

Memorandum on the Gay Liberation Movement

[The general line of this memorandum was approved by the SWP national convention in August 1973.]

The plenum of the National Committee held last year adopted a motion that read in part, "To open immediately following the plenum an internal party literary discussion, for a three-month period, of the gay liberation movement and the party's orientation to it, leading to a decision by the subsequent plenum of the National Committee." This is that subsequent plenum, and the purpose of this memorandum is to make that decision.

1. The struggle against the oppression of gay people is a struggle for democratic rights. The party has taken a position in support of this struggle, and adopted the following position at the 1971 party convention: "To reaffirm the party's position stated in the Political Committee motion of May 25, 1971, of unconditional support to the struggles of homosexuals for full democratic rights, including full civil and human rights, and against all the forms of discrimination and oppression they suffer under capitalism." The adoption of the general line of this report will include reaffirming this as the basic political position of the party on the oppression of homosexuals.

2. While we reject with contempt all forms of bourgeois prejudice against gay people, including quack psychological "theories" labelling gays as mentally ill—prejudices echoed by the Stalinists—the party does not and should not take a stand on the nature or value of homosexuality.

The party should not do this for the following reasons.

First, the party is a political organization. Its aim is a political one: to construct a mass revolutionary proletarian political party that will mobilize the working class and its allies, and lead in the conquest of state power by the working class, opening the road to the construction of socialism. In keeping with its aim, the party adopts political positions that guide its work. It does not take positions on a whole range of scientific, artistic, cultural and other questions—to do so would cut across its purpose, dilute its nature as a political organization, transform it into an organization advancing one or another scientific or cultural viewpoint, narrow its appeal, and cripple its ability to mobilize the masses on political questions.

Second, this particular question is further complicated by the fact that the whole question of the scientific investigation of sexuality and the related one of psychology is still in its infancy. Especially concerning homosexuality, little is known, and it is difficult to ascertain what is objectively based and what represents prejudice in what knowledge is available. If we were to attempt to adopt a particular viewpoint on the nature of homosexuality or sexuality in general, we would become embroiled in a hopeless tangle of opinions, prejudices and personal preferences with little hope of reaching any scientifically valid conclusions, even if that were within the purpose of the SWP, which it is not.

Neither is scientific knowledge advanced enough on this question for us to be able to say what future human sexuality will be like in a classless society. The socialist revolution will lay the foundations for the transformation of human culture in all spheres, including sexual and other personal relations, but exactly how this will affect sexual relations can only be a subject for speculation at this stage, as is true of a whole range of aspects of the future classless society. We can say that, in sexual relations as in every other human sphere, we have every reason to expect that future communist humanity will be superior to present-day humanity, and that sexuality will be freed from all prejudice, superstition, mysticism, and religious morality. We cannot go much beyond the assertion that the present sexual misery of the masses of people will be overcome. If we attempt to extrapolate further, we run the strong risk of merely projecting our own psychological makeups, losing sight of the fact that each and every one of us has been formed under capitalism.

We should reject the idea, propounded by some in the gay liberation movement, that homosexuality is more progressive than heterosexuality because it involves sexual relations that fall outside the family system, and therefore leads to liberation from that system. Sexual activities of any kind outside the family—whether heterosexual or homosexual—cannot replace the family system. They in no way replace the social functions of caring for the young and old, performing such labor as cooking, laundry, etc. The reactionary institution of the patriarchal family, and the ideology and morality that buttress it, will wither away only in the process of the construction of socialism, as the social and economic functions it now performs are progressively taken on by society as a whole.

The party should take no position on the nature or value of homosexuality, nor try to determine what is "good" or "bad" about heterosexuality or homosexuality, and not advocate any specific sexual orientation.

3. We cannot abstract our consideration of this question from the rise of the gay liberation movement itself. In fact, it has been the rise of this movement that has made it necessary for the party to clarify its position concerning the oppression of homosexuals, and to discuss our relationship to this movement.

The gay liberation movement is an aspect of the current radicalization and developed out of it. There are a number of factors which prepared the way for the development of this movement.

First, there have been changes in the prevailing attitudes on homosexuality in society as a whole, together with changes in prevailing views on sexuality in general. While the prejudices against homosexuals remain, and they are deep, an attitude of greater acceptance of homosexuals as fully human has developed. At bottom, this reflects a loosening of the hold of traditional sexual

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morality that has accompanied the growing crisis of the social mores of capitalism in its decline.

