

How a queer liberation collective has stayed radical for almost 40 years

LAGAI's commitment to intersectionality keeps them from being engulfed by the mainstream politics of compromise.

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On May 22, some 80 people filed into a press event for the largest gay culture event in the world, the Frameline Film Festival, held every June in San Francisco. And like every year since 2007, there were queer protesters to meet them.

The group Lesbians and Gays Against Intervention, or LAGAI, and its offshoot Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism, or QUIT!, have protested the festival for the past decade, consistent with anti-oppression politics that began when the United States started meddling in Latin America in the late 1970s.

“We know our history didn’t start with ourselves,” said Daniel Ward, a longtime member of LAGAI. Probably the longest-running anti-hierarchical queer organization in the United States, LAGAI is a tight circle of friends and comrades originally formed in response to the U.S. invasion of El Salvador. Since then, as a 1987 mission statement reads, the group has centered issues as diverse but as inextricably linked as HIV support services, universal healthcare, self-determination for youth, open borders, sexism and poverty.

LAGAI’s unrelenting devotion to intersectionality — the idea that all oppressions are connected, and that by isolating an issue like gay rights, it’s easy to fall into the trap of selling out other groups of oppressed people — started way before the word entered the lexicon of the left.

And the whole time, they’ve done it as “out” queers, even during a stretch when simply being open about your sexuality could get you locked up. Just about every one of them has spent time in a jail cell at some point or another.

Over the past decades, dozens of flash-in-the-pan movements and organizations have emerged for periods of time only to dissolve quickly thereafter. Many have laid groundwork for future generations of activists. But rarely have they had the staying power of LAGAI. Taking on often-unpopular but critical political issues, the group has met every other week since Reagan declared war on Salvadorean self-determination. Yet they’ve gotten next-to-no credit for helping to popularize thriving movements like boycott, divestment and sanctions, or BDS, for Palestinian liberation, and ending the prison-industrial complex, by producing *UltraViolet*, the longest-running queer prisoner-focused newspaper in the United States. This vital group of not widely known, or written about, queer liberation fighters shows just how a radical group can stay true to an anti-authoritarian politic over decades, and keep from flaming out, even during times of intense hopelessness.

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Every June brings some of LAGAI’s loudest and most theatrical actions — in part reactions to the commercialization of the largest Gay Pride event in the world, in San Francisco.

Originally started in the 1970s as a raucous demonstration against homophobia, the new millennium’s version of Pride has turned into a drunken “sale-a-bration,” hosting fallen pop stars like the Backstreet Boys and receiving financial backing from corporate sponsors like Bud Light Lime and Wells Fargo.

But as the Bay Area-based LAGAI’s defiant Pride-month flyers from as far back as the 1980s proclaimed, “Assimilation is NOT Liberation.” Many of LAGAI’s members are holding this as a fundamental ideal well into their 60s, at the same time as the most highly-resourced gay organizations — the Human Rights Campaign, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force — concentrate

on conservative, assimilationist issues like state-sponsored marriage and transgender military enlistment.

Cops almost inevitably end up at LAGAI's direct actions, which have included an unforgettable, unsanctioned bra runway show at San Francisco's biggest mall (protesting Victoria's Secret's factories on Israeli-occupied Palestinian land); the occupation of a Starbucks in Berkeley, during which they erected homes and plastic palm trees — referencing both Israel's bulldozing of Palestinian villages and Starbucks CEO and outspoken Zionist Howard Shultz; and the legendary rush-hour shutdown of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1989, during which members of LAGAI and the AIDS group ACT UP handcuffed themselves to the West Coast's most famous landmark to protest inaction around HIV by President Reagan and friends.

Oppression is oppression is oppression

As far back as junior high school, in the early-1960s, LAGAI member Deeg Gold went around to the embassies of communist countries asking for books and pamphlets. The Albanian embassy, in particular, was stumped by the arrival of an unassuming American teen. Soon after, Gold helped organize clothing drives for Freedom Summer in Mississippi, when white leftists and blacks teamed up to thwart racist politics in June 1964, resulting in deaths and bombings against the workers and black people who dared to support the movement.

Not yet 20, Gold moved to a house in Washington state in 1971 that housed the lesbian collective that Gold joined, the Gorgons. The group moved to the Bay Area in 1978 from Seattle, in search of more racial diversity, but without much money. They lived by lesbian separatist ideals, which worked to center queer women in a society that was patriarchal and a women's movement that was often homophobic. The Gorgons "had an official shoplifting team," and maxed out credit cards so that "everyone in the collective had a bed, a stereo, and another object we're not going to mention for publication," Gold said.

