

STATEMENT ON SOCIALISTS AND THE GAY LIBERATION MOVEMENT
BY THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISTS, MELBOURNE GAY FRACTION.

The gay movement in Australia is in such a state of disarray that it is doubtful whether the word 'movement' can be used at all. In Melbourne, for instance, after discounting the social support groups (like Gay Rap and Lynx), the discussion groups and the task groups (like the Gay Community News and Lesbian News collectives), there is very little left. Gay activism in Melbourne has suffered a sharp decline and the situation is hardly any better in the other cities.

The sources of this disarray are complex but an essential component of the failure of the movement is the failure of even its most clear-sighted and articulate elements to offer leadership.

It is a fact that many of the gays mobilised during the last ten years saw liberation primarily in personal terms and have settled comfortably into the ghetto and bar scene. Others have burnt out or reassessed their priorities and gone into unions or parties.

Meanwhile, that part of the movement that maintains its commitment to autonomy now finds itself adrift and isolated, reliving its past glories and debating its present failures with itself.

In all this confusion certain fundamentals have been forgotten. The most important of these is that gay oppression is an adjunct of women's oppression and that women's oppression springs from the demands of class society. Without the abolition of classes there can be no liberation for women or gays.

It is upon this basic fact that the whole question of the correct strategy for the gay liberation movement hinges. There are areas of disagreement within the movement that cannot be submerged. Unlike the Sydney CPA Gay Collective in its 'Collective Statement to the Socialism and Homosexuality Conference' we in the International Socialists do not want to play down these significant differences. We believe that there are "distinct political lines", that they must be acknowledged and fought out.

It is clear, after all, that the strategy for the movement is not an academic question; the consequences of our taking a wrong turn at this point in our development would be horrendous. With the right gearing up to force women back into the Home and Family role, gays face a period of sustained repression in support of this attack. We must decide, and decide now, who will defend gays and lead the counter attack against the right and against the capitalist system. In our opinion only the working class has the strength and will to fight and win. It is to the working class that gay socialists must direct their energies.

As a final point we note that we are aware that we are frequently accused of sectarianism because we assert our politics forcefully and without apology. We deny the charge absolutely. In the particular case of this conference, members of the International Socialists have actively participated in the organising collective precisely because we believe that it is necessary to discuss together the question of the way forward for gays.

WHERE SHOULD THE GAY LIBERATION MOVEMENT BE GOING?
....TO THE WORKING CLASS.

Alison Thorne

Early this year the Hamer government's Sexual Offences Act became law in Victoria. While some gays celebrated the fact that the new law degendered sexual acts and abolished the 'abominable crime of buggery', others saw it as a hollow victory. For lesbians the much-heralded act was a step backward as lesbianism is now recognised by the law giving the cops an even greater opportunity to harass and charge lesbian women. Of course, the real acid test of a law is how it is applied and Hamer's hollow illusion has done little to end gay oppression.

Gay men are still harassed by cops while doing the beat, lesbians and male homosexuals are bashed and terrorised by poofster-bashers and gay people are still discriminated against in employment. In February this year Colin Briton was not re-appointed to his job as Community Education Officer at Sunshine high school. Colin had held the job for three years. During the job selection interview the panel asked him questions about his sexual preference. I myself have recently started teaching at Glenroy technical school. Starting work has made me realise that nothing has changed. I am forced to be closeted at work. Constant questions about my boyfriends and even having students call me Mrs are just so oppressive and make me want to scream.

For the last four years I was a student. I existed quite happily in a rather artificial situation. Coming out was easy. Coming out was fun. By the beginning of 1980 I realised that I had become ghettoised, noy liberated. Going out into a school made it clear to me once and for all that the ghetto is no solution. The oppression of gays at work cannot be ignored and there have been few real gains.

WHY WE ARE OPPRESSED

Gay oppression, like women's oppression, cannot be legislated out of existence. Gay people are oppressed by the ideology of the nuclear family and by the capitalist ~~xxxxxx~~ system which produced this ideology and now props it up.

