

Communist Party USA on **LBGTQ** **LIBERATION**

**Before Stonewall:
Queer Liberation's
Communist
Party Roots**

by C.J. Atkins

**Towards Queer
and Trans
Liberation**

**by the Michigan
Writers Group**

BEFORE STONEWALL:

Queer Liberation's Communist Party Roots

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The modern movement for queer liberation - or gay liberation to use the as-yet less inclusive terminology of the 1960s and '70s - wouldn't exist without the Communist Party USA.

That might sound like a big claim to make, but it was Communist ideology and political strategy that provided the theoretical and practical architecture of the earliest effort to win gay equality in the United States - the Mattachine Society, a group whose ideas underpinned all the struggles and victories that have been won over the past half century.

The Stonewall Rebellion is generally (and rightly) regarded as the moment when the fight for gay rights broke out into the mainstream, led by Black and brown trans women and drag queens in New York City. Credit is certainly due for figures like Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and others who first had the courage to fight back against police repression that hot June night in 1969.

But even before Stonewall - and before the radical organizations that would follow, like the Gay Liberation Front, ACT UP, and Queer Nation - there was the Mattachine Society and Harry Hay. Mattachine, one of the first groups to attempt to politically organize gay men and lesbians, was established over the course of 1948 to 1950, a period of resurgent conservative power and suburban-inspired social conformity in U.S. culture. And Harry Hay was the Communist who combined theory and praxis to bring it into reality.

“Are you now or have you ever been a homosexual?”

Harry Hay came of age as a gay man when the notion of a gay identity barely existed; as Hay himself would often say, gay people didn't even have a word for themselves yet. Homosexuals and “deviants” of whatever variety still understood themselves as sexually addicted, biologically defective, and mentally

“handicapped.” The self-hatred and inward-focused slut-shaming ran deep.

Hay was also a Communist - at a time when first fascism and then Red Scare McCarthyism made possessing left-wing allegiances dangerous. Hay had been politicized early in life by interactions with old Wobblies from the Industrial Workers of the World, and during his work organizing migrant farm workers, but he became truly radicalized after a pair of galvanizing experiences in 1934. Witnessing police violence against mothers of starving children who were protesting the disposal of milk to protect market prices during the Great Depression, Hay instinctively picked up a brick and hurled it at a cop, striking him in the temple. He had to flee and found unexpected protection in the home of a Los Angeles drag queen named Clarabelle.

Now politically active, that same summer Hay traveled to San Francisco to organize solidarity efforts for the General Strike of maritime workers that had shut down the West Coast ports. There, he saw National Guard soldiers fire on the picket lines, killing two workers on the spot, and felt bullets fly by his own head. Thousands attended the fallen workers’



funerals. Hay would later say, “You couldn’t have been a part of that and not have your life completely changed.”

For Harry Hay, that change resulted in his joining the Communist Party in 1938. He was introduced to the CPUSA by his lover, actor Will Geer (known to later generations as Grandpa on the TV series *The Waltons*). Over time, Hay’s involvement with the party and its various campaigns against fascism and in support of labor and what was then called Negro equality grew to become full-time devotions. He was employed for many years as an educator in the Communist Party’s political schools and community labor education associations; cultural work and the Communist-led folk music scene were other areas to which Hay devoted himself.

Never faltering in his commitment, Hay remained in the party until he felt compelled to engineer his own “honorable discharge” in 1951 so as to protect the party from any FBI security risks due to his homosexuality. By this time, he had undergone an awakening of his own sexual identity and knew there could be no going back into the closet; the “brotherhood” which he now acknowledged also demanded his loyalty. Local party leaders in California didn’t want him to go, but official CPUSA policy at the time and for decades after still saw homosexuality as a sign of the social degeneration of late-stage capitalism and as a serious blackmail risk. His request for an expulsion was eventually granted by the national leadership, but Hay was recognized as a “lifelong friend of the people.”

As it turned out, Hay was right about the potential for government manipulation; in 1955 he was summoned to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee about his Marxist proclivities. Investigators perhaps hoped that fear of being exposed as a homosexual would prompt Hay to turn on his old comrades; instead he shot back, “I’m not in the habit of confiding in stool pigeons or their buddies on this committee.”

The Spark

Sen. Joe McCarthy had once joked, “If you want to be against McCarthy, you have to be either a communist or a cocksucker.” Harry Hay was both. But rather than letting his being gay and a Red become debilitating liabilities, Hay combined them and set the stage for a social and sexual revolution.

For decades, the work of Hay and the Mattachine Society remained largely unknown, a brief episode in gay history. Thanks to the work of researchers like Stuart Timmons and Will Roscoe, authors respectively of *The Trouble with Harry Hay* and *Radically Gay*, thankfully much of the story of Hay and Mattachine has been rescued from dusty boxes and locked filing cabinets. And the broad outlines of Hay’s life and the basic aspects of his work founding Mattachine have been previously presented in the pages of *People’s World* by historian Norman Markowitz.

