

# "The Socialist Workers Party vs. Gay Liberation (or The Cuckoo Builds a Strange Nest)"

From William A. Percy

**The Socialist Workers Party vs. Gay Liberation  
(or The Cuckoo Builds a Strange Nest)**

by David Thorstad



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[This polemical article originated as a leaflet I handed out at a forum of the Socialist Workers Party in New York City on May 11, 1979. It was published in the June–July 1979 issue of the *Gay Activist*, newspaper of New York's Gay Activists Alliance, and in the gay left journal *Gay Insurgent*, no. 7 (1981). The May 11 forum was intended to explain the SWP's new line on gay liberation, representing a shift away from involvement in the gay movement and an attack on me and NAMBLA. Unbeknownst to me, I had been banned from attending SWP forums, but an exception was made in this case since I was to be the target of attack by the main speaker, Michael Maggi, who had been the national coordinator of the SWP's gay "work." The lively event was attended by a large number of gay and lesbian activists spanning the political spectrum, as well as some left-wing opponents of the SWP, including the Spartacist League. The SWP's new line had just appeared in a two-page spread in the party's paper, *The Militant* (April 13, 1979) by Rich Finkel and Matilde Zimmermann titled "The class-struggle road to winning gay rights." A report on the forum appeared in *Young Spartacus*, youth paper of the Spartacist League, titled "SWP: From 'Gay is Good' to 'Save Our Children'" (summer 1979). All three of these articles appear in my compilation *Gay Liberation and Socialism: Documents from the Discussions on Gay Liberation Inside the Socialist Workers Party (1970–1973)*.

This polemic was written in the heat of struggle, at a time when both left groups and the gay movement were in a different place from where they are today. The left has virtually vanished as a force in American society,

and the gay movement has abandoned sexual freedom as a goal in favor of conventional and conservative assimilation into hetero society. The very concept of posing a challenge to heterodominance seems rather quaint nowadays in view of the widespread focus among same-sexers on conventionality and patriotism—the embrace of same-sex marriage, efforts to get into the imperialist military to do Wall Street's dirty work against third world countries like Iraq and Afghanistan—and support for thought-crimes legislation (hate-crimes laws). The gay movement no longer plays the radical role for social change that it still played in the late 1970s, and consequently, this polemic serves as a snapshot of a moment that has passed.—DT]

Since the late nineteenth century, when homosexuals took their first steps toward self-definition and organization, an exchange of views and even a certain amount of mutual interaction and support have characterized their relationship to the labor movement and the socialist movement. At times, especially during the 1890s and the first decades of the twentieth century, they have won outspoken backing for their demands from the left—socialist, communist, and anarchist. At other times, as during the Stalinist terror of the 1930s and under the Castro regime in Cuba, they have fallen victim to reactionary policies as severe as any in capitalist countries.

With the rise of the present wave of gay liberation, unleashed by the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, a new and more far-reaching debate than ever before has been going on within left-wing organizations throughout the world about the significance of gay liberation, the nature of sexuality and homosexuality, and the relationship between the struggle for sexual freedom and the struggle of the working class to overthrow capitalism and replace it with a more civilized, rational, and humane social arrangement—socialism. This is a debate in which homosexual revolutionists have been playing a central role. It is a debate that on one level is no different from the debate on homosexuality and gay liberation that is going on in the rest of society—in religion, the scientific community, and many other institutions—and it is creating just as much turmoil.

The debate within the left, however, differs in a number of respects from these other manifestations of the increased awareness of homosexuality and its social implications. First of all, the left in North America carries far less weight in the body politic than it does in many other areas of the world. Therefore, many people, including many gay activists, are only vaguely aware of the scope and nature of this debate. Second, many left groups refuse to discuss this question openly, before the gay movement and the working class as a whole, preferring instead to restrict it to their own memberships, and to put their best face forward in the gay movement itself. Third, the left shares with gay liberation, as well as with other movements of the oppressed, a vision of a better society. It shares a need to ruthlessly criticize the status quo. And it generally promises a future social order of freedom for the exploited and the oppressed. Put another way, the left promises more, so it is not unreasonable to expect more from it than one might from liberal capitalist politicians whose primary devotion is to maintaining a political, social, and economic system based on inequality and profits for the few, rather than on freedom for the vast majority.

