The struggle of lesbians and gay men for equal rights has become a part of the political agenda in Britain in the last decade. The early eighties saw important advances in the understanding of the issue within the labour movement. Local councils, led by the example of the Greater London Council, adopted and publicly defended controversial lesbian and gay rights policies. The solidarity of the lesbian and gay communities in the miners’ strike of 1984-85 broke down many barriers. In 1985 both the TUC and the Labour Party adopted good policy positions, and the Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights (LCLGR) has fought successfully to maintain that victory through four party conferences.

There has been a vigorous right-wing counter-attack. The Tories whipped up bigotry against Labour policy in the 1987 general election and followed their victory with the notorious section 28 of the local government act, a direct ban on promoting positive images of lesbian and gay sexuality in education. Further legislative attacks have followed, with amendments to the human fertilisation and embryology bill, paragraph 16 of the government’s guidelines on fostering and adoption and clause 25 of the criminal justice bill.

Meanwhile police forces have stepped up their harassment of the lesbian and gay communities and there has been a rising tide of violent assault and murder against lesbians and gay men. Why is this so and why should lesbian and gay liberation be part of the socialist agenda?

Supporters of Socialist Outlook have long been leading activists in the lesbian and gay struggle. Here we give an outline of positions which have been developed through many years of activity and discussion.
What is sexuality?

Our NECESSARY starting point is that all sexuality — not just heterosexual sexuality — is socially and historical- ly, not biologically, determined. The human species has developed a capacity unique to the animal world. Our sexual activities are not restricted to periods when the female is able to reproduce. It is not tied to the reproductive cycle. We can explore sexuality and sexual pleasure for erotic or pleasurable reasons. We are capable of sex for pleasure. We are capable of sexual arousal independently of the presence of another human being, or even of being physically present. Children are capable of masturbation well before puberty. Human beings have also developed the capacity for sexual and sensual pleasure and many forms of activity quite apart from organs- or reproduction-related intercourse. Human beings have always had the capacity for sexual pleasure with members of the same sex.

The argument that homosexuality is in some way ‘unnatural’ is inconsistent with any world view except those which place religious or mystical significance in the act of heterosexual intercourse. The biological reproductive function of sex is inevitably determined by non-biological factors, not least of which is the form of social organisation. The vulnerability of the human child and the long time before it is capable of finding for itself played a major role in determining forms of social organisation and its impact on the reproduction of modern society and the application of some measures of socialisation have removed even this impingement on society. There is no question, nor has there ever been, that the level of homosexual activity has reached the point where the future existence of the human species is endangered. All we can then say is that the ‘natural’ laws of human beings have always had the capacity for sexual pleasure with members of the same sex.

Capitalism and sexuality

It is critically important to understand that before capitalism homophobia is both an act and a habit, to be denounced as sinful or a crime but something to which any person might fall prey. It was not the basis for describing and characterising a specific group of people.

There is no space to examine the historical evidence here but at a glance we can see the emergence of specific lesbian and gay identities — can be traced to the epoch of capitalism. There are also important changes in the archival relations between patriarchy, heterosexism and the family which is not possible to discuss here.

The globalisation that took place in the twentieth century, the triumph of capitalism established a social regime whose eternal naturalness has only been challengingly threatened by the specific development of the social crisis of late capitalism. It is indeed a tribute to the ideological power of capitalism that so many Marxists, even many Marxists, have failed to grasp the transitory nature of the family system established as part of a new economic order and have therefore_handed_a weapon of destroying the family to the class enemy.

The family of the proletariat was moulded after the model of the family of the bourgeoisie which became established with the rise of the capitalist mode of production. Women were forced into the role of child-bearer and home-maker. The ideologi- cal basis was established for justifying the expulsion of women from the workforce when this was necessary for capitalism, such as during the slump which heralded the age of imperialism. And the material basis was established on which capitalism could attempt to build a relatively stable social order. The family has played a major role ever since in keeping capitalism in control.