The importance of the Communist Party USA to the tale was never downplayed by either Timmons or Roscoe, nor by Markowitz, but the centrality of Marxism and the CPUSA’s Popular

Front strategy in this earliest effort at queer liberation has often been downplayed by other commentators who “discover” Harry Hay. His work is a part of LGBTQ history and Communist history that neither queers nor Communists have sufficiently acknowledged.

Historical materialism and the “cultural minority” thesis

The idea for a group to specifically organize gays to fight for their acceptance by society was first broached by Hay in 1948 in the form of a “Bachelors for Wallace” caucus within the Progressive Party campaign of Henry Wallace. Though it didn’t go very far, the effort eventually morphed into Bachelors Anonymous (modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous, note the addiction connotations) and then the Mattachine Society.

Hay had trouble convincing very many people in his circles that an advocacy group for people who were “that way” was even possible. Post-war reaction was setting in and progressive



Members of the Mattachine Society in a rare group photograph at a 1952 Christmas party. Pictured: Harry Hay (upper left), then from left to right, Konrad Stevens, Dale Jennings, Rudi Gernreich, Stan Witt, Bob Hull, Chuck Rowland (in glasses), Paul Bernard.

politics in general were under attack; what Hay was proposing was even more subversive, but he felt compelled to start organizing anyway. "I knew the government was going to look for a new enemy, a new scapegoat," he said. Those scapegoats were Communists and queers.

Hay and the few co-organizers he gathered were trained in the party to know that, if Mattachine was going to get off the ground, they needed a theoretical foundation on which to build. Chuck Rowland, another former CP member, told author Stuart Timmons, "With my Communist background, I knew I could not work in a group without a theory. I said, 'All right, Harry, what is our theory?'"

Hay's years as a Marxist educator provided him the answer. "We are an oppressed minority culture," he told Rowland. Thus was born what became known as the "Cultural Minority" thesis. Still lacking a proper vocabulary, Hay initially referred to this oppressed culture as the "Androgynous Minority."

The notion of gays as an oppressed minority culture was a takeoff from the Marxist analysis of the oppression of African Americans and other groups as "national minorities," a concept with a long pedigree in Marxism-Leninism but which was particularly stressed after the Sixth Congress of the Communist International in 1928. In the ultra-revolutionary days of the 1920s and '30s, this meant U.S. Communists advocated for the "right of self-determination" for African Americans in the "Black Belt" where they constituted a majority, up to and including the right to secede from the United States and form a new nation.

The inspiration of the Cultural Minority thesis as Hay formulated it was, in retrospect, an ironic one: Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. He was the man largely responsible for re-criminalizing homosexuality in the USSR after the liberating early years that followed the Russian Revolution.

As a teacher in CPUSA schools, Hay had regularly used Stalin's text *Marxism and the*

National Question as part of his curriculum. In the book, which was counted among the Communist classics at the time, Stalin defined a "nation" as "a historically-evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture."

Stalin's definition wasn't an easy fit for the situation facing African Americans - there was no distinct Black national economy, and no one yet recognized a Black linguistic vernacular - so American Communists adjusted the theorization to account for the reality that existed in their own country - African Americans had a shared territory and culture. This was how the call for a Black Belt Nation morphed into the view that African Americans were a national minority concentrated in a geographical area which possessed their own culture forged in struggle against oppression - two out of Stalin's four criteria.

It was this aspect of the theory that Hay extended and developed as a means for understanding the oppression of homosexuals - he analyzed them as a group sharing a culture and a language (of sorts). "I felt we had two of the four . . . so clearly we were a social minority," he later said. The publication of the famed Kinsey Report in 1948, which found that 37% of men in the U.S. had had a same-sex experience at some point in life and that 10% were exclusively homosexual, convinced Hay there were millions of people who could potentially be organized.

Chuck Rowland would say in the 1980s that by "culture," the former Communists in Mattachine had meant a shared "body of language, feelings, thinking, and experiences."

Being a historical materialist, though, Hay sought out evidence for the Cultural Minority thesis and found it in both the unexpected commonalities of experience that were shared by Mattachine discussion group participants and the historical examples of Native American "two spirited" persons and European "fool" traditions. It wasn't so much individual sexual

practices that he focused on in his studies, but the social institutions that had tolerated, made use of, or even fostered a distinct identity for persons that might by modern standards be seen as occupying some third space between man and woman. The Two Spirits and “fools” were defined not by the sex they had or who they had it with, according to Hay. Rather, they played particular roles in sustaining certain cultural practices and as repositories of knowledge.