The debate within the left has been uneven. Although it is making inroads in virtually all left-wing groups—Maoist, Stalinist, anarchist, Social-Democratic, and Trotskyist—it has been most extensive, and has made the greatest progress, in Trotskyist groups. Of these, by far the most important debate has taken place inside the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), where repeated discussions and struggle have occurred since 1970, when the party abandoned its policy of banning homosexuals from membership.<sup>[1]</sup>

The SWP is a small and generally uninfluential American organization, with close ties to Trotskyist groups in dozens of countries. It is, next to the Communist Party, probably the most important left-wing group in the

United States.<sup>[2]</sup> It is also one of only a few left-wing groups to have actively, though inconsistently, participated in the gay liberation movement since the early 1970s. In general, its involvement in gay liberation has been most evident in New York City and California. Even there, however, it only really got involved in any significant way following the Dade County defeat in June 1977. It, like some other left-wing groups, was compelled by the massive upsurge of the lesbian and gay movement that Anita Bryant provoked to reassess its abstentionist position and to dip its toes, however gingerly, into the struggle.

It did so, however, with a rather limited grasp of what the struggle for gay liberation is all about. It supports equal rights for (adult) homosexuals before the law, but at the same time it regards gay liberation as "peripheral" to the class struggle—that is, not as important as other layers of American society (such as the labor movement, women, and Blacks and other racial minorities). In fact, its position—which it has never fully made public in its own press—differs little from that of bourgeois liberals who oppose discrimination, but who regard homosexuality as an exotic deviation from the heterosexual norm that affects only a minority of people. Like any other institution in this society, it too has internalized antihomosexual prejudice fostered by the bourgeois ruling class—though it officially condemns such prejudice. It continues to suspend judgment on whether homosexual behavior is just as "natural" as heterosexual behavior, on whether homosexuality is a potential of the human animal or an aberration of class society, and seems particularly averse to solidarizing itself with the notion that Gay Is Good. And, like most leftist groups, it sees the struggle against capitalism, and all the forms of oppression and discrimination that go with it, through glasses colored by the political "line" it has adopted at any given moment.

## **The SWP "Comes Out"—A Bit**

As the 1970s draw to a close, the SWP has finally decided to make public part of its true position on the struggle for gay liberation. This has taken the form of a two-page article in the April 13, 1979, issue of its weekly newspaper, *The Militant*. The article, which appeared under the byline of Rich Finkel and Matilde Zimmermann, was entitled "The class-struggle road to winning gay rights."

The article has created a stir and considerable confusion among many gay liberationists, and no doubt among some members of the SWP itself. It is bound to have repercussions within the left as a whole, both within the United States and in other countries. For this reason, it calls for a response and an explanation.

There is another reason for answering it. And that is the fact that today, more than ever, the gay liberation movement is looking for answers, is attempting to develop a strategy for liberation, and this has led more sisters and brothers than ever before to consider socialism as an alternative to the repression, antisexuality, oppression, and exploitation of capitalist society. Today more than ever, people are becoming aware that the horse-and-buggy morality of American society is completely out of kilter with the needs and realities of the space age. At a time when our most vociferous opponents are clinging for dear life to this antiquated moral code, homosexuals are beginning to realize that we are part of a historic process of redefining traditional religious and moral values that belong to social orders that have long since disappeared. We do not know yet what the new order will bring, but we can say with certainty that its emergence is already beginning to sweep away the old crap. We should be glad to be a part of this historic process.

The Finkel/Zimmermann article is what is known as a "line" article. That is, although it is signed by individuals, it really represents a policy statement, publicly binding on all other members of the group. This in itself is interesting because the article appeared like a bolt from the blue, takes positions that are antithetical to Marxism, and at least in part appears to have been determined by leading bodies of the SWP rather than by the

membership as a whole. To the extent that this is the case, it can be expected to provoke some consternation inside the SWP, which prides itself on being a democratic organization in which the party line on any major issue is elaborated only after thorough internal debate. The fact that a line article, which on the surface at least appears to deviate from the previously touted line on gay liberation, is being handed down from the top, without prior internal discussion, raises some serious questions about how democratic the SWP really is. It also suggests that there is more going on here than at first meets the eye.

Such an article is different from a trial balloon. Rather than testing the terrain or announcing the beginning of a discussion on a strategy for gay liberation within the SWP, it appears designed to whip the membership into line before such a discussion can even begin. In this connection, its timing can hardly be accidental. For 1979 is a convention year for the SWP, and its pre-convention discussion—a three-month period during which members may submit documents on any subject for publication in an internal discussion bulletin—begins in May. So, in a sense, the Finkel/Zimmermann piece signals a decision by the party leadership to go public, so to speak, even before the ranks have had a chance to get involved. Why such a bureaucratic maneuver should have been felt necessary is anyone's guess. So is the extent to which the article may have poisoned the atmosphere inside the SWP and rendered a democratic discussion more difficult, if not impossible. But there is little question that it has helped to poison relations inside the gay movement, particularly in areas like New York where gay activists have been working together with members of the SWP for goals that were thought to be shared.