To accompany the material form of social or- ganisation, the establishment of a ideology to justify it. The subordination of women to men, of whatever class, had to be shown to be natural. Likewise it had to be shown the case that the real form of sexual activity was individual heterosexual attachment. Not far be- hind came the laws to give the state the power to enforce the norms of sexual deviance.

In Britain in 1885 there were a series of measures against prostitution and male homosexuality leading to criminalise les- bianism fell in the House of Lords in 1921 — for fear that publicity would encourage it.) Similar laws were being enacted around the same time in Ger- many and in other capitalist states. The durability of these laws has been remarkable. It was 1967 in Britain before the worst excesses of the Labouchere amendment of 1885 were moderated and in Ger- many.

Lesbians and gay men are not a fixed minority in society. The capacity for non-heterosexual sexual activity is not restricted to one of those of-off-repeated percentages.

The processes differ in non-capitalist societies. In backward rural societies homosexual behaviour takes place as it always has but the conditions do not exist for the emergence of lesbian and gay iden- tity as such.

The establishment of lesbian and gay identities in the west laid the basis for a fight back. The ear- liest organized homosexual rights movements rapidly took off in Britain. Germany had its beginnings, demanding the repeal of the repressive legislation. The history of these movements is difficult to summarise but the ex- tent of these movements, especially in Germany, was dramatic testimony to the emergence of new identity. Their potential was predominantly based on the theory that homosexuals were a ‘third sex’, a female soul in a male body or vice versa. Despite the limitations of this determinist view, Magnus Hirschfeld’s cam- paign in Germany took on a Europe-wide dimension, made serious inroads into the Social Democratic Party, where Bernstein was an early champion, and took part also in the resistance to fascism. The Nazis rapidly set about the annihila- tion of the campaign, its institutions, and any record of its previous existence.

In the early Soviet Union, where there was no material and social basis for the existence of such a vigorous movement, the Bolsheviks repealed tsarist legislation which persecuted homosexu- ality. It was Stalin who as part of the process of re-establishing the family as the basic social unit during the thirties re-introduced straitened measures, such that it was only since the advent of glasnost and the open admission of the suffering voices of lesbians and gay men are beginning to find an expression.

The present crisis

The POST-WAR boom saw women drawn again into the workforce, the expansion of education and the media, youth culture and spending power. The so- cial consequences are well known: traditional values were questioned, marriage stability was ended with a massive rise in the divorce rate, and
before capitalism

Homosexuality was a form of behaviour to be denounced as sinful or a crime but something to which any person might fall prey. It was not the basis for describing and characterising a specific group of people.

to understand equal rights, while a necessary stage, are not sufficient to end oppression: So how does lesbian and gay liberation represent part of the socialist challenge to the capitalist order?

We outlined above how the family is a central prop of capitalism. As a form of social organisation, the family and its associated ideology oppresses women, young people and lesbians and gay men – whether they live in a nuclear family or not. The struggle for the right to express lesbian and gay sexuality freely – the struggle against compulsory heterosexuality – is a necessary part of the struggle against the family.

Campaigns for lesbian and gay rights, so basic and so simple, yet so violent and courageous – the parades on the left and the right wing, confront profound social questions at every turn, not because the workers’ movement in the current period is not willing to raise these issues, but because every tentative step taken which genuinely confronts compulsory heterosexuality – is the positive image of education policy – immediately brings forth the counterblast that family values and all things moral provide a powerful signal of the enormous social changes under way, harbingers of explosive changes to come.

The women’s and lesbian and gay movements have developed a broader understanding than traditional marxism of compulsory heterosexuality and the role of the family and the capitalist society. It is not just that women are subordinated to men economically, it is also that women’s sexuality is denied and supported by the idea of invisibility. Lesbian sexuality especially, which shows not only that women have a sexuality of their own but that women are capable of emotional satisfaction without a man at all, is either taboo, or else the object of male violence or pornographic titillation.

The struggle is also a means of breaking down the traditional barriers between things which are regarded as a public concern and those which are seen as private questions of human nature or psychology. The rapid transformation which has taken place through the self-organisation of lesbians and gay men in the labour movement in the last few years represents the first beginnings of this process. Such self-organisation will surely play its part in the struggle to change an entire society into a force which genuinely stands at the head of all the oppressed. It will challenge the ruling class ideology that has hitherto used the labour movement to such negative effect.