The capitalist nuclear family is not a unit of production (as the family in feudal or tribal societies was) but despite this its existence is central to capitalism. Like the family in all class societies, the capitalist family is the means by which the next generation of producers can be raised and socialised but the capitalist system provides specific problems. Since it is only those who sell their labour who receive the means to live and since there is no domestic production to speak of, an alternative arrangement is necessary to provide for child-bearing women and children. The nuclear family 'solves' this by providing rigid sex and age roles. Men became responsible for supporting women who produced a new generation of wage slaves. Men are 'breadwinners' who receive a wage sufficient to support 'their' dependants; women are wives and mothers providing emotional support, domestic labour and basic socialisation; children are the passive recipients of all this, being moulded according to their parents whims.

The family is a powerful socialising agent that, along with the other important means of ideological control such as education and the media, propagates the ideology of the nuclear family. Being part of the nuclear family is seen as the valid form of existence. Anti-gay sentiment is part of this drive to reinforce the current form of male-female relations and the family.

One of the difficulties facing socialists intent on confronting the family is that (within the context of an

irrational society) there is a certain logic to it. If women are to be as grossly underpaid as they are, then they might as well stay home; if workplaces are intolerable then the compensatory aspects of the family -- emotional support in particular -- assume real importance in workers' lives. The family survives partly because the working class has been led to perceive its advantages.

But these 'advantages' do not alter nor even disguise for socialists the fact that the family remains one of the most oppressive institutions within our society. It is central to the oppression of women and gays and it must be overthrown.

THE GAY MOVEMENT.

The idea of an autonomous gay movement (that is, a movement that excludes heterosexuals and includes all gays regardless of their political orientation) has been a central assumption of gay politics for the last ten years.

In the early 1970s the autonomous gay movement played a vital role in advancing the struggle for gay liberation. It contributed to the growth of gay pride as both a personal and a public phenomenon and it explored and advanced the understanding of sexual politics, especially of the relationship between gay liberation and socialism.

However, it is clear that currently the movement is in sharp decline. It has lost direction and become isolated and inward-looking. A major source of this decline has been the idea that gays must always and everywhere work autonomously. The elevation of the autonomy of the movement from a tactic (to be used whenever necessary or desirable) to a strategy or inviolable principle has meant that many new avenues of development have been closed off.

Given the current world situation, gays need to be ready to defend themselves. New attacks on gays are happening around the world. With Reagan as the US President gays are in for a hard time. His victory has given a boost to the anti-gay, anti-woman Moral Majority who have already allocated a million dollars to 'foster anti-gay values' in San Francisco. In Canada, in February this year police raided four saunas and three hundred people were arrested. In London the recent Paedophile Information Exchange trial attracted a lot of publicity which could lead to a huge rise in anti-gay activity. These worldwide attacks will flow on to Australia. The current attack on sex education in Victorian schools is just one example of the constant anti-gay attacks. Another is the recent decision by the Wran ALP government to maintain the criminal status of consensual homosexuality, complete with fourteen year jail penalties, etc.

In the past the Australian gay movement has adopted the strategy of building the united front and has had some success with this, especially in the Campaign Against Repression. It must be made clear that what is at issue is united front work -- that is, campaigns waged by various groups around socialist demands. The current emphasis on popular frontism -- or worse still, gay fronts -- can only lead to the swamping of socialist politics and the ever-tighter co-option of gays within capitalism.

Where there is a movement around specific struggles then socialists must try to build it. This is how gays are won to socialist politics. We must not commit ourselves to trying to build an autonomous movement; all we would be building is a hollow shell.

GAY LIBERATION

Gays are oppressed by capitalism so to achieve gay liberation we must end the system that is causing so much misery-- the capitalist system. To smash the capitalist system we must build a mass revolutionary party of the working class. Women, workers and gays must unite because a class that is divided amongst itself will not have the energy or inclination to fight the system that is oppressing it.