## What Did The Article Say?

The ostensible setting for the article was an analysis of the Philadelphia conference February 23–25 which called a lesbian/gay rights march on Washington, D.C., for October 14, 1979. It took the Militant more than one month even to report on this important conference. This in itself was unusual, particularly since the SWP had a half dozen people at the conference. At least one of its members strongly argued from the floor in favor of the march. One of its lesbian members was even elected co-chair of the proceedings. And the SWP has a well-deserved reputation for supporting mass marches by any oppressed group.

Finkel/Zimmermann devote a few introductory paragraphs to summarizing the debate at the conference over whether or not a march by the gay movement should be called. They spend the remaining one-and-three-quarters pages laying the groundwork for opposing the march and belittling efforts of the lesbian and gay movement to develop a national focus and plan of action. What are their arguments?

They correctly point to the fact that the capitalist ruling class is on a campaign to cut back on the social, economic, and political rights of the working class, to weaken the unions, and to erode the democratic rights of the masses of the American people. These attacks are "aimed at establishing an atmosphere of greater conformity and weakening the self-confidence of all oppressed or exploited persons. The antidemocratic assault must include attacks on personal freedoms that do not directly stand in the way of the employers satisfying their profit hunger. Attacks on gay rights fall into this category." Nothing to quibble about here.

Nor are our authors wrong to claim that "Anything that succeeds in blocking this capitalist offensive strikes a blow for the democratic rights of all." They list as examples a whole series of victories—the 1978 miners' strike, the Iranian revolution, the ERA deadline extension, the defeat of an antilabor referendum in Missouri. These events are correctly described as "big advances for the gay rights struggle."<sup>[3]</sup>

Nowhere, however, do we see here even lip service given to the massive mobilizations of gay people

themselves in 1977 and 1978 in response to the mounting assaults on our rights and our very existence. But our mobilizations, in which hundreds of thousands participated, were the largest mobilizations by any oppressed grouping in American society for many years, and the biggest demonstrations of any kind since the anti-Vietnam War movement. In some areas of the country, such as in the South, gay demonstrations were bigger than any demonstration of any kind in history—including by the labor movement and the antiwar movement.

A year and a half ago, the SWP took a more accurate and realistic view and recognized that the fact that gay people themselves stood up by the hundreds of thousands and said "Enough!" to bigotry and persecution was an inspiration and a victory not only for gay people, but for the entire working class. In a report to the SWP convention in August 1977, SWP national secretary Jack Barnes pointed to the fact that the gay mobilizations had prompted a mineworkers' official to get up at a meeting of 200 officials in Kentucky to argue in favor of a march on Washington by mineworkers by saying, "If the homosexuals in this country can get recognition, so can the coal miners" (Militant, September 16, 1977). But today the SWP's line has changed, as Finkel/Zimmermann proceed to make clear.

## Gay Liberation Gets Cellar Priority

After pointing out the potential power of the labor movement, and its crucial role in the economy and society, as well as its importance for a revolutionary strategy whose aim is to overthrow capitalism, they warn their members and whatever unionists may read their paper that "the unions should not throw the same resources into the defense of gay rights that they must throw into the defense of women's rights and Black or latino rights." They offer as a strategy for gay liberation, as well as for women and Blacks, one "that includes doing everything possible to strengthen and protect the working class. . . ." They seem to be suggesting that gays are not in fact in their majority themselves workers, and that the only road for gay liberation is to join the unions and/or focus on working in the labor movement—which they have just advised not to put much energy into fighting for gay rights. To me, this sounds like advice to lesbian and gay activists to stop fighting their own battles, to stop building an independent movement that fights for us, even if no other group in society is willing to do so. Such an approach would be suicidal.

Let me be clear. I believe the lesbian/gay movement must do much more than it has so far to win the labor movement, as well as other oppressed layers of society, to support our just demands for an end to persecution and for freedom. But we can only do this by continuing to build our own movement, independent of any outside force, and under our own control. This is an elementary lesson that we should have learned from the history of the Black and women's movements, the antiwar movement, as well as from the labor movement itself. This also used to be the view of the SWP—before it made what it calls a "turn to the industrial working class" a year or so ago.