He presented his findings in “The Homosexual and History,” which attempted a dialectical study of the role that those who fell outside socially accepted gender and sex roles had played in the past—and could play in the present and future. Drawing on Marxism’s focus on the overthrow of patriarchy and the onset of male domination as part of the division of labor and the rise of private property, Hay argued that the origins of the oppression of the homosexual was closely linked with the oppression of women.

The advance of agriculture and technology meant surplus wealth could now be produced and accumulated, transitioning eventually into private property. The breakdown of communal society and the rise of the male-centered patriarchal family unit—and the consequent growth of religious and other ideas to support this new economic arrangement - conspired to squash any liberal attitudes that might have existed toward sex and gender expression. The raising of children was also no longer a communal affair, but rather the task of the family unit and a source of exploitable labor. Homosexual relations produced no children, and thus the regulation of such behavior arose in line with the regulation of female sexuality and labor.

Hay’s theorization was still incomplete, but it would be further refined and bolstered by later radical gay activists. Bob McCubbin’s 1976 study, *The Gay Question: A Marxist Appraisal*, which was put out by the left-wing Workers World Party, remains a touchstone historical document that followed in the Harry Hay tradition.

With an examination of the historical roots of homosexual oppression at least partially begun, Hay gave particular attention to the issues of shared culture and language among homophiles, the word coined by Mattachine to refer to this community in formation. He wrote:

“The Homophile common psychological make-up manifests itself in a community of culture so phenomenologically remarkable that it transcends the mechanical barriers of formal language by creating an international behavioral language of its own, in addition to sharing the pedestrian language of each parental community. To be sure, the communities of culture differ in detail from one national community to another. But they are enough alike that no one need be a helpless stranger whatever the port of call.”

Essentially, what he meant was that gay people will always find and recognize one another no matter where they are in the world.

Rowland, again playing the Engels to Hay’s Marx, put the theorist’s ideas into a readily digestible form. He told a 1953 Mattachine convention: “We must disenthral ourselves of the idea that we differ only in our sexual directions and that all we want or need in life is to be free to seek the expression of our sexual desires as we see fit.” He said that “the heterosexual mores of the dominant culture have excluded us,” and as a result, “we have developed differently than other cultural groups.” Rowland concluded that homosexuals had to develop “a new pride—a pride in belonging, a pride in participating in the cultural growth and social achievements of the homosexual minority.”

In developing the Cultural Minority thesis, Hay and his Mattachine comrades were setting the example from which all future radical LGBTQ politics would emerge. From that point on, there would of course be setbacks, reversals, and internal battles, but, in the words of



People's Front against fascism: A phalanx of police officers charge into anti-Nazi protesters organized by the Communist Party in Los Angeles, Calif., Aug. 7, 1938.

Timmons, the Cultural Minority thesis became “the implicit mode of self-understanding and community organization of Lesbian/Gay communities wherever they exist,” even if its Marxist roots typically went unacknowledged.

Strategy: The Popular Front and the unity of oppressed peoples

Just as Hay drew from his CPUSA experience in establishing the theoretical basis of a gay liberation movement, he did the same when formulating the Mattachine Society’s political strategy. Gay politics, from their beginning, were popular front politics.

Known as “the people’s front” in the U.S., the popular front strategy had been adopted by Communists around the world in the 1930s to combat the rise of fascism. At its core is the idea of broad-based coalition politics, formulated around a couple of key strategic questions. First, it asks what goal, if won, can change the relationship of forces and open up the possibility for advance. Second, it sets out who are the main opponents and possible allies in

the struggle to achieve that goal. This means determining who has the self-interest to fight for the goal and assessing their organization, consciousness, and capacity to join in the fight.

The popular front represented Communists’ abandonment of sectarian and doctrinaire “go-it-alone” dogmas which had held that only the organized working class was needed to overturn capitalism and that nothing less than total revolution would do. Racism and other problems would disappear after socialism was won; the class struggle would settle such questions. Instead, with the popular front, the party promoted the notion that change could be won in the here and now through the united efforts of workers, oppressed groups, and anyone who had an interest in stopping the descent into reactionary politics and fighting racism and division. It was the way to alter the balance of forces and open the path to progress.

Hay carried the popular front with him into Mattachine. He saw homosexuals as a distinct cultural minority but believed that their social advance rested on building alliances and finding shared interests with others oppressed under patriarchal capitalism.

“We are essentially a group of individuals that have been forced together by society.

Society attacks the Homosexuals for their non-conformity in sexual desire and objects completely on the basis of this one characteristic. This attitude would change if society could see the positive side and realize the potential ability to offer a worthwhile contribution,” he told a Mattachine group in 1951.

In the 1930s and '40s, the popular front established a legacy that extended well beyond the bounds of the Communist Party. The building of coalitions of workers, women, African Americans, Chicanos, youth, immigrants, and eventually the LGBTQ community and others became the standard strategy for progressive change and left-wing electoral politics in the United States, a situation that still prevails to this day.