The International Socialists are trying to build a mass revolutionary party that can overthrow the capitalist system. We believe that the capitalist system can be patched up or gradually changed; there is no parliamentary road to socialism. The International Socialists are committed to full equality and liberation for all people. We believe that racism, sexism, the oppression of and discrimination against gays, blacks, women and migrants are the pillars of the capitalist system. These pillars must be smashed. Only the organised working class has the power to create a society free of oppression and exploitation.

Any oppressed group that is fighting back will find the International Socialists fighting along side them.

Gay people cannot afford to retreat into lifestyle politics. Sometimes we will be tolerated but when we are weak and unprepared we will be smashed. A gay movement based around struggle is a way to win people to socialist politics but it is only when women, workers and gays unite together in a mass revolutionary party to overthrow capitalism that gay liberation can ever be won.

PAPER PRESENTED TO THE SATURDAY MORNING PLENARY.

STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL PRIORITIES FOR SOCIALIST GAYS

References:

Breaking the Chains - the Struggles for Gay Liberation and Socialism - Susan Tyburn, Canadian I.S.

Glad to be Gay at Work - John Lindsay, article in Industrial Discussion Section of Socialist Review, monthly magazine of the British Socialist Workers Party. No 1 1981.

How Lesbians and Male Homosexuals are Oppressed Under Capitalism - Rod Connolly, an Australian I.S. discussion paper.

1981 Mardi Gras ?? - Oska Puglisi and Di Minnis, article in Gay Community News, October 1980.

In this session I have been asked to talk about tactical priorities for socialist gays. Although some important strategic questions for socialist gays have been discussed in my comrade Alison Thorne's paper - presented yesterday morning - there are strategic considerations which are intertwined with the tactical priorities that we in the I.S. would argue for socialist gays to take up.

1. HOW TO FIGHT BACK - STRATEGIES

It is important for socialists and socialist gays to be clear about how and why homosexuals are oppressed under capitalism - so as to make clear the strategic and tactical decisions in the struggle for Gay Liberation which can only be won in the struggle for Socialism. (1)

Essentially, this struggle has to go a long way past the current state of the Gay Movement, the embryonic Gay Left in Sydney notwithstanding. Most gay activists still hold to the idea of a for all time Autonomous Gay Movement and abhorrence to the idea of heterosexual supporters being active in that movement.

This, of course, was based on a very real need in the early '70s for an independent gay movement. Just as the independent Women's Liberation Movement played an indispensable role in raising issues of the nature and causes of the oppression of women and the level of sexism generally - and in the left groups of the day. So did the Autonomous Gay Liberation Movement with tactics of coming out, Gay Pride demonstrations and protests at victimisations of lesbians and male homosexuals.

We in the I.S., see autonomy as a tactic - and not an eternal sacrosanct strategy.

A fetishisation of autonomy can lead to a "gay/straight" - "us/them" attitude, and can lead to seeing heterosexuals as direct oppressors of homosexuals and who benefit directly from that oppressor role.

This is one of the ways that the ruling class of this capitalist society perpetuates and fosters the divisions between workers - along gay/straight, male/female, black/white, migrant/native born lines. It is precisely these divisive pressures which have to be fought against, to unite all workers at the point of production - the only force which, when united, has the strength to overthrow the capitalist system.

To quote John Lindsay's article, Gay+Rights at Work:

"Our work must have two broad currents -

* winning the bulk of working people to an acceptance of the rights of gay

people, and the understanding of how bosses use anti-gay fears to undermine workplace solidarity.

* winning the bulk of gay people to the realisation that their interests are inextricably linked with the interests of the class as a whole, and that gay liberation, as with any other liberation, has to be achieved at the point of production."