It is revealing in this regard that three photographs accompany the Finkel/Zimmermann piece. The first, and largest, is of a West Virginia miners' rally during the 1978 coal strike. (To me, they all look like white males.) The second, about half as large, is of the ERA march in Washington July 9, 1978. The caption credits the turnout to the assertion that the participants were "bolstered by [the] miners' battle." The third photo, also smaller, and at the bottom of the second page, shows two gay men carrying a sign urging: "Jimmy: Human Rights for All Americans." Wouldn't a photo of one of the many mass mobilizations for gay rights have been more appropriate?

In a paper like the Militant, the selection and placing of illustrations is not haphazard. The message is clear:

Gay liberation is a distinctly peripheral aspect of the class struggle, one which needs to look elsewhere for validation, one which neither the socialist nor the labor movement should do much to advance. Such an assessment is not only out of line with reality; it also suggests a hostility to gay liberation itself.

## Is Sexuality Irrelevant?

Finkel/Zimmermann sneer at what they call "the so-called gay movement defined by sexuality." Is sexuality, then, irrelevant to the struggle for lesbian/gay liberation? Is it irrelevant to our oppression in a heterosexist society? Is it a mere side issue for a party that aspires to lead a revolution and usher in a new social order? Is it no longer true that the moral code and behavioral norms of this society are based on an active and ubiquitous proselytizing to exclusive heterosexuality? Are lesbians and gay men preventing hordes of straight people from supporting our just struggle because we are open and proud about being queer? Are gay people wrong to be fighting to protect their rights to live their lives as they see fit, to defend a sexuality that they cherish as a gift? Would there even be a gay liberation movement at all were it not for the fact that homosexuals themselves stood up to fight back against centuries of oppression—at the very time, incidentally, that the SWP itself was banning homosexuals from membership? Considering the SWP's own record, the Finkel/Zimmermann sneer will not be quickly forgotten by proud faggots and dykes. Nor should it be. Moreover, it is an observation that suggests an underlying hatred of queers; and coming from a socialist group, it is the kind of remark that gives socialism a bad name.

Furthermore, it is still not possible to imagine the Militant expressing similar contempt for other movements of the oppressed. What would Blacks think, for example, if they were to read in its pages a reference to the "so-called Black movement defined by race"? Or women if they were to see their movement described as the "so-called women's movement defined by sex"? Where does the SWP think such movements come from anyway? They certainly do not sprout full blown from the labor movement the SWP has so recently discovered.

For Finkel/Zimmermann, this "so-called gay movement defined by sexuality" appears to include only people they do not like. It includes "bar and bath owners who profit from the exploitation and isolation of lesbians and gays." It includes "real or aspirant ruling-class politicians." It includes "gay preachers whose religious role is not a bit less reactionary than that of more orthodox clergy." It includes "individuals who insist that living a certain 'lifestyle' is the road to victory in the fight for gay rights." Now this is truly something new! It is not often that the SWP rails against bar and bath owners, and one almost never reads in its press criticism of religion. Certainly, it is not in the habit of attacking the Black or women's movements for such undesirable elements, which they have in far greater quantity than does the gay movement. I cannot recall ever reading a criticism in the Militant of the phenomenon of women's banks. And surely there are far more Black capitalist politicians and preachers than there are gay ones—at least who are involved in the "so-called gay movement defined by sexuality." The same could be said of the labor movement itself, whose leadership contains numerous unsavory characters. To judge from this nonsense, Finkel/ Zimmermann, and the SWP leaders who helped them write their diatribe, have never seen a gay worker, and never hope to see one, but they can tell you anyhow, they'd rather see than be one.

## Covering Up an About-Face

But our authors have only been warming up. Now they are ready for their pièce de résistance. Supporters of a gay march on Washington, they moan, "did not even consider the broader framework in which their deliberations at the Philadelphia conference occurred. They failed to weigh thoroughly the political import of their demands, downplayed the narrow representation at the conference, and underestimated the forces lined up

against the action." Marching, which the SWP has strongly favored for more than a decade at least, is now demoted to a "tactic," and in this case a "tactic" that the SWP wishes had been scrapped. Fine. They have a right to their opinion. But why don't they explain why none of their own people at the Philadelphia conference took the floor to argue against the march? Or why none of them stood up to enlighten the benighted delegates about the "broader framework" they now say should have been discussed? To judge from their article, you would think they had not participated at all, but were there merely as observers. Why, then, did they allow their members to speak in favor of the march? Why did they allow one of them to be nominated by the women's caucus to chair the conference? Why do they fail to report their participation in their article? Furthermore, why did they, as a member group of the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, not object to the CLGR position paper distributed at the conference—a position paper for which they voted? Why did they wait until now to snipe at and undermine the call for a march on Washington, since they supported the idea before? Or did they mislead the Coalition into believing that they supported the march? Are they themselves now making common cause with the "forces lined up against the action"? Do they intend to support the march or not? If so, why are they actively campaigning against the march by urging other groups, like the National Organization for Women, not to endorse it? And what is the significance, if any, of the fact that one of the two authors was not even present at the conference? Isn't this a bizarre form of reportage?<sup>[4]</sup>

Finkel/Zimmermann provide no answers to these questions. But their lengthy delay in reporting on the conference, and the hostile nature of their "report," may offer some clues.