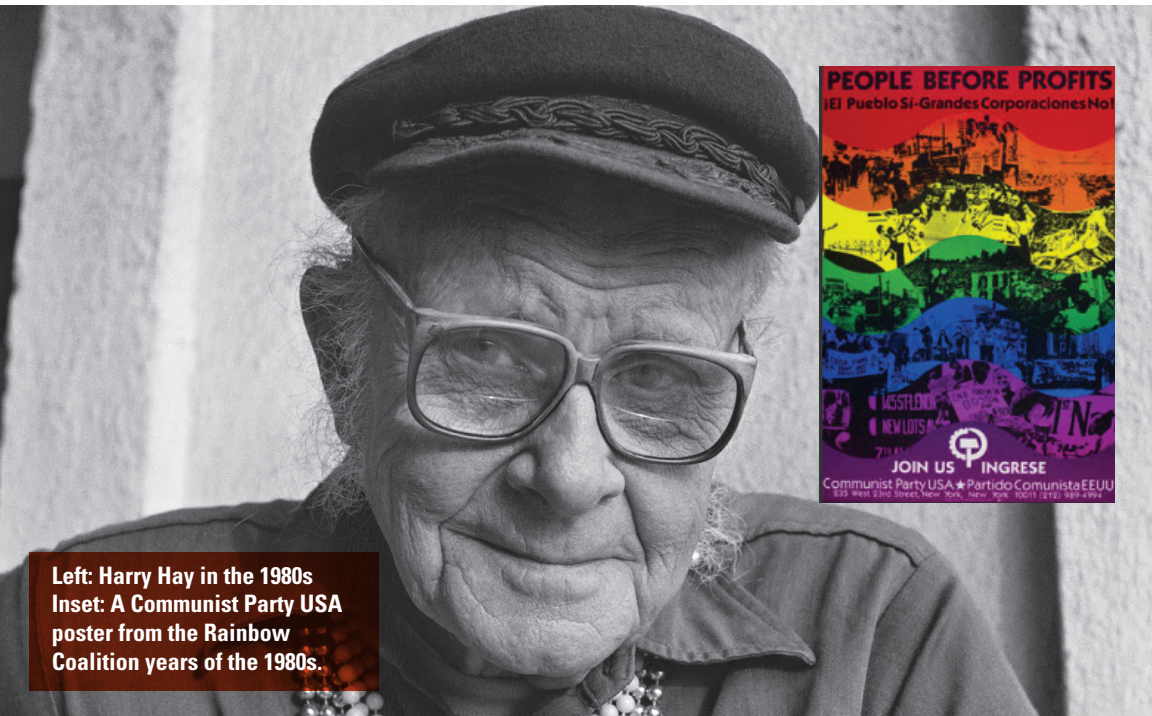
The tactics and organizing principles of the popular front were also imported into Mattachine. The group was organized much like the broad-based coalition front groups that the Communists had initiated and led in the 1930s. The Los Angeles Anti-Nazi League has been cited as an inspiration for Mattachine, for example. And although some scholars recognize the Freemasons when they look

at the structure and social service goals of Mattachine, it is actually more reminiscent of the International Workers Order - a fraternal aid society led by CP members.

Mattachine's internal system of tiered levels of responsibility and authority showed hints of democratic centralism, the organizing principle of communist parties. There were also provisions for aboveground and illegal structures - a lesson learned from intense periods of anti-communist repression. The group set itself three missions: unify, educate, and lead; Hay saw Mattachine as essentially a vanguard that would raise the consciousness of oppressed homosexuals and move them to action.

The document “Mattachine Society Missions and Purposes” was in some respects the homosexual equivalent of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*, the pamphlet which laid out the principles for a “party of a new type.” In his document, Hay wrote:

“It is not sufficient for an oppressed minority like the homosexuals merely to be conscious of belonging to a minority collective when . . . that collective is



Left: Harry Hay in the 1980s
Inset: A Communist Party USA
poster from the Rainbow
Coalition years of the 1980s.

neither socially organic in its directions and activities. . . . It is necessary that the more far-seeing and socially conscious homosexuals provide leadership to the whole mass of social deviants. . . . Once unification and education have progressed, it becomes imperative . . . to push into the realm of political action."

The linking of gay equality to other progressive causes was also a priority for the Mattachine founders. The group's very first action was gathering peace petitions against the Korean War at a gay beach in California.

In the early Mattachine Society, then, we find a group of small - c communist gays who were attempting to organize their emerging community along the lines of a rudimentary Marxist analysis of their oppression and with the tools learned in the fight against fascism. Even though circumstances and prejudices did not allow them to be in the Communist Party proper, Hay, Rowland, and other Mattachine activists were doing communist work and attempting to link up the homosexual cultural minority with others who were oppressed by capitalism and had an interest in fighting it.