In the fall of 1979, Gold helped to organize anti-Nazi demonstrations when White Power became trendy in the East Bay suburb of Walnut Creek. Later, she was involved with activist groups that formed Jews for a Secular Middle East in 1983. Then came the so-called lesbian civil wars, when political differences among members of groups of queer women on both coasts divided the growing movement for lesbian liberation. Rifts caused by difficult questions like: Did "butch-femme" (masculine-feminine) and monogamous relationships just perpetuate the patriarchal U.S. society that lesbian separatists wanted no part of? And how could the movement work to integrate more non-white members? "People wore buttons 'Veteran of the Lesbian Civil War,'" a takeoff of the pins worn by Spanish Civil War vets, remembered Gold.

"There were such expectations of each other," explained Tory Becker, Gold's now-partner, who lived in New York City at the time. "You wanted everything to be right in your collectives, and things *weren't* right, about class and race. It was horrible."

Now 64, trans-identified, and a retired U.S. Postal Service union organizer, Gold was part of a protest at a speech by Betty Friedan, the feminist author of "The Feminine Mystique" who co-founded the National Organization for Women. "We each had a sign saying things like 'racist,' 'classist,' 'anti-gay,'" and raised a sign each time Friedan — one of the most highly visible feminists at the time, who was often criticized for not addressing the connectedness of different types of oppression — said something offensive. "She walked off the stage yelling, 'Who's paying you?'"

In line with Friedan’s non-intersectional way of thinking, members of the mostly queer Jews for a Secular Middle East felt that being “out” about their queerness would detract from the central issue of “peace in the Middle East.” One meeting got so heated, one of the other members derogatorily dismissed Gold as just another “butch” dyke — as not femme enough to be taken seriously. The refusal to conform and to be closeted caused rifts between potential allies, but it was a major reason Gold joined LAGAI, and helped to cement relationships between members of the group.

“In addition to my own personal identity [as transgender],” Gold said, other members were self-identified drag queens and transvestites. “Those may not be terms that are used now, but there was always a lot of queerness in LAGAI — always, always, always.”

Like Gold, LAGAI founding member Cole Benson, then a bike messenger whose family moved from the Carolinas to California at age seven, explained, “For many of us, [queerness is] not the only way we are oppressed in life.” That’s something everyone in the group feels deeply. “[LAGAI is] one of the few places where I can be radical, and leftist, and queer all at the same time,” said Becker, who works as a nurse in the San Francisco public hospital system.

Work together, play together, stay together

But a profound commitment to intersectionality alone doesn’t keep a group like LAGAI going for four decades.

“We come from a long heritage of lesbian collectives where people slept with each other,” Gold said with a laugh.

“It was an army of ex-lovers; for a while I would say that all the women in LAGAI had been with each other,” added Kate Raphael, who joined LAGAI in 1985. “I knew a lot of queers, for sure,” she said, but she hadn’t found a group of intersectional activists that centered queerness. “I don’t feel like I joined to hook up, but I was in my mid-20s, for sure those tentacles were always out there. I dated Deeg for at least a year.”

“This is where social groups overlap with political groups,” said Becker, who admits that she came to her first LAGAI meeting as a new transplant to the Bay in part to find a girlfriend. With the “advancing tsunami” of old age, “you have to find someone who will be there to help you when you fall down with a coma.” In a tight-knit group like LAGAI, most of whose members are 45-plus, any member of the group could be that someone.

Once you’re in with LAGAI, everyone counts. It’s a primary reason that Daniel Ward joined up around 1989 after getting kicked out of the Navy the year prior. “I didn’t want to stay in, so I sort of came on to people I maybe shouldn’t have come on to,” he said. “You don’t necessarily want to put yourself through that trauma, but at the same time I couldn’t see an alternative.” Ward had enlisted to get out of his hometown of Stockton, California, where life felt full of dead ends. “It was either that or Jack in the Box.” The official reason for discharge: “Homosexual acts; engaging in, or soliciting another to engage in.”

One of his first actions with LAGAI was during the 6th International AIDS Conference in San Francisco, during which people with AIDS and their allies staged protests demanding that women, people of color, and drug users with AIDS be counted, and against anti-needle exchange laws and a ban forbidding HIV-positive people from entering the country, which was finally lifted in 2010.

“I was floored by LAGAI’s organizing efforts,” said Ward, who had previously been involved mostly with ACT UP. “The way they would track people taking part in the action, caring for people taking part in the action, and knowing who got arrested,” is a concept many activist groups can’t claim.

“We don’t lose track of our people — even if they’re in Israel,” said Becker, who flew there after Raphael was arrested for filming Israeli soldiers assaulting Palestinians.

After her month in jail, Becker remembers, Raphael “was incredibly thin, and tired, yet really driven.” While locked up, Raphael came to know immigrants to Israel who’d come to work in the country and were waiting to be deported. Back home, fellow LAGAI members organized a “Hands Off Kate” campaign in collaboration with Dunya Alwan, an Iraqi-American activist who organizes trips to Palestine for activists called Birthright Unplugged, where “foreigners who support human rights and liberation do that in conversation with the people who are most directly affected.”