Lesbian and gay liberation is not just about the liberation of lesbians and gay men. It is necessarily part of the liberation of all sexuality. While the liberation of heterosexuality is of course the aim of the liberation of straight men cannot be equated with the oppression of lesbians and gay men, the violence, competitiveness, anxiety and misery within relationships are in many cases due to the combined forces of heterosexual suppression of deviance and male suppression of women’s sexuality. Sexuality is a central part of capitalist alienation and relations remain alienated while lesbian and gay sexuality is oppressed.

The lesbian and gay identity created

police raid in the summer of 1969 – an event commemorated in lesbian and gay pride marches throughout the western world each June.

For a while it seemed that capitalism could absorb the demands of these new movements without undermining significant structural changes. Though there came into being the vast new markets in the United States and Britain aimed at gay men because gay men have more economic power than lesbians. Gay clubs, discos, bars, social organisations and pornography mushroomed in the great metropolitan centres of the world. AIDS was a minor illness compared to its effect on the profit of heterosexual businesswomen, in which it became possible for a gay male community to develop and flourish: a scene in which those cast out from their homes, alienated from their backgrounds, experimenting with their sexuality, could carve out a precarious existence. One can talk to gay men who, in ironic contrast with the heterosexuals who often assert the opposite) depth and breadth to, mix with or even see straight people any more.

Within this social transformation, increasing numbers of gay men and women were enabled to discover that they were not as straight as they had always thought they were and, because of this new subculture, were in many cases able to come out and live their lives as lesbians and gays.

Of course the big cities provided an escape outlet for people who were unable to come out in their home town, they were in some cases able to escape on to a boat or even to fly to, mix with or even see straight people any more.

The ‘permissive society’ was not without its criticisms. It was not without its dangers, its critics. But it was the onset of economic crisis in the seventies and eighties which brought with it serious attempts to reverse the social changes of the sixties. An attempt to re-establish family values as the major feature of the eighties and a key part of Tory philosophy under Thatcher. The virulence of the attacks associated with the reassertion of the family indicates the perceived depth of the breakdown of the family and its associated traditions.

The decline of the family is not a myth of the right wing. Its reality is evidenced by the rise in the divorce rate, which was measured against the remarriage rate, demonstrates the end of the monogamous tradition, the number of single-parent families and the slipping in the proportion of the working population who live in the traditional heterosexual family structure into a minority of the population in Britain. It is evidenced by the government’s own social trends surveys, the most recent of which demonstrates the growing popular acceptability of much of this social reality, with the
under capitalism will disappear at the same time as the emergence of both categories, homosexual and heterosexual, and the coming about of a genuinely free form of sexual relations between human beings. The only way for the freedom of all sexuality can be brought about is through a socialist revolution. Lesbian and gay liberation is clearly therefore a component of the socialist revolution.

The necessity of autonomy

Our analysis has important strategic conclusions, one of which is support for the autonomous organisa-
tion of lesbians and gay men. It is vital that the struggle against a particular form of oppression is led by those who are oppressed by that oppression. This can only be achieved through the work of lesbian and gay organisations that progress has made at all. If lesbian and gay liberation is to be completely effective, it is not just a question of those who at least do not support autonomous organisa-
tion none of the recent achievements would have been secured.

Heterosexism is so deeply implanted that the oppression of lesbians and gay men will not cease with the advent of socialism. The autonomous or-
ganisation of lesbian and gay groups will continue to be a necessary part of transforming society for quite some time to come. This is because heterosexism is a neces-
Sx but not a sufficient condition for liberation.

There is an even more basic reason why it is es-
cential to support autonomous movements. Without the existence of a vigorous, wide-ranging movement which is public and tangible, it would not be possible for individual lesbians and gay men to come to terms with their sexuality, and to make the first steps without which there could not even be a struggle to come out.

One must not distinguish between les-
bias and gay men, for it is the reality that the two are oppressed in different ways, have different priorities, organise in different ways. Lesbians have faced sexism from gay men and heterosexism in the women's movement. Lesbians must have the right to autonomous organisation within the women's movement, the gay movement and the labour movement.