Forever a comrade

The groundbreaking role of Mattachine in theorizing gay identity was lost in the fog of, first, anti-communism and, later, the pressures for queer people to assimilate to the standards and social structures of the straight world. As McCarthyite repression intensified, Hay and other radicals were pushed out of Mattachine by anti-communist elements and political moderates within.

They worried that the Marxism of Hay would tarnish their ability to win the toleration of socially conservative heterosexual society. Revolutionary notions of sexual liberation and an overturning of patriarchal gender roles weren't on the agenda for these timid assimilationists. By the time of

Stonewall in 1969, Mattachine was largely seen as a conservative force, sometimes even as a brake on progress. It dressed its gays in suits and ties and its lesbians in dresses and high heels, looking down on the multiracial and working class trans women and drag queens of the street - the "wretched of the earth" in the words of the old Communist anthem, The Internationale.

Hay went on to found other groups to fight the assimilationist trend, and he continued challenging taboos over the decades. He was also an eager advocate of efforts to overcome the male-centered focus of the early movement, supporting lesbians, bisexuals, trans persons, and others as they expanded the boundaries of queer liberation to account for the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality.

But Harry never left behind the Marxism he had learned in the Communist Party USA or the commitment to a post-capitalist world that the party forged in him. According to Timmons, Hay watched the advance of perestroika and reform in the Soviet Union in the 1980s with great hope, but he was saddened by those who wanted to throw out scientific socialism along with the USSR.

"Marxism needs to be revised," he said in 1990, "based on new scientific knowledge, particularly of human behavior. . . . The underlying methodology will be proved sound." The science of dialectical and historical materialism that he had studied and taught in the CPUSA remained at the core of his analysis of society.

When leaving the party in 1951, Hay had expressed the hope that "one of these fine days . . . maybe we can all come back together again," but it wasn't to be. It was only in 2001, just before Hay's death, that the CPUSA made an official conversion to openly supporting LGBTQ equality.

Today, the party is a committed fighter in the struggle for queer liberation, with many LGBTQ persons playing key roles among its leadership and membership. It has become a part of the



Harry Hay, left, brushes the cheek of his partner John Burnside with his hand, July 19, 2002, at their home in San Francisco. Hay died three months later.

fight for what Harry Hay called the “heroic objective” of the movement way back in 1950: “liberating one of our largest minorities from the solitary confinement of social persecution and civil insecurity . . . and guaranteeing them the basic and protected right to enter the front ranks of self-respecting citizenship, recognized and honored as socially contributive individuals.”

As with so many movements of the oppressed around the world, the theoretical and strategic roots of the queer movement are products of the Marxist tradition. That legacy tells us that the oppression of LGBTQ persons will continue to exist as long as the material conditions inhibiting true freedom prevail. And it tells us that winning full sexual liberation will require winning political, economic, and social liberation for all peoples - it will require socialism. ■



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TOWARDS QUEER AND TRANS LIBERATION

BY THE MICHIGAN
WRITERS CLUB

INTRODUCTION: SOLIDARITY WITH ALL

"When we turn against other workers," one UAW and Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance leader said at a recent event, "that is betraying what solidarity is all about."

Labor movement people tend to address each other in non-gendered ways: "hello everyone," "our members," and "workers" are often the types of collective nouns they use. Part of the culture is to talk about "we" and "us," above all.

Communists use a similar kind of language, but also refer to one another with the non-gendered term "comrade."

Union organizers and communists talk about solidarity and worker power as essential tactics and strategy for the working-class movement. This is why it is common for union folks to refer to each other as "brothers" and "sisters," terms which identify each other in one of the closest ways possible, as family.

But recently, labor organizers have begun to introduce themselves using their preferred pronouns, referring to one another also as siblings and family, and they have taken on the responsibility of recognizing the multi-gendered, queer, trans, and nonbinary composition of

the working class.

Queer, trans, and nonbinary workers, people of color, and their families and communities face tremendous levels of violence, discrimination, hatred, stigma, and exclusion from social institutions. Marginalized in schools, ignored in medical care, disregarded by health insurance companies, denied full worker rights or employment in many industries, mocked in media representations, used as a political target by right-wing politicians, and often rejected by their own families, queer and trans people need to be included, organized, mobilized, and advanced as leaders of the class struggle for radical transformation. In many places, they already are taking on these roles.

The Communist Party program correctly states, "The real threat to working families is not LGBTQ civil rights but the extreme right agenda of maximum profits and war. Homophobia, a weapon used by the Nazis and later by the McCarthyites in their attack on democracy, continues to be called on by the extreme right in attempts to split the growing unity against their right-wing program." Hostility from the dominant culture, from employers, from co-workers, according to a recent report from Pride at Work, shows that many trans and nonbinary workers are forced to hide their identities. It is still legal in many parts of the country to fire a worker

based on their trans identity.

