would-be privacy of their own apartment or

homes, most homosexuals have to take precautions to hide their sexuality from neighbors and landlords for fear of losing their housing. For the few who can afford it, there are "gay ghettos" in a number of cities where homosexuals can live openly—and pay higher rents for the privilege.

Homosexuals in institutions and the military face segregation, brutality, and humiliation. In prisons, mental hospitals, and in schools, known or suspected homosexuals are often segregated, isolated, taunted, and even physically attacked by those in charge. Men who are turned down or discharged from the military for being gay face a life of problems associated with their military classification.

And always, for every minute of the day, there is the nausea of self-contempt and fear. Most gays are able to find ways around the legal obstacles put in the path of their survival. But to do so they must go deep into hiding. Like heterosexuals, gays have been thoroughly trained to view homosexuality with disgust. For most homosexuals, these feelings continue and often intensify as fear of being discovered drives them deeper into clandestinity.

Some initial gains

A small number of dedicated men and women have worked for years to improve life for homosexuals. With the infusion of the new spirit of the younger, more militant gays, and the beginning of united struggles for some basic rights, gays have already made some gains.

Sodomy laws have now been repealed in ten states, including the notorious 103-year old California statutes which punished homosexual behavior with up to life imprisonment, and even

castration in some cases. There have been a number of successful legal challenges to specific cases of job discrimination.

In addition, an important symbolic victory was won in December, 1973, when the American Psychiatric Association, responding to a long internal gay rights campaign, voted to moderate its long-standing policy that homosexuality constituted a psychiatric disorder.

While supporters of human rights for gay people have made these initial gains, the road to full victory is far from smooth. The gay liberation movement has already come face-to-face with some large, well-entrenched obstacles.

The largest of these is the resistance of the national, state, and local governments and the institutions of this society to the changes demanded by gay rights advocates.

A related obstacle is less obvious, thus more pernicious. That is the illusions which the politicians of the two capitalist parties attempt to maintain.

Some liberal Democrats and Republicans work diligently to get people to believe that the answer to the problems facing homosexuals (and all oppressed people) can be found in a reliance on a slow, steady push for reforms through the capitalist system and its politicians.

Although some important reforms can be wrested from the capitalist rulers of this country—and some have already been won—not one single basic improvement in the lives of people in this country has come about through reliance on the good will of capitalist politicians.

The demands and goals of the gay liberation movement are for basic democratic rights. Heterosexuals, as well as gays, have been and will

continue to be won to support this fight. To abandon the effort to educate and mobilize the support of the majority of people for "behind the scenes" efforts of liberal politicians is to court the same betrayals gay liberationists who supported George McGovern met when he backtracked on his "support" to homosexual rights at the 1972 Democratic party convention.

The Democratic party liberals who woo gay liberationists and other activists seek to keep people's sights limited to what is possible within the framework of capitalism. Fundamental to capitalism, however, is that the tiny number of people who control the wealth and the means of producing more wealth have the power to organize the lives of the rest of us in whatever way most benefits them. And fundamental to the survival of capitalism is the job of "keeping people in their place," submissive, accepting their lot.

Reactionary ideas and superstitions—sexual taboos, religion, flag-waving patriotism—are encouraged by the rulers to promote faith in the corrupt institutions of capitalist society.

Thus, it is anathema to capitalism to face large numbers of people, let alone the bulk of a generation, which is rejecting its rules; which is seeking a new kind of world where human beings are free to live full lives under their own control; which is rejecting self-contempt and submissiveness and fighting for its rights. But that is just what is beginning to happen today.

The gay liberation movement adds to the strength and enthusiasm of the current radicalization of young people throughout the world.

By exposing the cruelties and irrationalities of the oppression of homosexuals, the gay liberation movement helps demonstrate how deeply and de-

structively capitalist institutions interfere with people's lives.