These strategic aims are intertwined - in fighting for one, we can go some way towards implementing the other. For instance, valuable lessons can be learned by gay activists when they are involved in workplace struggles. The solidarity and strength of purpose of workers in a dispute can cut across otherwise divided groups of workers and can convince individual gays of the need to join with workers and other oppressed groups and overthrow capitalism. It is in struggle that people's ideas are transformed - that gays will realise that their interests are inextricably linked with the working class as a whole. People do not come to these realisations solely in the world of ideas.

There are a few examples around of the effect of gays fighting for their rights in unions on fellow workers - albeit on a small scale at this stage.

In my union, the Administrative and Clerical Officers Association which covers Federal Public Service clerks, we had such an experience. In 1978, at the Annual General Meeting, the rank and file group I work in - Grey Collar - put up a motion proscribing workplace discrimination against lesbians and male homosexuals. In speaking against the motion, the then Federal Secretary of ACOA, Wattie Peck, stated vehemently to all members of Grey Collar present, "All you homosexuals can go to buggery."

As well as displaying fairly gross anti-gay prejudice, Peck's comments put the militants in Grey Collar, gay or straight, in the position of being harrassed as if they were gay. It gave them a clear example of someone, in this case a union boss, attempting to use anti-gay fears to undermine solidarity.

Anyway, getting back to Lindsay's article - it discusses the Gay Rights at Work committee in the U.K. He talks of workplace based campaigns working through both gay caucus' in unions and through established networks of rank and file groups in industry.

In Australia we do not have a history of socialist gay organisation or as developed a network of rank and file groups in unions. In the following section I would like to examine the application of these strategies in the Australian context.

(1) The oppression of lesbians and male homosexuals flows from the same institutions in capitalist society that the oppression of women is manifested through. The nuclear family and its function of reproducing and training future generations of workers for the capitalist class and the sex-role stereotyping integral to this process lead obviously to the oppression of gays under capitalism.

2. HOW TO FIGHT BACK - TACTICS

There are three main tactical areas I would like to discuss in the application of the strategies outlined in the last section. These cover work inside and with trade unionists, ways of working with gays to win them to a socialist perspective and united front work.

(1) "Winning the bulk of Working People to an Acceptance of the Rights of Gay People":

This paraphrase of Lindsay's first aim may seem utopian. In looking at

tactics necessary in this struggle it is helpful to look at the nature of Trade Unions under capitalism.

Historically, trade unions began as defensive organisations of workers fighting for improved wages and conditions in industrial revolution England. As far back as the Chartist Movement in the 1840's, union officials came to play a pivotal role as compromisers selling out workers' struggles and blunting the impact of their fight against the capitalist class.

Without going into details of the myriad material and social pressures on union officials which lead to sellouts - when some are initially elected with militant politics - it is obvious that the way to "win over the bulk of working people" is not through a focus on merely pressuring union officials. The most militant of the membership of a particular union are the group most likely to be won over on the question of fighting gay oppression and other wider political questions. As with traditional union issues, like fighting for pay increases and against redundancies, this militant minority actually plays the leading role in a struggle. Even as a minority of a union's membership, the militants play the key role of arguing for advanced ideas and tactics which, over a period, win over new layers of the membership.

The militant minority plays the leading role in the union that the officials are incapable of playing given their go-between role between the forces of capital and the organised working class.

It is the militant minority in key unions who must initially be won over. Working through rank and file groups, gay caucus or individual activists in unions with a militant, active sector of membership can be an effective beginning of the implementation of this strategy.

Assisting groups of militant workers in struggle is another way. Gay groups, which may include gay workers in similar industries or unions, collecting money and giving support on picket lines where workers are on strike or stood down or are fighting the sack helps bridge those gaps and win over those workers to understanding the need to fight for gay rights along with lesbians and male homosexuals at the point of production.