Too often workers turn against their siblings in struggle because they don't recognize their gender identity, they have an issue with their sexuality, or they do not recognize queer and trans people as workers. Willingness to turn against other workers, their families, or community members on the basis of an identity, such as sexuality or gender identity, race, ethnicity, or country of origin, allows the bosses and the ruling class to drive its wedge into the heart of working-class solidarity.

Popular stereotypes about who queer, trans, or nonbinary people are deny the reality that they make up all parts of the working class and our communities. Steelworkers are queer and trans; so are bus drivers, autoworkers, retail workers, teachers, technology specialists, librarians, nurses, truck drivers, warehouse workers, letter carriers, members of the military, custodians, and more. Queer and trans people are leaders in our Party, our unions, and our democratic organizations. They are our family members, our comrades, and our allies. They are us!

Homophobia has been around for a long time, but never before has a sitting president exploited such hatred to strengthen his base. We saw Donald Trump target queer and trans people by siding with bigots who wanted to exclude trans people from sports or from fair treatment in public schools. Trump even attempted to deny the existence of trans people by excluding them from federal equal protection laws. This campaign of hate targets the working class for division, by deflecting our energy against one another. We have the power to transform that hateful energy into a struggle for solidarity that strengthens our Party, our labor movement, and our class.

The fight for queer and trans inclusion and liberation may begin with how we use language, such as in recognizing the pronouns our siblings and comrades prefer to be identified with, in using non-gendered collective nouns and pronouns, like “family” and “they,” to discuss a movement of people. But liberation will be realized only when we change our working-class culture to be inclusive, when we build worker power, and when social institutions meaningfully respect the multiplicity of gender identities so that the rights and benefits of those institutions are extended in ways that match the specific identities workers and families hold.

1. Why is language important? But also, why is language not enough?

Getting into the habit of describing people by deliberately identifying their preferred pronouns, using the terms “family” or “siblings” instead of “brothers” and “sisters,” or using non-gendered terms like “Latinx” may seem like a small gesture. The practice may even seem unnecessary to experienced activists who believe they are known to be egalitarian in all of their practices.

The language we use every day, however, is important because it can either be used to justify violence against certain people (i.e., using hate speech or refusing to acknowledge a trans person's identification) or it can signal and shed light on “invisible” communities. On top of this, using the properly designated language that such a community demands gives rise to actual belonging, recognition, and may be a building block for solidarity.

A change in such language — not just substituting one word for another but rather changing how we think about the use of language itself — changes the form of our language, which begins to change how we think about our world and possible futures.

However, using proper pronouns or changing one's language is hardly enough to create full equality. We already see several corporations addressing this within systemic contexts. Changing the language is only the beginning and alone does not mean one stands in solidarity with the LGBTQIA+ community.

One important site where language is crucial is in union contracts. As Pride at Work argues, despite harmful rulings recently by the Supreme Court that deny equal protection to trans workers, unions can fight for contracts with language that contain “strong nondiscrimination language that prohibits discrimination the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.” Contracts are enforceable by law regardless of how much employers may hate to accommodate trans and queer workers.

2. What's the significance of the working-class movements for the trans community?

One thing that often gets overlooked when we talk about the LGBTQIA+ community is their livelihood. The Communist Party program correctly notes that “all specially oppressed social groups are in their majority working class.” The last 20 years, discussions have centered mostly around marriage rights, surgeries, hormone treatments, and pronouns; yet, what sometimes gets ignored is how do queer and trans people earn their wages? Are we to accept the spectacle that LGBTQIA-friendly TV shows, such as

Will and Grace or Modern Family, for example, have given us over recent decades and to assume all gay people are obsessed with fashion, “normal” cultural identities, or are of the upper-middle class?

The truth is that most trans, nonbinary, and queer people are forced to accept lower wages than most or roles that prevent any front- or customer-facing work. As Red Fight Back makes clear in their work Marxism and Transgender Liberation, many LGBTQIA+ people have to hide their identities or accept lower-income jobs, not to mention the workplace violence enacted against them regularly. About 44% of transgender people, if they are employed, are underemployed; trans workers are four times more likely than the rest of the population to have a household income of under \$10,000. A study done in 2015 found that 31% of the trans population was impoverished and 42% was unemployed. Many trans people have few options outside of taking on sex work out of necessity — whether to ensure better wages or out of sheer safety or simply to be able to work.

3. How does the erasure of trans, nonbinary, and queer people materialize in our day-to-day?

Nonbinary, trans, and queer people are often rendered “invisible.” Indeed, parts of the LGBTQIA+ community are more visible than others, and protective rights are certainly differentiated this way. However, “hiding” trans people from customer-facing jobs, not taking their rights seriously, and reducing the “bathroom” debate to predatory motives, etc., leads to a tendency to fall back on a specific ideal: that trans people are not people — it’s a made-up community that ignores specific genders and sex. At best, this is sex essentialism — that an actual sex binary exists, but as more and more studies show, sex essentialism is more ideology than scientific fact. At worst, this is the justification that trans and queer people are a symptom to be “cured,” and the murder of this community is another genocide-in-progress that is fully sanctioned by the state.