These changes towards lessening of prejudices concerning homosexuals is evident in many ways, in the cultural and information media, in the number of challenges to various legal aspects of the discrimination against gays, and even in statements by bourgeois candidates.

The development of greater acceptance of homosexuals has been most pronounced among radicalized young people. One aspect of the youth radicalization has been a widespread and growing questioning of repressive sexual morality. This critical attitude towards traditional morality undermines the ideological basis of the prejudice and discrimination against gay people. This shift in attitudes has provided an atmosphere in which such a movement could develop. At the same time, a layer of gay people, especially young gay people, have been affected by the radicalization. Seeing other oppressed layers and groups begin to fight against their oppression, young gay people were inspired to begin to struggle for their rights too.

Under the impact of movements such as a Black liberation struggle and the women's liberation movement, radicalizing young people have begun to reject any discrimination against people for their physical or sexual characteristics. For many in this generation, opposition to the traditional repressive sexual morality and to discrimination based upon sexual characteristics is becoming the norm. This trend among youth was reinforced by the rise of the women's liberation movement.

The women's movement itself is concerned with sexual oppression, as women are oppressed as a sex. The literature of the women's movement has analyzed and exposed the objectification of sex and the debilitating and reactionary character of traditional sexual morality, and the distortion of sexuality in capitalist society. The Marxist theory of the origin, structure and role of the family as the basis of the oppression of women has, for example, become much more widely accepted. In this context, many in the women's movement have begun to see the prejudice towards homosexuals as another facet of sexist oppression.

The women's movement not only helped pave the way for the rise of the gay liberation movement on the plane of ideas, it had to confront the question of the discrimination against homosexuals directly in the form of lesbian-baiting. This included baiting of lesbians in the women's movement, and baiting of the whole movement with the charge that any woman who fights for her rights is stepping out of her place, is rejecting her "femininity." The women's movement has by and large rejected lesbian-baiting as an attempt to divide and weaken the movement.

While these developments in the radicalization lay the ground for the rise of the gay liberation movement and helped inspire radicalized young gay people to fight against their oppression, the movement itself has in turn

brought about a higher level of understanding of and opposition to the oppression of gay people among radicalizing youth, and has already had a considerable impact on the society in spite of the movement's shortcomings.

This development of the gay liberation movement is progressive. It confronts and helps break down the reactionary morality that helps preserve class society. The struggle of gay people for their rights is directed against the capitalist government, and is in the interests of socialism, which can only be built by the mobilization of the working class and its allies in the historic task of rebuilding society, eliminating every vestige of discrimination and oppression spawned by class society, including the oppression of gay people. The party identifies with the aims of this struggle and supports it, and this is reflected in the political position the party has adopted and reaffirmed in this report.

4. Given our political position of support to the struggles of gay people against their oppression, how we carry out that support is a tactical question.

First, let's look at the question of priorities in a strategic long-term sense. The gay liberation movement directly relates to a relatively narrow sector of the population. The issue it raises is essentially limited to the struggle for the democratic rights of this sector. The gay liberation movement does not have the potential mass of either the women's movement or the movements of the major oppressed nationalities, nor the social weight of these movements, which result both from their mass and the scope of the questions they raise. The movements of the major oppressed nationalities in the United States—both because their national-democratic demands cannot be met except through the proletarian revolution, and because of their overwhelmingly proletarian composition—raise almost from the beginning demands of the working class as a whole. The women's movement, also, because of the role of the family as a pillar of class society and the character of the economic exploitation of women, raises class demands. The gay liberation movement is much narrower in the scope of its demands.

In our long-term strategic priorities, the gay liberation movement is much more peripheral to the central issues of the class struggle than either the women's movement or the movements of the oppressed nationalities. Neither does it raise such a central issue of world politics as the struggle against imperialist wars. Our propaganda, our election campaigns, *The Militant*, our forums, etc., must reflect the relative weight and importance of the gay liberation movement compared to other movements and issues of more central importance. The major issues we should be concentrating on are the big questions of the class struggle, and this must be reflected in the totality of the party's projection of its program. It would be a mistake to place equal emphasis upon the struggle of women or Blacks, and that of gay people, for example.

Exactly how the party should orient towards this movement at the present time has to be considered in light of the concrete situation of this movement, and in relation to other fields of work and tasks facing the party.

