

# For a working-class LGBT movement

BY TOM UNTERRAINER

THE concept and practice of international solidarity, one of the cornerstones of socialism, is under attack from within the ranks of the labour movement. This disease is particularly visible in the context of Middle East politics. Year on year, conference after conference, motions are submitted that denounce the crimes of western imperialism — indisputable, barbaric acts — but say little, often nothing, of the struggles of socialists, trade unionists and democrats in countries like Iran and Iraq. Likewise, the struggles of groups oppressed by these same theocratic regimes and movements — women and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people in particular — have suffered the same fate on conference floor and in the meeting room. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), play a prominent role in keeping these issues off the radar within unions, anti-war groups and other campaigns.

A particularly shameful example of this trend exposed itself at the recent TUC LGBT conference. ASLEF (rail workers' union) proposed a motion motivating solidarity with LGBT people within Iran and Iraq and calling for self-determination for Iraq. Uncontentious you would have thought. After all, the vast majority of delegates will have experienced homophobia and oppression in one form or another and might be expected to politically identify with people experiencing much worse. Disturbingly, this was not universally the case.

After the motion was moved by ASLEF and seconded by the FBU, a SWP-affiliated delegate from UCU (the University and College Union) got the platform. Having some knowledge of the swiftly degenerating politics of the SWP, it was easy to predict what this delegate would say. "Bush and Blair are to blame", "it's all the fault of imperialism" etc... Indeed, this was the substance of the contribution. However, she wasn't using these arguments *in favour* of the motion but against. Apparently, ASLEF were in danger of playing into the hands of the war-mongers by levelling criticism at Iran. If conference passed this motion,



Pride demonstrators in Paris condemn the execution of two Iranian boys for homosexuality

it would commit itself to de facto support for a war against Iran. Thankfully subsequent speakers were able to re-assert the case for solidarity and the motion was carried with only the already-mandated UCU delegates voting against.

Whilst LGBT people in Iraq and Iran face imprisonment, torture, mob violence and death the politically bankrupt delegates of UCU sat stony faced as applause filled conference hall. The hypocrisy of the delegates who voted against was all the more startling given the tearful ovation a short time before the debate for a speaker from J-FLAG (the Jamaican LGBT rights group) who was introduced to conference by a leading member of the UCU delegation. Rights for viciously oppressed LGBT Jamaicans but not those in the Middle East, it seems.

What was it that convinced these UCU and SWP members to insist that LGBT people in Britain should not extend solidarity to LGBT people in the Middle East? In all of the Marxism she may have read, where is it written that LGBT rights or the rights of women should be subordinated to other concerns? Is her position a matter of consensus within the ranks of LGBT socialists in the SWP? What do the young SWP LGBT comrades think? Did they not join the SWP to do something

about exploitation and oppression? Do they agree with this position? Do they think they have the right to an openly gay existence but oppose calls for such freedom elsewhere?

LGBT issues have often suffered contradictory and partial treatment on the revolutionary left. For almost fifty years — after World War Two and up until the emergence of the gay liberation movement — many socialists, influenced by Stalinist ideas, regarded homosexuality as a sign of "bourgeois decadence" and so a 'middle class' problem that would wither under socialist society. LGBT people were "tolerated", "pitied". Socialists just had to understand the "condition" and work with it.

Writing on same-sex relationships in the ancient world, Engels claimed that homosexuality resulted from the humiliation of women, "this degradation of women was avenged on the men also, till they fell into the abominable practice of sodomy". Other radical thinkers on homosexuality "medicalised" the issue and attempted to promote a "respectable" image of gay men in particular. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the German Scientific-Humanitarian Committee agitated for this view around the then-Marxist SPD winning support from leading figures such as Eduard Bernstein and August Bebel. Gays were a "third sex" who deserved recognition along-

side men and women.

Wilhelm Reich, a prominent German socialist who sought to fuse Freudian and Marxist theory, elevated heterosexual sex to the status of a "perfect union" and regarded same-sex relationships to be deficient. In reaction to what he viewed as the degeneracy of pre-Nazi Germany, Reich emphasised the benefits of gender specific roles arguing for "men to be men and women, women". Like most theorists of their time, they failed to understand sexual and gender identity as closely linked to social structures. There was no understanding of sexuality in terms of a social relation and little attempt to excavate LGBT history and find a material context. If homosexuality is understood in terms of genetic inherency, as the expression of the failure of "pure love" or simply a product of bourgeois decay then it's fairly understandable — if you follow the logic — that some have ignored LGBT issues or continue to relegate them in the face of other, bigger concerns. More often than not, gay liberation has been reduced to a question of "gay rights" within a particular context and the root cause of homophobia ignored.