The SWP, as well as other Trotskyist groups (in Canada, for instance), are now busy reorienting their members to take jobs in heavy industry. This no doubt worthy endeavor undoubtedly creates considerable difficulties for them, both on a personal and a political level. It is in light of this reallocation of their somewhat limited forces that the Finkel/Zimmermann piece must be seen.

## Official Position on Gay Liberation

The SWP's official position on the gay liberation movement was adopted in August 1973. It is called a "Memorandum on the Gay Liberation Movement." This document, which was approved by a majority of its convention, contains a key section in which gay liberation is characterized as relating to a "relatively narrow sector of the population," as lacking the "potential mass" and "social weight" of movements for women's and Black liberation, and as "much more peripheral to the central issues of the class struggle" than those movements. It argues that it would be a mistake for the SWP to "generally assign comrades to this movement." No point in wasting time on "peripheral" movements.<sup>[5]</sup>

The lesbian/gay upsurge following Dade County made such an abstentionist policy untenable for the SWP. Hence, it began to get involved, on a limited scale, in the gay movement in a few areas. But this involvement, such as it was, now appears to have outlived its usefulness. In fact, it may be getting in the way of more important things, like getting jobs in steel plants. Therefore, the party seems to be casting about for an excuse for pulling out of the gay movement—but it has to do so in such a way that it seems justified to its membership.

It is in this context that the report by SWP national secretary Jack Barnes to the SWP National Committee last December must be seen. In that report, published in the March 16, 1979, issue of the *Militant*, Barnes goes to great lengths to explain why the Briggs Initiative in California was defeated. Twice he warns the SWP membership not to "overestimate the weight of the gay movement" in defeating this antigay initiative. (Were some SWP members beginning to question the "Memorandum"'s characterization of the gay movement as

"peripheral" and nearly weightless?) He warns against pointing too much to the opposition of the labor movement, which was genuine and widespread, in helping to defeat Briggs. The ruling class itself, he suggests, played a key role in the defeat. But would Briggs have been defeated if the gay movement itself had not responded with massive mobilizations against it, if it had not reached out to the labor movement to enlist its support? Possibly, but not likely. Still, the whole thrust of Barnes' analysis leads to a denigrating of the self-mobilization and struggle of homosexuals themselves. To be wrong on the character and scope of the forces in the fight against Briggs, he says, "could lead us to a false estimate of the state of the class struggle, the current tactics of the ruling class, an overestimate of the strength of the gay rights movement, and cause us to veer away from the correct strategic line of march for labor and our party."

That "line of march" now appears to be straight out of the gay movement. Anticommunists in the gay movement will rejoice at this prospect, no doubt. But for socialists, for people who recognize that the ultimate goals of the gay movement, as well as of all the oppressed and of the working class, lie in the overturning of capitalism and its heterosexist dictatorship, such a retreat can only be interpreted as a betrayal of the struggle for sexual freedom and socialism.

A further clue to the SWP's current behavior might be found in another passage of its 1973 "Memorandum," which is still the party's official line on gay liberation. This passage refused to "take a stand on the nature or value of homosexuality," and suggested that to do so—that is, to recognize what science has already proved, namely, that homosexual behavior is a natural form of human sexuality—might jeopardize the effectiveness of the party as a political organization and alienate it from the masses (who, as we all know, hate queers). To take such a stand, it argued, "would cut across its purpose, dilute its nature as a political organization, transform it into an organization advancing one or another scientific or cultural viewpoint, narrow its appeal, and cripple its ability to mobilize the masses on political questions." These are strong words. They suggest that the gay liberation movement is inherently apolitical, little more than an exotic sideshow playing itself out on the fringes of society. Were the massive mobilizations of gay people during the past two years, then, not political? Just the opposite. They were extremely effective in thwarting our enemies and in extending the influence of gay liberation in American society. They inspired other layers of the oppressed and exploited to fight back. And they occurred in spite of the fact that the SWP believes gay liberation to be inherently "countercultural," riddled with "lifestylism," and "peripheral" to the class struggle. How far out of it can you get?