(2) "Winning the bulk of Gay People to the Realisation that Their Interests are Inextricably Linked with the Interests of the Working Class"

In examining tactics towards this aim it is necessary to look at some of the forms homosexual oppression takes under capitalism. Firstly, gays are not as obviously oppressed as blacks or women - the majority of lesbians and male homosexuals are not as obviously gay as women are female and blacks have darker skin. Basically, this subtler form of oppression makes it harder to fight back. For instance, how often is a worker's gayness, open or otherwise, the real reason for being fired, not hired or not promoted - yet other work-related reasons are given for that action. The same can often be the case for other oppressed groups but it is usually more overt.

While having a very real material base, more subtle oppression does make it more difficult to mobilise homosexuals to fight against their oppression - or even recognize it particularly. How many times have you heard statements like: "We are not oppressed, we can go to Oxford street any time" or "Sydney is just so free - I can walk down the street holding my girlfriend's hand and nothing happens".

This more subtle form of oppression is expressed as an enforced dichotomy where "being homosexual" involves what you do in your private life. There is a clear split between a gay identity "after hours" and your exploitation

as a worker. As Lindsay puts it:

"Because of this few gay people see gayness as having anything to do with their workplace experience - until they get the sack. Queer bashing jokes in the staff canteen, fear of recognition provoking too sharp a reaction from fellow workers, and the possibility of carving out a comfortable existence in the pubs, home and foreign holidays; all combine to prevent gay people from FORGING LINKS BETWEEN THEIR OPPRESSION AND ORGANIZING AT WORK."

In addition - restricting "gayness" to a social life amongst gay friends in bars etc. is a real insulation against oppression. It leads to a ghettoization of life away from the workplace with a corresponding downplaying of your exploitation as a worker.

One other factor which affects organizing gay workers is their distribution throughout the workforce. Most women are confined to "women's jobs" which tend to be lower paid, more menial, more supervised and with lower levels of union organization than most jobs done by men. Consequently, it is less difficult for women to connect their oppression as women with their oppression as women workers.

In the light of these factors, the increasing preoccupation of many sectors of the gay movement, especially in Sydney, with the visible gay lifestyle sub-culture of the bars scene is disturbing.

Aside from the ghettoization of oppression in the bar scene, those involved are only a small minority of gays. The gays in the bar scene tend to fit a certain age bracket and appearance stereotype. Very few gays over forty regularly attend bars - neither do those not fitting one of the appearance stereotypes.

Even fewer lesbians participate in the scene. At least 95% are left out of it. Lesbians are more oppressed than gay men and a gay movement orienting predominantly to the visible sub-culture of the bars is in danger of being sexist in only orienting to only a tiny minority of lesbians.

The bar scene tends also not to include many working class gays. Those who do get involved in the scene tend to become declassé and are drawn away from the influences and pressure on workers and into the ghetto. This is not contradicted by the fact that, apparently, you can look around Patches on a Saturday night and see numbers of working class gay guys. They do not predominantly participate in the scene, but go to gay bars on the occasional Saturday night. As such, they are rarely caught up in the activities and propaganda of sectors of the gay movement as directed towards this scene.

Being a gay bar habituee, questions of alcoholic poisoning aside, acts against further radicalization as I have outlined earlier by ghettoizing our experience of oppression. It also leaves you open to the politics of the owners and managers which are based on their vested material interests in the gay commercial scene.

They are part of the capitalist system which oppresses us all and have a vested interest in not rocking the boat too much. The proprietor of the Beresford hotel, a gay male pub in Sydney, recently wrote to the Sydney Star arguing that gay street marches were counterproductive. Obviously, he would rather maintain a cosy ghettoized gay lifestyle so he can continue to make a good living out of gays. The close identification of many gays with the bar they frequent - as is now evident during Sydney's Mardi Gras - is further evidence of the potential for the managements of these establishments to shape the politics of their clientele.

The preceding points are not arguing against going to bars and having a good time -- I would be a hypocrite if I did argue that. If you do not become drawn into the ghetto mentality you will be less able to be influenced by these conservatizing influences.