If socialists fail to understand the words of Bolshevik Central Committee member Alexandra Kollontai who wrote in 1919 that "the problems of sex concern the largest section of society — they concern the working class in its daily life", then we fail to understand the issues at hand and deform socialism into a "pick-and-choose" set of ideas. If LGBT socialists fail to theorise our own liberation in the context of gender roles, the oppression of women, the role of the family in society and fail to understand the driving ideology of those who would see us subjugated and murdered then we fail as socialists.

If we regard the treatment of LGBT people and women in Iran and Iraq as a lesser concern than the question of imperialism, we become self-hating chauvinists. This is the situation the SWP and other would-be Marxists have reduced themselves to.

Workers' Liberty extends a challenge to LGBT socialists: reject the bankruptcy of the SWP and its satellites, expose those organisations for what they are and join us in forging and renewing a working-class gay movement.

## "Marxism 2007": SWP suppresses debate

BY DAVID BRODER

Featuring dozens of sessions on each of its five days, the Socialist Workers Party's "Marxism 2007" event (5-9 July) is somewhat impressive insofar as it attracts large numbers of young people interested in socialist ideas. However, the SWP hardly provide the ideal atmosphere for giving activists a political education, shutting down free discussion in order to allow carefully stage-managed "debates" where all of the contributors from the floor simply parrot the line of the top-table "expert" speaker.

In all of the sessions where AWL comrades filled out speaker slips in order to be allowed to contribute (you had to write what you were going to say on the slip...) we were not called to speak once — in one instance the said speaker slip was ostentatiously trampled by an SWP apparatchik. However, in a meeting on Hezbollah where you only had to raise your hand to be called to the podium, and the chair did not recognise me, I was allowed to speak — to the extent that I spoke nearly 30 seconds before people started interrupting. While avoiding reference to my opinion that Hassan

Nasrallah is fascist scum who ought to be shot, and making clear that I support Lebanese — including, of course, Muslim — workers against Hezbollah, I was furiously denounced as a "racist", "Zionist", and "imperialist" by the speakers who followed. They "knew what [I] really meant".

There was the same hostility as we talked to people in the street outside the event. To our surprise (and amusement) SWP student hack Rob Owen interrupted our discussions to scream that we were "Zionist", or even "racist" for suggesting that "maybe it wouldn't be so great if Israel were smashed and its people slaughtered by invading clerical fascist armies", and thus should not be allowed to air our views. Although an admirable minority would at least discuss ideas with us, most SWPers variously refused to talk to us at all, or would bark "anti-imperialist" or plainly nonsensical slogans at us before storming off. Central Committee member Chris Bambery was heard shouting slightly incoherently to a comrade, "Orangemen, you're bloody Orangemen". And yet when we mocked a diehard Stalinist paper seller — a fan of North Korea who claimed that "homosexuality is a mental illness spread by the Jews and child molesters" — we were angrily told off

by the SWP for not considering his viewpoint seriously!

Clearly this is the mark of an internally undemocratic sect that gives its members no political education, lest they think for themselves and oppose the bureaucratic clique controlling the group. Oppositional ideas must not be heard in case they provoke discussion and independent thinking.

Indeed, one SWP dissident expelled in 2006 (by text message) for "bringing the party into disrepute", the CPGB's comrade Simon D, was dragged out of a meeting at this year's Marxism by SWP national organiser Martin Smith. The CPGB report:

"The SWP's national organiser angrily demanded comrade Simon's ticket to the Marxism event and, when he refused, Smith instantly attacked him. Wrestled to the floor, comrade Simon sustained bruising, abrasions and back strain. A second SWPer joined in the attack and together they went through the comrade's pockets and bag in an attempt to confiscate his ticket."

Having been banned even from attending the SWP's public meetings, the comrade was no doubt expelled from the event for fear that he might have "undue influence" among other SWPers and activists at the event by voicing his opinions. The SWP's paper-thin

rationalisations for the attack (varying from John Rees's claim that Simon threw the first punch through to a total denial that anything happened) do nothing to hide their long-held anti-democratic and sectarian mores. At the "Marxism 1993" our own comrades Mark Sandell and Jason Bonning were assaulted by SWP heavies. Indeed, Martin Smith told me in relation to this year's incident that "I didn't lay a fucking finger on the fucking bastard, but now I wish I fucking had", as he guffawed grotesquely.

The SWP is run by philistines and deprived of serious politics. Many of the arguments we had were simply hitting our heads against a brick wall of ignorance and stupid sloganeering — "I salute Hezbollah's leadership of the anti-imperialist peoples...", and claims that Israel should be destroyed "by any means necessary". But among its activists and sympathisers are many people interested in ideas — interested in socialism — to whom it is possible to relate. Interruptions aside, we were able to run a successful stall, talking to lots of people not aware of the different tendencies on the left, giving out a fair bit of propaganda and acquiring funds to drink away in the Institute of Education bar... such is the joy of "Marxism".