At the same time, those who are concerned with winning full rights for gay people have a major stake in the fight to change society as a whole. The central core of the gay liberation movement is *the fight for full dignity for all human beings without regard to their sexual orientation*. History, and our own generation's experience, have shown that such human dignity, free from all prejudice, is not possible without getting rid of capitalism—without a socialist revolution.

It is necessary to note here that some who call themselves socialists and communists stand on the wrong side of the fight for gay liberation. Chief among these are the pro-Moscow and Peking parties around the world. In the Soviet Union itself, for example, homosexuality is outlawed and punished. The same attitude is reflected in the Communist Party U.S.A.; their youth group, the Young Workers Liberation League; and various Maoist groups like the Revolutionary Union.

These parties, and the Soviet, Chinese, and Eastern European bureaucracies that they represent, must be counted among the opponents of the fight for gay liberation and most other freedom struggles around the world. Rather than working to build socialist freedom in the countries where the working class holds power and helping to spread socialist revolution throughout the world, these bureaucrats act as a parasitic caste holding back progress in the countries that have already abolished capitalism.

Unfortunately, Cuba, a workers' state that is not led by a corrupt bureaucratic caste, has also adopted the incorrect position that homosexuality

is a “sickness.” For the Cuban state to move toward instituting workers’ democracy in all spheres of life, its leadership must look to the example set in the early years of the Russian Revolution—not the reactionary policies of the current Soviet regime.

Socialist road to victory

It was the Russian Revolution of 1917 that showed the way for the future of all people fighting for human rights. Among its first acts was the abolition of tsarist laws that penalized people for their sexual behavior, including laws against abortion and homosexuality. In his 1923 book, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, Dr. Batkis, director of the Moscow Institute of Social Hygiene, exhibits some of the spirit of the early years of the revolution before the rise of Stalin’s bureaucracy:

“The present sexual legislation in the Soviet Union is the work of the October Revolution. This revolution is important not only as a political phenomenon, which secures the political rule of the working class, but also for the revolutions which emanating from it reach out into all areas of life. . . .

“The revolution let nothing remain of the old despotic and infinitely unscientific laws; it did not tread the path of reformist bourgeois legislation which, with juristic subtlety, still hangs on the concept of property in the sexual sphere, and ultimately demands that the double standard hold sway over sexual life. These laws always come about by disregarding science. . . . Soviet legislation bases itself on the following principle: *It declares the absolute non-interference of the state and society into homosexual matters, so long*

*as nobody is injured and no one's interests are encroached upon."*¹

The Russian Revolution cleared the ground for the building of a socialist society based on human rights. In the mid-1920s, as a result of the extreme poverty of the new Soviet Union combined with the failure of socialist revolutions in more advanced European countries that could have come to the aid of the Russian people, the revolution suffered a setback with the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy. This bureaucracy remains in power today. Among its many repressive actions was the reintroduction in the 1930s of tsarist laws prohibiting abortion and homosexuality.

Today's young activists face conditions far more encouraging than those faced by the Russian revolutionists. From the successful liberation struggles in Vietnam, and Cambodia, and "Portuguese" Africa, to the youth rebellions in Greece and Thailand, the radicalization in the United States, and the fight for socialist democracy in Czechoslovakia and inside the Soviet Union itself—all are positive indicators for the future of the international fight of a generation striving for human dignity and freedom. It is a fight that has the best opportunity history has yet provided to win.

Together with revolutionary socialists throughout the world, the Young Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Workers party in the United States are working to assemble a force strong enough to combat and defeat the most brutal and powerful

1. *The Early Homosexual Civil Rights Movement*, by John Lauritsen and David Thorstad. Times Change Press, 1975, \$2.25

ruling class in history—the American capitalists.

This victory, which will be won by the vast majority of the American people, can alone stop the plunge toward world economic chaos and a third world war. It will be the victory that will lay the groundwork for creating a world where human beings can live together in dignity, and where sexuality, along with all forms of human potential, can be freed from the dark closets of fear, intimidation, and repression.



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