Rather, the above points are an argument against a predominant political orientation to the bar scene. To organize gays, to link up their oppression as gays with their exploitation as workers, we must draw them out of this scene.

3. COALITION BUILDING

Looking at tactics which can enable us to "win the bulk of gay people to the realisation that their interests are inextricably linked with the interests of the working class" - rather than factors which hold us back from this strategic aim - I would like to examine the united front tactic.

Briefly, the united front comprises a working alliance between organised workers, people from oppressed groups and socialists. IT IS NOT A CROSS CLASS ALLIANCE. The slogan of the united front - march seperately, strike together - sums up the strength gained by uniting across traditional divisions between gays and straights, men and women and with socialists and workers.

The Campaign Against Repression in Melbourne in 1979 was a successful example of this tactic. Lesbians, gay men, feminists and socialists campaigned around issues like child care and gay rights. Unfortunately, the level of struggle in these areas at the time was low and sporadic so it was difficult for CAR to do mass work. For these reasons the group folded in 1980.

In the wave of struggle generated by the police attack on the 1978 Mardi Gras, the IS argued for a united front at the Gay Solidarity Group. It seemed to us that there was a genuine and strong response to this incident from left groups, the Women's Movement and many individuals including individual workers. It was an issue and it was the biggest thing to happen on the Sydney left for a couple of years. The large attendance - 2000, representing the spectrum of radicals - at the following demonstration on July 14, 1978 shows this clearly.

It was a pity this tactic was not taken up. It would have broadened the struggle against police harassment and would have forged links between workers, socialists, gays and other oppressed groups. I know of individual workers who, in discussing the situation, were won over to a real understanding of the need to fight for gay rights and against gay oppression. Only in struggle or as witnesses to struggle are ingrained sexist, heterosexist and racist ideas going to be changed. We do not change workers' ideas about us by simply propagandizing them; we do win them over in struggle.

Sydney's Gay Left is about to launch a public campaign against the rising level of police attacks on lesbians and male homosexuals. The motion I put at the initial public meeting called for a public campaign involving trade unionists and other oppressed groups. It was carried, but **it** remains to be seen what sort of campaign can be built around the issue.

I would just like to cite a recent example to show what I mean about the united front not being a cross class alliance. It is not intended to generate individual dilemmas about whether we are working class or middle class as I would define all those whose income is derived solely from wages and salaries and who do not supervise or boss numbers of other workers, as workers.

Those I would not propose allying with in a united front are owners and managers of gay commercial establishments, newspapers and the like. Their class and material interests are directly opposed to fighting for gay liberation. The IS successfully argued at the Sixth National Homosexual Conference in Sydney, August 1980, against gay commercial interests participating in the organisation of Stonewall Day.

This is why we argued at a series of public meetings in Sydney late in 1980 against these interests being involved in organising the Mardi Gras. At rowdy meetings of 100-150 people, just slightly under half the people there agreed with us. Unfortunately, large numbers of predominantly leather bar patrons - never seen before or since at gay meetings - came along and voted for an explicitly apolitical Mardi Gras to be held in summer - divorcing it from the political anniversaries of late June.

The Editor of the Sydney Star most cogently argued their position by saying that summer weather would attract larger numbers of gays, as would the apolitical nature of the event. He said that our aim should be to have as large a number of homosexuals on the streets as possible in order to demonstrate the size and diversity of the gay community and thus change the ideas of ordinary people which will alleviate our oppression.

In fact, he is more radical than most commercial interests who do not even support street marches.

The united front tactic can be used to do mass work on gay issues with lesbians, gay men, workers and socialists working together. Those who do mass work which crosses class lines, like those members of the Communist Party who supported and worked for the apolitical Mardi Gras, dilutes the politics and really sells the struggle far short of those whose power it must challenge in order to fight for the liberation of lesbians and male homosexuals - the capitalist class, whether gay or straight, cater for gays and straights.