Queer and trans youth face houselessness at alarming rates. They are over-represented in foster care and juvenile detention systems, according to data compiled by the Human Rights Campaign. Abusive family situations and school settings force many into the streets to struggle for survival. Many choose to stay closeted for fear of this abuse, leading to innumerable mental health disorders ranging from depression to attempts at suicide.

Further, according to the Transgender Law Center, trans and nonbinary people, especially of color, Indigenous,

and/or disabled members of this community, “experience extremely elevated rates of police violence.” In other words, capitalist social institutions in this country are designed to stigmatize, target, and enact violence against queer, trans, and nonbinary people. These abuses of human rights on a systematic level reveal the inherent brutality of capitalism and the limits of freedom, liberty, rights, and justice built into the U.S. system.

4. Why is equality in healthcare so vital to queer, trans, and nonbinary people?

Trans people are often denied personal medical leave, have unequal access to health benefits (especially employer-based benefits), and are denied equal treatment by medical staff. When the question of one’s health comes up, trans and queer people are left wondering if they should not self-identify or lie about their gender. This fear of public shame or, worse, outright denial of human rights has always been an issue of racial oppression, gendered politics, and class struggle. Nobody should be denied access to healthcare. Nobody should have to hide who they are.

Access to legal documents (driver’s license, social security numbers, insurance information, etc.) that reflect the preferred identity of each person is an important feature of this struggle.

It is only within the past couple of decades that trans healthcare issues were recognized as medical issues rather than mental health problems. In 2019, the Trump administration deliberately targeted trans people by allowing insurers and medical providers to deny care to trans people. Medical providers from EMS personnel, urgent care facility staff, to doctors and practitioners often deny care, mistreat trans patients, or accuse them of not really being sick or injured. Insurance companies regularly deny coverage for hormone treatments, surgeries, or other medical care people need.

Nonbinary people have experienced workplace, emotional, and physical violence; and 51% of adult trans people have attempted suicide, according to a report by the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law. The existential and physical threat to the queer and trans community is overwhelming, and without proper access to healthcare, violent attacks and emotional trauma can lead to death because of this unequal treatment. This is a form of systemic violence enacted against a particular community.

5. Where do many of these hate campaigns come from?

Government statistics reveal that on average 20 workers face hate crimes every day in the U.S. This rampant and violent assault on human rights stems from a larger capitalist culture that devalues the lives of Black, Brown, people of color, and queer and trans people.

At the intersection of these communities are Black and Brown queer and trans people are who targeted every day with slurs, harassment, discrimination, violence, and murder. Data collected by the National Center for Transgender Equality shows that this hate campaign creates massive harm: 26% of trans people lost a job due to bias, 50% were harassed on the job, 20% were evicted or denied housing, and 78% of trans students were harassed or assaulted.

Most transphobic/transmisogynistic, in fact, are efforts of right-wing, conservative politicians and nongovernmental organizations. Research into outspoken transphobes or trans-exclusionary radical feminists betrays the truth of this. In fact, many of these people are openly racist or back sexist/anti-reproductive rights legislation. Many people on the Left get misled by their arguments to miss the motives entirely.

Hate campaigns that target queer and trans people of color are rooted in a history of colonialism, especially historical examples of Europe imposing state and religious control over African and Asian countries where a “third” gender was not only common but also venerated. Transphobia and anti-LGBTQIA+ efforts are the effects of imperialism and have been around for centuries. We’re simply seeing this violence because of the radical work the LGBTQIA+ community has done. It was already there before, just “invisible.”

Today, hate campaigns that target queer and trans people are rooted in a system of hetero-normative patriarchal social reproduction, aiming to control private households, families, domestic labor, and the manner in which capitalist society is reproduced. The struggle to unfetter this social relation, to disassociate it from the shape of human bodies and to connect it most closely to a collective and social responsibility will advance the cause of human liberation, to strengthen the unity and power of the working class and its allies in the struggle for socialism.

6. What is the decisive role of solidarity with the trans, nonbinary, and queer community?

This community is as much involved in the class struggle as any other specific community. The violence enacted against these people is all too familiar to the working and poor classes, Black and brown communities, and women; anyone overlapping multiple communities is

likely to see this violence on several levels. Reducing the LGBTQIA+ struggle to an issue solely of identity politics is cynical and idealistic. Such arguments ignore both the causes and effects of the everyday violence this community of people face. If it were only a question of identity politics, the battle would have ended with pronouns, and any subsequent murders and other violent acts would be regarded as incidental.

