

Report on October 14 National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights

By Peter Seidman

Comrades can read an account of this demonstration in the Militant (October 26, 1979). Clearly October 14 helped focus national attention on the struggle for full democratic rights for lesbians and gays.

In coming weeks, discussions of this protest in plants all over the country will give us a chance to get out our views on this subject to working people.

The demonstration itself, at which we sold more than 300 papers, also gave us an opportunity to explain our views on the fight for gay rights to the thousands of demonstrators on the march. In a special Militant article as well as a campaign statement by Andrew Pulley and Matilde Zimmermann, we outlined how the battle of gay people for their rights is dependent on the outcome of the overall battle between the working class and capital. We stressed how the gay movement needs to build alliances with and orient towards the organizations of the working class, the unions in particular, because only through the workers struggles will gay rights be won.

The character of October 14--after the action was first called out of a national conference in Philadelphia last February--would not enable the demonstration to advance the struggle for gay rights along these lines. In fact, because conference participants included a demand for "lowering of the age of consent laws," it seemed clear that the demonstration would be nothing but a politically narrow action--incapable of making a serious appeal to broader forces with more social weight--regardless of how large it might finally turn out to be numerically.

On this basis, the SWP and YSA rejected giving support to the proposed demonstration. We were by no means alone in this position. Most of the major organizations in the gay movement, particularly women's organizations, took a similar stand for similar reasons.

However, demonstration organizers dropped their demand for a lowering of the age of consent laws at a second conference held last July in Houston.

We noted at our Oberlin convention that as a result of this decision, support for the demonstration among broader forces in the gay movement began to grow. Instead of the age of consent demand, the march was now calling for an end to laws that victimize and harass gay youth. Following the political discussions of this change a whole range of groups expressed support for the march. These included the National Gay Task Force, the Gay Rights National Lobby, the National Organization for Women, and others. During August and September many others added their names as supporters. Organizers announced that

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Eleanor Smeal from NOW, U.S. Rep. Theodore Weiss, and others would be speaking at the rally.

In line with what we decided at Oberlin, the party too joined in giving support to the march. It was clear that October 14 would be a serious political protest--as opposed to the countercultural and sectarian thrust its organizers gave to it at its inception. Articles reporting growing support for the demonstration appeared in the three issues preceding the action. Two of these included statements backing the demonstration by Pulley and Zimmermann.

Pulley, along with Baltimore SWP mayoral candidate Norton Sandler, were on the demonstration. So were about fifty campaign supporters from the Albany, New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Tidewater, Piedmont, and Pittsburgh branches.

The overwhelming reaction from demonstrators to our presence was positive. They were interested in what the SWP and YSA had to say about gay liberation and its place in the fight for socialism--and vice versa. They were interested in the ideas of a party with a growing base in industry, sensing the clout that socialist workers carry in defending a section of the population that the rulers constantly seek to malign as pariahs and deviates. They were impressed that Pulley is the only presidential candidate in the 1980 election demanding passage of the federal gay rights bill. And they were impressed and interested in our overall strategy for how democratic rights for all working people can be won--through the workers struggle for socialism.

Not everyone on the demonstration, of course, was particularly interested in talking politics. Although the overwhelming majority of demonstrators were there to make a serious political statement about their demand for gay rights now, the march was predominantly made up of and oriented towards the gay community. Very few signs made specific demands on the government, for example. Very few (with the exception of a fair number of antinuclear slogans) attempted to link the demands of gay people with other social struggles taking place today among Blacks, women, and others. There was virtually no mention of trade unions at all--either in banners on the march or in speeches at the rally. The percentage of Black and Latino demonstrators, however, was significant. That same weekend, nearly 500 people attended a "National Third World Conference on Lesbian and Gay Rights." On the other hand, quite a few contingents were totally apolitical. A marching band carried the Texas state flag and played the Yellow Rose of Texas, for example.

The composition of the demonstration, of course, was no surprise. But the absence of organized placards, banners, chants, etc. attempting to appeal to broader layers of the population--not to speak of the amorphous quality of the rally--did reflect the political weaknesses of the organizers of Oct. 14 which were apparent from the beginning. To the extent that rally

speeches made any political projection, they were to urge gay involvement in the 1980 Democratic party presidential primaries. No future actions were projected by organizers of the march at the rally.

Clearly, our countercultural and sectarian opponents had a much greater weight in the apparatus of the demonstration than within the demonstration itself. This was evident in the official demonstration program, for example, which was sold to raise funds for the march. On page two, it contained an attack on the SWP--as well as attacks on Cuba. No mention was made of other organization on the left--including those which oppose the struggle for gay rights (nor for that matter, of the oppression of gays in the Soviet Union).

The Workers World Party, the Revolutionary Socialist League, the Freedom Socialist Party and PWOC were the only left groups I saw with contingents in the march. The Spartacists and the International Socialist Organization sold or distributed their newspapers. Stacks and stacks of the Guardian had been dropped off along the march route and at the rally, but only a handful of people were distributing these (for free). Most were being used as seats by demonstrators who didn't want to sit on the muddy ground. Workers World party had a speaker at the rally. Comrades might want to check out their editorial in the issue of their paper sold on the march. It is an extreme polyvanguardist adaptation to the countercultural wing of the gay movement.