FINALLY

Coalitions, united fronts and links between workers and oppressed groups, forged or otherwise, are not in themselves going to give the coordination and leadership to the struggle to overthrow capitalism. A revolutionary party is the only force capable of cohering these isolated areas of struggle. The embryonic state of gay socialist and rank and file organisation only serves to underline the need to build such a revolutionary party, to unite these struggles, and only serves to underline the need for gay socialists to join groups like the International Socialists to build that party.

DI MINNIS

Paper presented to the Sunday Plenary.

THE BASIS OF GAY OPPRESSION

This paper will attempt to provide a brief outline of the basis of the oppression of lesbians and male homosexuals. Its central argument is that our oppression as gays arises specifically out of the nature of the society we live in - capitalism. This oppression can not be separated from the exploitation of the working class and is based on the need for the capitalist class to maintain one of their central institutions - the family.

To come to any understanding of gay oppression we must start with the role of the family in capitalist society.

The precise origins of the family are unclear (and for that matter controversial among marxists) but what is clear is that hand in hand with the development of early class society came increasing restrictions on the sexual freedom of women in order to protect the descent of property down the male line. Eventually the entire life of women was restricted and controlled by the consolidation of patrilineal descent and the monogamous family.

Associated with the development of the monogamous, patrilineal family occurred the development of private property and the state. The reproduction of human beings (and future labour power) within the family was separated off from social production generally and women were subordinated and oppressed within this sphere -- reproduction. This is not to say that women were simply confined to the family. They also participated in and were oppressed and exploited within social production (the nature of their participation in social production varied from one particular class society to another, and in different periods within the same class society) but it was the family which provided the basis of their oppression.

The family then is not some natural system of reproduction, but a specific development of class society. Women's oppression is neither biological nor natural and can be abolished with the abolition of class society.

The origins of the oppression of lesbians should be fairly clear -- women's sexuality had to be totally controlled and subordinated to the production of future labour power. Any independent sexuality of women was a clear threat to the structure of the family.

To the extent that male homosexuality represented a threat to the family it was also proscribed. However because male homosexuality was not as clear a threat as women controlling their own sexuality, it was possible in early class societies for it to be tolerated or even approved within certain limits. Thus for example in Greek society it was acceptable for male members of the ruling class to have young male "lovers" provided they still maintained a family.

All class societies have maintained some form of the family as their basic means of reproducing labour power, but that is not to say that there is some timeless patriarchy which is responsible for the oppression of women and gays. In each type of class society the form of the family has been historically specific; the rise of capitalism for example witnessed the destruction of the peasant household and the freeing of women from the direct domination of a male patriarch. And by driving women out to work, capitalism provided the basis for its own destruction and the liberation of women.

The Capitalist Family

The basis of the capitalist system is the process of accumulation of capital; the source of this accumulation of capital is surplus value. But surplus value can only be created if the capitalist can buy a commodity that has the potential of generating more value than it itself was bought for.

There is only one such active commodity: labour power. Only the labourer can create more value than his/her wage.

The essential pre-condition for the development of capitalism then is the existence of a class of "free" wage labourers. The only way that a worker's capacity to labour could become a commodity was if he or she was free to sell it to any boss and if he or she was free from the ownership of any means of production.

Because the class of "free" wage-labourers is the essential pre-condition for capitalism, all capitalists have sought to intervene in the reproduction of this class. The family system is one of the first and more important areas of state intervention. As early as 1753 the formless common law marriage of England (established purely by consent) was "reformed" into a stipulated ceremony..

The value of labour-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the labourer and for the reproduction of labour-power (i.e. the labourer's children). The wage system of capitalism is based upon the premise that all individuals in society actually live in family units. The wage system itself imposes its own requirements of "normal" life within a family upon the "free" wage-labourer, as well as all the ideological pressures of our society.