The working class must stand against the economic and political atrocities queer and trans people face. We must publicly acknowledge that they deserve better wages, better jobs, and overall, a better life; we have to build a better awareness of not only who the masses are but also the successful acts of solidarity by the masses to include the trans/queer community. These efforts by LGBTQIA+ people are communist efforts, and anyone who denies this also denies the very theory and work we put into action. We stand with our comrades and siblings!

7. Why don't China and Vietnam have as advanced pro-LGBTQ laws as in Cuba? Why does the CPUSA support countries like China and Vietnam?

When U.S.-based people look out at the world and find complex and differing cultural and political values, we should remember, firstly, to reject the idea that countries, their peoples, and their political systems are monolithic. People who live in this country should approach the cultures, histories, and systems of countries who were once subjugated, occupied, or conquered by the U.S. with special care and humility. We must always remember that U.S. capitalism and its vaunted system of “democratic rights” developed on the near genocide of Native people, the enslavement of Africans, the elevation of white supremacy, and an ongoing deadly imperialism.

Cuba’s democratic struggles provide an important lesson. When the Cuban people began to debate extending medical care and institutional support for queer and trans people, they chose to recognize a broader humanity principle. They called on the Communist Party to create social space for queer and trans people, and they took a massive step forward for human rights that few others have emulated. When Cuba made this decision, they did so well before LGBTQ persons in the U.S. were able to enjoy limited democratic rights such as marriage equality. Sadly, the Cubans made these decisions even before the CPUSA defined its own clear position on queer and trans liberation. Cuba leads the world by its example as a continuous fighter for freedom. We all have much to

learn from that country.

The Communist Party USA has close relations with the Communist Party of China and the Communist Party of Vietnam, in part because of our historic support for their struggles against U.S. imperialism. We have a lot to learn from the peoples of those countries. For example, China currently extends democratic rights to its 56 ethnic minorities. These include the right to their culture, history, language, and autonomy. They also have a right to function equally within the dominant economic and political institutions. The U.S. currently systematically brutalizes ethnic and racial minorities and is attempting to criminalize those who refuse to be silent about it.

Communists specifically, and Americans generally, have much to learn about building a democratic society that is inclusive of ethnic and religious minorities. We can learn this from China. But if we insist they be identical to our most advanced democratic struggles (even when they haven't come to fruition) before we support their right to exist free of U.S. imperialist interference, we would be making a huge error.

Having said this, we must follow the example of Cuba: to lead by example where we are able to lead; to humbly learn to grow and change when we need to do better. Above all, we must stand shoulder to shoulder in solidarity with the international working class in the fight for full human liberation.

8. Why do queer and trans people need socialism?

Many people think that it is possible to achieve full democratic rights without rejecting capitalism. Unfortunately, leaving capitalism unchallenged - with its system of hierarchies and its required divisions of the working-class - is not a solution for democratic struggle.

Think about how easy it was for Trump to fight back against some of the minor victories of the Obama administration on queer rights. He deployed a systematic hateful rhetoric that mobilized his base. And because those earlier victories were not rooted in working-class power, many of them wobbled. With these events, Trump successfully launched new streams of attack against trans people. Consider how voting rights, supposedly won in 1964, remain on the agenda today. Working-class power built through a united struggle for the fullest democratic rights offers a better route to making our rights permanent.

The CPUSA calls for Bill of Rights Socialism rooted in working-class power. It offers a transition from capitalist dominance toward the fullest expansion of democratic rights. Queer and trans people deserve that achievement as much as anyone.

Elevate the struggle in the Party, the labor movement, and our communities

Let's elevate the democratic struggle for queer and trans liberation. While the current administration has promised to side with queer and trans people in anti-discrimination struggles, these promises are often contingent on the willingness of the whole class to fight to hold authorities accountable for their promises. In addition, as presidential and state administrations come and go, many of these promises become political bargaining chips or are simply cast aside.

Our goal is to make non-discrimination in the workplace, in housing, in education, and in healthcare a permanent feature of this society. Winning this begins with passing laws such as the Equality Act, which would include sexual orientation and gender identity as protected categories under federal law. While the bill passed easily in the House with some support from Republican in 2019, it never received consideration in the Senate. Trump's campaign of hatred in 2020 also may have eroded some bipartisan support.

One law will not change the minds of millions. That is why we call on our Party, for all workers, and for our democratic allies to stay in the struggle to win equality, to fight for solidarity, and build the power of our class by affirming the value of our queer, non-binary, and trans family and comrades. We should work in our communities for queer and trans-affirming social institutions — schools, healthcare facilities, political institutions, and public spaces. We should organize in our unions for stronger contractual language that both protects queer and trans workers and provides equalized benefits, pay, and work status. ■

Join us.

The image features three raised fists, one from a light-skinned person and two from darker-skinned people, set against a vibrant, textured background of red and purple hues. The fists are positioned diagonally across the frame, symbolizing solidarity and protest.

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