The rise of lesbian and gay movements in Britain

The movement which came into being after 1971 in Britain had two main components: a right wing component, which was formed by the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) and the libertarian dominated Gay Liberation Front (GLF)

CHE was a small, middle class, male-led, membership based group. The GLF, like CHE, drew its support from the same strata of society. It differed in that its membership had a more female presence and was more activist in nature. The influence over the other hand of the smaller CHE was far wider than the number of people who were ever directly involved. It was a revolutionary movement in the sense that it challenged the concept that lesbian and gay men's sexuality was inferior to heterosexual sexuality and saw the oppress-
iveness of the nuclear family. Its activities were public and campaigning.

The GLF had all the strengths and weaknesses of the sixties counter-culture. It argued that the revolution would not succeed if it was something that would just live out now; the trade unions and Labour Party were organisations of the past and weren't worth bothering with. This attitude towards women's oppression was contradictory. Gay men saw their oppression as stemming from gender stereotypes but tended to see these as a threat to both men and women. Influenced by strands of radical feminism they saw heterosexual penetration as the basis of women's oppression. Gay men's opposition to homopho-

The left has failed even to try to understand the issues* and the campaign and sometimes parasitical involve-
ment in the campaigns compounded the tendency towards dismissal of the labour move-
ment in general and the left far in particular, which continues to this day.

The last ten years have witnessed a big increase in lesbian and gay self-organisation inside the labour movement. There are lesbian and gay groups in many British unions (the most influential being in white collar unions like the National and Local Government Officers' Association and the National Union of Teachers, where it is easier to or-

Initially encouraged by the supportive stance of the Labour left, activists within the party built up the Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights into an effective force which pushed a reluctant party leadership to the verge of promulgating to deliver its conference policies.

Lesbian self-organisation

Lesbians have generally been more politically ac-
tive and more radical than gay men. There has not been any gay male equivalent to lesbian feminism, which has a gender-based non-libertarian approach to sexual politics, explicitly based on an analysis of women's oppression. Lesbians' radicalism reflects their gender and lack of vested interests in capitalism.

The relationship between lesbians and gay men has often been uneasy. Neither CHE nor GLF took the outlook

The Tory right understands better than the left the challenge of lesbian and gay liberation. Only its moral rhetoric wins support for policies such as the banning of compulsory heterosexual school courses. Only its moral rhetoric has been able to link all the major wing of the gay movement have begun to understand that if these alliances are to be sus-
tained there is a need for lesbian and gay self-organisation and a programme that can take the needs of lesbians.

Lesbian feminism has provided an innovative and a compelling counter to compulsory heterosexuality which was especially powerful given the lack of such an analysis from a socialist perspective. The weaknesses of the movement in the eighties, have shown that it has not been able to dominate the liberal political arena. There is an urgent need to develop a class-based feminism.

Many of the Lesbian movement's campaigns have been directed at the Labour movement, and it has been a consistent feature of the Labour movement's incorporation of lesbian politics that it has always been on the right of the party. This has meant that it has always been the case that the movement now is broader, more receptive and more representative than ever.

Footnotes

1 Lesbians and gay men have long organised in support of working class struggles. This dif-

2 This is an enormous subject. There are large and developing lesbian and gay movements in a number of developing countries, notably Mexico and Brazil. They are based in the big cities. The Sandinists revolution enabled a small movement to begin in Nicaragua.

3 Nigel has a lesbian and gay group which has campaigned successfully for official recogni-

4 Apart from specific factors - the structure of the union, the pioneering work done on the part of the women's movement - the key factor which made the Labour Party more ac-

5 The next issue - out in July - will be on the moves towards greater capitalist integration in Europe, and the significance of '1992' for socialists.

theory + practice

* t+p is an occasional supplement to Socialist Outlook which takes an in-depth look at key issues of socialist analysis and strategy.

* Each issue of t+p will examine an issue of importance to socialists in greater depth - and at greater length - than is possible in the paper itself.

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