The family still represents the cheapest means for capitalists to reproduce labour power -- some estimates are that the family system reproduces the labour of a child four times as cheaply as state institutions. The family also plays an important role in terms of the training of the child to adapt to capitalist industry. As well the family indoctrinates the child in the social values of capitalism.

However capitalism is a society based on contradictions, and as well as propping up the family the process of capitalist development also serves to undermine it. The expansion of capitalist industry has resulted in the need for increased state intervention in the reproduction of labour power. The family could not provide the necessary education and health care to produce a more skilled labour force. If capitalism was an ever-expanding system it would be possible to imagine that the family would be abolished completely as it would eventually be cheaper to socialise reproduction totally and draw all women out of the home onto the labour market.

But of course capitalism is a system plagued by recurring crises which make it unprofitable for capitalists to invest the massive amounts needed to fully socialise child care, education and health services. Instead in a crisis the capitalist class places the burden on the backs of the working class family and cuts back the pre-existing social services, etc. In a period of crisis like the one which began in the early seventies, the state plays an increasing role in the maintenance of the system of capitalist production and of the family; and necessarily then in the oppression of women and gays.

To summarise: in capitalist society the private family is the essential structure for the reproduction of "free" workers who own their own labour power. The family is part of the necessary base of capitalist society. But that does not only mean the oppression of women (and indirectly of male homosexuals), it also means bringing women into production outside the household system.

Because production and reproduction are torn apart in capitalist society the immediate control of women in the family is no longer the essential structure of women's oppression. The control of women shifts from the individual patriarchal household to the capitalist state with its infinite battery of laws, and to the capitalist market.

Thus the family is in a constant contradictory relationship to capitalism. Production is based on the assumption of a male and female workforce; but the reproduction of capitalist society, as co-ordinated by the capitalist state through the family propped up by the "welfare" services, is based on the assumption of women as mothers.

From this analysis we would argue that the oppression of lesbians under capitalism flows directly from the oppression of women generally in this society. The oppression is accentuated because lesbians have rejected the sexual behavioural norms for women.

In the case of male homosexuality the situation is more ambiguous. In sections of society, e.g. the ruling class or upper middle class, male homosexuality in itself does not represent a direct challenge to class rule or the family. It is only the generalisation of male homosexuality to all layers of society, in particular the working class and the non-exploiting elements of the middle class which would represent such a threat. It is no accident in this regard that while a whole layer of male homosexual capitalists and petty exploiters has developed, there is no comparable development of lesbian capitalism.

Strategically this fact is of some importance. It means that lesbians and in particular lesbian workers, who have the power to act to change society will in the long term be in the forefront of the struggle for gay liberation and socialism and that the interests of lesbians and working class male homosexuals are sharply counterposed to the interests of gay petty capitalists, who exist with the support/toleration of the big bourgeoisie who oppress us all.

Another factor which should be touched on when examining gay oppression under capitalism is the historical fluctuations between brutal repression (e.g. in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia) and periods of at least limited toleration.

In periods of capitalist prosperity such as the long boom of the fifties and sixties, it is possible for the ruling class to grant limited concessions to the working class and to movements of the oppressed. However in periods of crisis in the system, the ruling class is compelled to attack the working class and the oppressed and force down their living standards. As, "deviant" behaviour which can be tolerated to some extent when the system is relatively healthy is more of a threat when the system is in crisis.

In times of crisis the capitalist class will mount an ideological defence of traditional moral, sexual and religious values to cohere the petty bourgeoisie and sections of the exploited in the defence of "classless" (i.e. pro-capitalist) national interests, and also as a means of disciplining society. It is no coincidence that fascist movements have linked their ultra-nationalist and pro-imperialist sentiments with defence of the family and anti-gay prejudice.

It is to be expected, with world capitalism now in a long and drawn-out economic and social crisis, that attacks on gays as well as attacks on the working class generally will increase. Even the extremely limited gains that have been made over the last ten years will be taken from us unless we fight back.

-the above was prepared as a discussion paper by
the International Socialists Gay Fraction