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Out, Proud and Loud

Louise Tierney

1994

ANARCHISTS believe that most people want to live in a society better than the one we live in now.

The coming into effect last June of legislation which decriminalised certain male homosexual acts was the subject of much celebration in the gay community. The Minister who introduced the legislation, Maire Geoghan Quinn was awarded the Magnus Hirschfield award for her contribution to the gay community by the National Lesbian and Gay Federation. For many it was felt the battle for equality had been won. This was certainly the outlook in the national and international press. Champagne flowed freely in the capital's gay pubs and clubs.

The period since then has been virtually silent in the gay political movement. The one exception was the Donna McAnnelan affair. Donna was sacked from her employment in a gym in Cork because she was a lesbian. She lost her appeal in January to the Employment Appeals Tribunal (EAT). Apart from a couple of half hearted press statements from the NLGF, publicity Donna organized herself and a very small demonstration, activity was negligible.

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Admittedly cases such as Donna's are now covered by a provision in the Unfair Dismissals legislation which place a sacking because of somebody's sexuality on the same level as sacking because of sex, race or religion.

In effect dismissal in such situations is presumed to be unfair but the maximum the employee can obtain is a year's wages. The usual award made by the EAT is a lot less than that. Reinstatement is very rare. Most young gays, lesbians and bisexuals work in poorly paid jobs like most young people in Ireland so even a year's wages will not amount to very much.

What Donna faced is the reality for working class gay people. Being gay in working class Ireland is not a lot easier after the legislation than before. Employment appeal legislation only works if you succeed in getting a job and holding onto it for a year. A young "out" gay person is unlikely to succeed in doing that in their local community.

Gay social venues, at least in Dublin, tend to be dearer than almost any other venue and they only exist so long as the people running them are making enough money. Hence rumours that the owner of "The George", Dublin's only major gay bar, is about to sell for a million pounds. Fifis, a gay club, has already been sold for a large sum. The concept of the "Pink Pound" is lauded in the gay press in Ireland and England. Basically the idea behind this is that capitalists should welcome gay people because they have more money to spend on consumer items, expensive holidays, etc., because they don't have children. This idea is largely irrelevant to working class gay people

Most young gay people keep their sexuality to themselves for fear of being kicked out of home. They know that support from the State in such situations is minimal and inadequate. A large proportion of young homeless men are on the street for this reason. In fact one of the ironies of the Emmett Stagg affair recently was that he is the Minister with responsibility for the homeless. A large number of homeless become rentboys to survive. The Government's record on housing this year is

as bad as ever. He should have been hounded because of his record in housing, not because of his sexuality.

The reality is that a lot more battles have to be fought before gay liberation is won. Even the new legislation is not irreversible. Equality legislation gained in the 1970s is now being rolled back in the United States.

The gay political movement did not always see its interests as lying with the government of the day or as being a single issue unrelated to other issues of oppression. They saw the struggle as being linked in with other oppressed groups. For example, Gays against Imperialism was formed in 1981 and identified the struggle for gay liberation with the struggles for “national liberation” around H Block and Armagh prison. Following the Charles Self Murder case in 1982 and the subsequent harassment by Gardaí of hundreds of gay men the Gay Defense Committee was set up.

It was people like that who organised the 1,000 strong demonstration in protest against the judgement in the case of Declan Flynn who was murdered in a queer bashing incident in Fairview Park in 1983. The gang who admitted to killing him and assaulting other gay people were given suspended sentences. This march attracted the support of trade unions, civil rights and left wing groups. At that time the issue of gay rights was taken up within the unions, the result being an ICTU policy document with detail as complete as pension rights for surviving partners. These negotiation guidelines have been incorporated into much of the civil service as well as some private sector companies.

For the gay movement to see its interests as lying completely with the government and the introduction of progressive legislation is a mistake. The struggle for real gay, lesbian and bisexual equality is far from over. Tactically the real needs of the gay community will not be met by relying on the government but the issue is wider than this. Oppression because of sexual identity is but one facet of state oppression.

Gays are not oppressed on of a whim but because of the specific need of capitalism for the nuclear family. The nuclear family, as the primary — and inexpensive — provider and carer for the workforce, fulfilled in the nineteenth century and still fulfills an important need for capitalism. Alternative sexualities represent a threat to the family model because they provide an alternative role model for people. Gays are going to be in the front line of attack whenever capitalism wants to reinforce “family values”. The introduction of Clause 28 in England is a good example of this. The government made it illegal for public bodies to “promote’ gay sexuality (i.e. to present it as anything other than a “perversion”).

This oppression is one reason why the gay and lesbian movement is of particular interest to Anarchists. It is not that we believe that all gays and lesbians are revolutionaries. It is because we believe that the experience of fighting oppression can show people the nature of the state and that it is possible to fight it. It is through fighting that people learn it is possible to win. One group winning a battle gives other oppressed groups confidence. People gain confidence through winning struggles.

NLGF feels quite confident with the coming to Dublin this summer of the International Gay & Lesbian Youth conference, and the sending of an Irish delegation to the twenty fifth anniversary march in commemoration of the New York Stonewall riots, which kicked off the modern gay movement. It should take advantage of this new found confidence to rethink about its politics.