“Oftentimes when people are in prison [for political struggles], they look around, and often have more resources and people looking out for them than most of the people who are being held in prison,” explained Gold. Raphael’s connections with the women in detention spurred her to change her legal name and re-enter the country through Jordan, with Becker “acting as her tourist beard.”

The group has from its beginnings worked within the consensus model — everyone has to agree (or abstain) on every decision. It’s one of the reasons why LAGAI split from other groups doing Latin American solidarity work in the ‘80s. That is not to say that it was open to everyone and all-horizontal, all the time.

Co-founder Tede Matthews, a charismatic drag performer and poet, “was a very strong, dominating, star-quality person,” said Gold. “For a while, LAGAI was seen as ‘Tede’s group,’ and that was a problem. Some people kind of drifted away because of that, and some people came because of that.”

The 1970s were a time when none of the groups represented by the letters L-G-B-T were really in solidarity with each other. For Becker, LAGAI was the first time lesbians and gays worked together for common causes. The group spent consecutive meetings figuring out what to do about the “bisexual question.” “There was always a tension in the lesbian communities about bisexuality,” Gold explained, because there were so many bisexual women who ended up with men. On the other hand, there was “never a tension around trans stuff in LAGAI.”

Outside of friendships and the bedroom — or any public cruising spot, for that matter — a bigger and just as personal reason for the group’s staying power has been its political unity. Probably the most important thing that links all of LAGAI’s members is their commitment to political struggle as central to their lives.

There’s the group’s informal required reading list that includes Audre Lorde’s revolutionary poetics, and “Anti-Mass,” the anonymously authored book that argues that small groups where people know each other are the pillars of mass movements, working off the idea of anarcho-syndicalism popularized in socialist Spain, and by the International Workers of the World.

This historical analysis is the basis for unity that has kept the group together throughout the years — even the really hard ones, like the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s. Seemingly hopeless situations “can be a powerful motivation for activism,” said Benson. “My best friend died [from AIDS]. I don’t want to see that happen to somebody else.”

Tede Matthews was one of the people lost to the systematic neglect of people with AIDS during the 1980s. Gold lists off more members lost to AIDS: Steven Fish, Jim Manning, David Stern. “AIDS affected us all very personally, living in the middle of the epidemic and fighting for the communities, trying to work in ACT UP to address issues of race, class and gender, housing and health care. It was a lot of struggle and a lot of loss, and a lot of love too.”

‘No choice’ but to fight

One of the most remarkable things about LAGAI is that so few of its members have burned out. “I’m not quite sure if I really believe in that concept,” Ward said. “Since coming to describe myself as a revolutionary, I have never stopped being that. I’ve never felt the desire to not go to something if I felt I was able to.”

Many organizations have existed for a short time only to break apart within a few months or years. In 2015, when the Supreme Court deemed gay marriage as constitutional, “Many people who were active in queer liberation were finally able to get married and they just bounced,” Ward explained. “And that was never my goal. I don’t want to be one of those people who has ‘finally got his, and fuck all you all.’”

Becker said she doesn’t feel like she has a choice but to fight. She hasn’t stopped being radical and anti-authoritarian since a formative experience at the alternative Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995, where radical women from all over the world converged, and there was a lesbian tent in a country where lesbianism is still mostly hidden. “I can’t imagine ever not feeling like the only thing to do is resist,” she said.

“It’s important to remember successes, and one of those successes is that there are people alive today, that wouldn’t be alive today if it weren’t for the work we did,” Ward said. “That LAGAI, and ACT UP, and we in the movement did. There would be a lot of people dead now — a lot of people. And that’s actually really fucking huge.”

In dark times, unrealistic goals like liberation for everyone might be exactly what is needed to keep moving forward. “I feel like politics saved my life,” Gold said. “If there hadn’t been a gay liberation movement, I wouldn’t have survived being a teenager. This is not a society that most people can actually live in; you either need to find a way to fight it, together, or you fight it yourself and go down, or you give in and just kind of go along with it.”

Today, the group’s meetings, held every other week at a Middle Eastern restaurant in Oakland or a cafe in San Francisco, tend to host a core of 10 people plus a dozen-or-so others, rotating in and out as their other commitments allow. But its actions and events can still bring hundreds of people out, as with “Outside the Frame,” the radical film festival the group organized in 2015 in opposition to the Israel-supported Frameline.

“There are times when we’ve thought in LAGAI, ‘We don’t have very many people, maybe we should disband.’ But if we did, the first thing you’d have to do is start an organization like this,” Gold continued. “Things have to start somewhere, and where they generally start is when some small group of people get together.”

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