The gay liberation movement is at present very diffuse, not organized into any single grouping or action front, on a national scale. In 1969 and 1970, gay liberation organizations sprang up on campuses and major

cities across the country. A number of demonstrations and actions were held—the largest have been the annual Christopher St. demonstrations in 1970, '71, and '72. From what we can tell from the probe of the gay liberation movement conducted by the party, and developments since then, there has been an evolution of the organized gay liberation movement. A sector of the movement developed in an ultraleft and inward-turned direction. This sector became part of the broader ultraleft and commune-oriented youth current. In some areas, this process resulted in the virtual disappearance of any viable organized expression of the gay liberation movement.

There have been some notable exceptions to this. The most stable of the gay rights organizations is the Gay Activists Alliance in New York, which has continued to carry out activities directed against gay oppression. On the campus, many groups have become essentially social groupings to provide social outlets and help for gays, although we can expect that these organizations could support struggles should they develop.

Since the 1972 party literary discussion on the gay liberation movement, there has been no significant steps towards the formation of a national framework of gay liberation organizations or a national focus of action by gay liberation groups. In fact, the direction seems to be the opposite at this time, with such a national focus or organization less likely.

In view of the present state of the organized gay liberation movement on a national scale, we should not attempt to carry out a national party intervention in the gay liberation movement or project a national party campaign on this question at the present time. Thus we should make no reallocation of our forces to generally assign comrades to this movement. Our support to this movement will be mainly in our propaganda in the next period, as it has been. There is no national gay liberation organization which could be a focus of our intervention. There is no national action coalition around specific issues of gay oppression which we could support and help build. Any attempt by us to start from scratch and try to build such an organization or coalition would fail in the given conditions, where we do not see much motion toward such formations. We cannot attempt to substitute our own small forces, in any movement, for broader forces we might like to see organized, but which are not at the present time.

On a local level there has been somewhat of a dropping off of struggles for the rights of gay people in the past period, but what struggles have occurred have been locally organized. Where such demonstrations, defense cases, etc., occur, the party should support them. Branches have the responsibility to carry out any such work within the context of carrying out the major campaigns being conducted by the party.

5. During the party literary discussion, an issue was raised concerning the party attitude concerning dress and appearance of comrades. This question and others related to it go beyond a discussion of the gay liberation movement, raising a more general question of the image and functioning of the party.

The party does have a concern with the image of the party as projected by the dress and decorum of individual members that would in fact prohibit certain clothing, like dresses, from being worn by male comrades. There is

a more general question involved, concerning the dress and appearance of all members. While we have no set of rules concerning dress, we do have a tradition of assuming that SWP members will dress and act in such a way as to project the party as a serious organization. If our image were to become exotic, that would stand in the way of recruiting and influencing masses of people justifiably suspicious of people that are obviously extremely eccentric. A political person who deviates too far from the social norm in questions like that of dress has lost or never had a sense of proportion about what is politically important and what is secondary.

The wearing of this or that kind of clothing has nothing to do with being a revolutionary, and responsible members subordinate personal whims or desires in this regard to the political objective of not placing unnecessary obstacles in our way. Our general rule should be to dress within the socially accepted styles, and the party units have the responsibility to see to it that individual members do not abuse the party by projecting an exotic image of the party.

There are other aspects to this general question. One of these is a pressure upon the party from a small and ultraleft section of the women's movement that asserts that to be a "true feminist" a woman should be a lesbian or at least not live with a man, or must not wear certain make-up, etc. Our conception of a feminist has nothing to do with an evaluation of her personal life. It is of a woman who fights politically for the liberation of women—no matter what her personal life.

Another question which has been raised concerns all-women functions organized by the party. In certain cases, all-women's classes, discussions, or more informal gatherings organized by the party can help bring contacts closer, provide an atmosphere for contacts to more easily exchange ideas with party spokeswomen, etc., and the same thing can be said of similar all-Black functions. Such functions must be organized in such a way that they do not project an image that the function is in reality restricted to lesbians. This can drive away many women who feel uncomfortable in such an atmosphere.

The same can be said of our attitude towards social functions of women's organizations we support.

A word should be said concerning our social functions in general. Such functions organized by the party are political functions, and must be organized as such, with a general tone and atmosphere that all the various types of people we seek to recruit and bring around the party are comfortable in. Sexual activities, whether heterosexual or homosexual, have no place at party socials.

In general, we must resist pressures upon the party that originate from certain sectors of the radicalized layers (not only in the gay liberation movement, of course, but among all the radicalized layers) who have turned towards counter-culturalism and away from politics.

6. Since we project no national campaign of the party at the present time in the gay liberation movement, there is no need to have a separate point on the convention agenda on this question.