The SWP's unscientific, un-Marxist view of gay liberation and sexual liberation is what it is now counterposing to its "turn to the working class." It has long berated the gay movement for not having a national focus. Now that the movement is beginning to develop one, now that it has an opportunity to move onto the national scene with a march on the nation's capital, does the SWP respond by encouraging this process? Oh, no. It is reluctant to go a step further. It seeks to force the realities of the class struggle to fit its own political line, rather than the other way around. It behaves as though the gay movement were in conflict with its "turn" toward the labor movement. It seeks refuge in its wretched "Memorandum" and its belief that gay liberation is, after all, really not "political." It is doing what a revolutionary party should never do—it is pitting itself against a movement of the oppressed. Any party that does not champion the rights and demands of all the oppressed does not deserve to call itself a revolutionary party. Can a witch hunt against whatever proud lesbian and gay members it may still have left in the SWP be far behind?

## **The Sexual Rights of Young People**

It is entirely possible that some members of the SWP may not be impressed with the arguments against the gay movement and the march on Washington that Finkel/Zimmermann have concocted. It is for their benefit, no



doubt, that our authors pounce on an issue about which not only they, but most of their readers as well, are profoundly ignorant. This is the issue of cross-generational sex, an issue that is currently being widely discussed and debated within the lesbian/gay movement.

This issue arose at the Philadelphia conference when the Gay Youth caucus introduced a demand for "full rights for gay youth, including revision of the age-of-consent laws." This motion was passed, but was subsequently replaced, following a poll of the delegates by mail, with another demand which read: "Protect lesbian and gay youth from any laws which are used to discriminate against, oppress, and/or harass them in their homes, schools, jobs, and social environments." (Finkel/Zimmermann rewrote this demand in their report to omit the word "jobs," though it is not clear why.) This substitute demand was proposed because of strong objections from the women's caucus, which did not agree with the idea of altering the age-of-consent laws. I myself, let it be said, voted against this substitute because I am in favor of full rights for gay youth, including their right to have sex with whomever they want. As a non-ageist radical, I also favor a repeal of the age-of-consent laws, which punish consensual sexual acts between an older and a younger person. These reactionary laws protect nobody, and in fact cause great suffering to large numbers of young people and adults. I believe that both the gay and socialist movements should get in step with Freud and Kinsey and recognize that children have an active sexuality. In my opinion, sexual freedom remains a distant dream so long as the state and the church are allowed to impose their sex-negative morality on young people, as well as adults. In my view, it is unscientific, as well as damaging to millions of young people, for the gay and women's movements, not to mention the socialist movement, to kowtow to the bourgeois notion that sexual rights should be the prerogative only of adults, preferably heterosexual adults. I myself, and just about every male homosexual I know, have suffered greatly as children from this irrational and reactionary legal repression of sexuality.

Many gay movements in other countries have recognized this, and call for a repeal of the age-of-consent laws. The American gay movement is out of step with them, and with scientific knowledge about sexuality, so long as it refuses to support full rights for gay youth. This is my personal and political conviction, and I intend to continue to express it. But I recognize that the American lesbian/gay movement needs considerably more discussion on this subject before it is in a position to bring its horizons into line with reality.

Socialists tend to be ahead of other people in recognizing the importance of child sexuality, and in stripping their approach to such matters of all religious and reactionary moralizing. To my knowledge, the SWP has never had a discussion of the question of cross-generational sex. But that does not prevent Finkel/Zimmermann from jumping into the fray with both feet and no head. They devote two columns to a delirious and absurd discussion of the subject, as well as to a personal attack on me for having publicly expressed my views on it. Not only do they blow the whole issue all out of proportion, but they completely distort it as well.

"The repeal of age-of-consent laws is a reactionary demand," they assert, "even though its supporters try to pass themselves off as defenders of adolescents against legal victimization." This may be news to some of the SWP's co-thinkers in other countries, such as Australia, who are officially on record as favoring the repeal of age-of-consent laws. Certainly, it makes a mockery of the very real oppression that many men and boys face when they are caught up in the labyrinth of the law for their purely consensual and loving relationships. I know personally of such people, some of whose lives are ruined as a result. I have seen teenage boys dragged into Family Court and harassed by the authorities for sexual relationships they sought out and willingly, nay joyfully, engaged in with men. I am convinced that the "treatment" for such offenses against morality is far worse than the "crime." Moreover, it is similar to the suffering of adult homosexuals caught up in the same heterosexist legal system. How do you "protect" a young person by putting his older lover in jail and hauling

the boy into Family Court, or worse? Laws that punish sexual acts freely engaged in should be discarded as relics of human prehistory. This is the only humane and civilized solution to a very real and widespread problem.

Finkel/Zimmermann, however, not only come out against the progressive demand to repeal or revise such laws, they also resort to slander to make their reactionary case. Those who advocate the repeal of such laws, they claim, "are primarily adult men who believe they should be unrestricted in having sex with children." (Why not just call them monsters?) Advocating such legal reform, they say, is "anti-working-class, anti-child." It has "nothing to do with gay rights or human rights of any kind. It has no place in the struggle to end discrimination against lesbians and gay people." And black is white, and white is black. How long will it be before Finkel/Zimmermann tell us that the earth is really flat?

They don't go quite that far yet, but they do drag in a most original, but ridiculous, argument to bolster their flimsy case: "Saying that children have the 'right' to 'consent' to sex with adults is exactly like saying children should be able to 'consent' to work in a garment factory twelve hours a day." To me, these are in reality quite different matters. Sex is fun. Sex is play. Sex is not work. And sex hardly resembles working in a garment factory for five minutes, let alone twelve hours. If this is an example of the SWP's use of dialectical logic, or even formal logic, it is safe to say that the SWP is in serious trouble. After all, things are not always their opposite. Maybe our authors are simply trying to impress their readers with their formidable grasp of labor history. I, for one, can think of nothing more irrelevant to the subject of consensual cross-generational sex than working in a garment factory. I do hope the Militant will spare its readers such foolishness in the future.

Finkel/Zimmermann also show that they have learned well the guilt-by-association method perfected by the ignominious Joseph McCarthy of 1950s witch hunt fame. "Some of Thorstad's associates," they assert, "argue that, at least for male youngsters, prostitution can be a freely chosen and fulfilling 'lifestyle.'" Who are these unnamed "associates"? Whoever they might be, they do not speak for me, for my view of prostitution, as well as that of all boy-lovers I know, is just the opposite. It is true that many boys in American society turn to prostitution, usually out of poverty, or because they can't get jobs, or because they regard it as one of the ways they know about to meet men. But I can't think of a single boy-lover who argues in favor of prostitution as a "fulfilling lifestyle." I know several who consider themselves oppressed by the prostitution to which this society has driven some of their young male friends.

But isn't this a strange argument to read in a socialist newspaper? After all, the women's movement has made far more of an issue out of prostitution than pederasts have. It has even organized demonstrations in support of female prostitutes, and some prostitutes have been involved in the women's movement. Yet the SWP has never chosen to attack or disassociate itself from the women's movement on these grounds. One of the SWP's gay minions, Michael Maggi, even brought a motion to the CLGR on March 27 which stated that "adults having sex with children is exploitation and is the antithesis of the fight for lesbian and gay rights." But this is not a true statement. Adults having sex with children may or may not be exploitative, just as adults having sex with adults may or may not be exploitative. These things must be determined on an individual basis. In many cases, adults having sex with children, or children having sex with adults, is just the opposite of exploitation. But this may all be too complicated for our pseudo-dialecticians to understand.

It is interesting to note, though, that this party, which takes a hysterical stand against homosexuality between men and boys, is the same party that refuses to "take a stand" on the "nature or value" of homosexuality. No longer does it merely pooh-pooh the concept that Gay Is Good; today it is saying that in cases involving young people Gay Is Bad.

Here are a few verbatim quotes made by SWP members during the debate on Michael Maggi's motion at the March 27 CLGR meeting:

Finkel: "Man/boy love is not part of the gay rights movement; it's exploitative of children. Maggi's motion "does not oppose the right of children to have sex with whoever they want."

Maggi: "I originally supported abolition of the age of consent."  
"It would be deadly to take up David Thorstad's position" on man/boy love.  
[But Thorstad never asked the Coalition to do so.]  
"Sex between a 30-year-old and an 8-year-old is child molestation."  
"I am not for giving children the right to consent to sex."

It is one thing to have an opinion on these questions, however reactionary and unscientific. It is quite another thing, however, to go on a campaign in the gay movement around such a reactionary outlook. But that is what the SWP has done. Had its motion passed the CLGR meeting, it would have split the Coalition apart. Group after group stood up during the debate to state that they would have to leave the Coalition if the SWP motion passed. Fortunately, it was overwhelmingly defeated.

But surely the SWP knew in advance that its motion would not pass. Was that the reason they insisted on bringing it? Were they looking for a defeat that might give them an excuse to withdraw from the Coalition? Or were they actually trying to break apart the organization? For years I have defended the SWP against charges that they were "splitters." But it is hard to come to any other conclusion in light of the recent behavior of its members in the CLGR.

Since Finkel/Zimmermann obviously don't understand the first thing about this subject, why have they chosen to write about it at such length? Is it because they have joined forces with reactionary fools like Anita Bryant, the Interfaith Committee Against Child Molesters, Dr. Judianne Densen-Gerber, and William F. Buckley? Objectively, they most certainly have, because their arguments are exactly the same. Word for word. Perhaps they rushed into this whole thing too quickly. But one thing is for sure: They should get the facts before they start putting their half-baked ideas onto paper.

There may be more going on here than is immediately apparent. In nearly two years of more or less active involvement in gay liberation, the SWP has, to my knowledge, recruited not one single lesbian or gay activist. Certainly in New York they have not. This in itself is a devastating commentary on the inadequacy of their position on gay liberation and on the ineffectiveness of their activity in the gay movement—at a time when so many gay activists are seriously considering socialism as the solution to the myriad problems facing our society. At a time when the SWP has decided that heavy industry is where the action is, they need a rationale for not allocating their meager forces to a "peripheral" movement like gay liberation. In their rush to justify their current line, it seems, any and all arguments, however absurd and unjust, are acceptable. This is the only rational explanation I can think of for the Finkel/Zimmermann piece.

But time marches on. Efforts to build a mass movement for lesbian/gay liberation and sexual freedom will go on. The struggle to build a mass, combative movement of the workers and the oppressed will go on. And sooner or later I believe that capitalism will be overthrown. But what about the need to win the Marxist movement to gay liberation, and the gay movement to Marxism? On this, the SWP has once again shown that it has no constructive ideas to offer. Its "Memorandum" has come home to roost.

## Notes

1. ↑ The first, major debate inside the SWP has been documented in the book I self-published in 1976 entitled *Gay Liberation and Socialism: Documents from the Discussions on Gay Liberation Inside the Socialist Workers Party (1970–1973)*. (Since 1973, two other internal SWP debates on gay liberation have taken place, and another one appears to be shaping up.) This book is now out of print, but can be found in a number of libraries. I was a leading participant in this discussion, which generated more than 100 documents, none of which had been made public prior to my publication of this compilation. I was told at the time that the SWP leadership regarded my decision to make the documents public “scurrilous.” Despite a small printing of only 200 copies, the book was welcomed by gay liberationists throughout the world, and has been reproduced in a number of areas by gay socialists who found it useful in understanding their own problems in winning the left to a Marxist position of actively supporting gay liberation and integrating it into an overall struggle to overthrow capitalism. Because of the continuing demand, I am considering putting out a new, updated edition. [The second edition came out in 1981, and is now out of print.—DT.]
2. ↑ [This is no longer true. The SWP has devolved into an irrelevant sect around its longtime leader Jack Barnes, and the party abandoned the label Trotskyist in 1982, following a speech by Barnes rejecting the theory of permanent revolution. This speech was published as *Their Trotsky and Ours: Communist Continuity Today*. In 1983, a large number of dissidents, including longtime top leaders of the SWP, were expelled. The Communist Party as well has become virtually irrelevant.]
3. ↑ [It is clear, even if it was not yet so clear then, that the Iranian revolution not only put a reactionary theocratic elite in power, but was the opposite of a “big advance for the gay rights struggle.”]
4. ↑ [The march drew about 50,000 people. The NAMBLA contingent was fifty men and boys strong, and right behind it came the NOW contingent.]
5. ↑ [More than thirty years later, in his memoir on the SWP, party leader Barry Sheppard, who wrote the “Memorandum” for the Political Committee, revealed that he had originally planned to include a formulation whereby no “organized national party participation” in the gay movement would be projected, but involvement would be left up to local branches to decide. He was told by longtime leader Farrell Dobbs that even that would be going too far: “He said that the opposition in the party to having anything to do with the movement was based ‘purely and simply on prejudice.’ But, he said, if we stuck with the position I had outlined, it would split the party, and we therefore had to reject any reallocation of our forces to the movement by the branches. In other words, we had to capitulate to prejudice” (*The Socialist Workers Party 1960–1988*, vol. 1, *The Sixties: A Political Memoir* [Chippendale, Australia: Resistance Books, 2005], 322). The party membership was never informed about this at the time.]

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