

It's time to stop the rot

The trans rights furore shows no signs of abating. If anything, levels of transphobia have intensified over the past year. Many trans people report finding the continual need to rebut false narratives and malicious commentary quite exhausting. Rising levels of harassment and hostility in public situations against trans people and LGBT+ people in general have led to many reporting that they have become more anxious and more fearful of even venturing out in public. What we really need is a mass campaign of resistance which can give trans people confidence, solidarity and hope.

We need mass lobbies and a national demonstration. And we need to get rid of the Tory government now headed by the racist homophobe Boris Johnson. A Tory government that goes weak at the knees in the face of transphobia recalls its notorious past as the instigators of the dreadful Section 28 of 30 years ago. We need them out. At least Jeremy Corbyn and Labour have stuck to their trans supportive position in the face of transphobic campaigning in some constituency parties and are committed to amending the GRA.

Being able to celebrate at Prides, particularly this year, the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion, has been especially important this year even though many of us might wish there was a bit more protest and angry solidarity involved and a lot less corporate jolly and pinkwashing.

Various Prides have made welcome statements opposing transphobic bigotry and the London Pride parade was led off by trans groups this year in response to last year's hijack of the front of the parade by a group of radical feminist transphobes.

A few years ago the conversation was mostly about what was going on in the US and the UK was pretty quiet. The state of North Carolina was attempting to ban trans people from using gender appropriate toilets (the 'bathroom wars') and Donald Trump attacked trans and LGB rights by seeking to ban trans people from the US armed forces. Thankfully a mass campaign blocked the North Carolina statute but trans rights have continued to be under attack in the US, for example removing LGBT+ people from federal provision of workplace LGBT+ equal rights.

Since then, however, there have been regular trans-critical articles in sections of the British mass media as well as further attempts to commit some unions to anti-self-identification positions. A trans critical motion was tabled at the University and College Union's Congress in May this year that attempted to open up campuses to trans-critical/transphobic organisations like Women's Place UK under the guise of 'free speech' and academic

freedom and which painted feminists as the victims of trans zealots. The motion failed to even mention that trans people are the targets of vicious hate crime. The Congress was leafleted by a small group of Women's Place UK supporters lobbying for the motion.

Unfortunately the motion was timed out at Congress so the issue remains unresolved and will no doubt return, although the union's current position as agreed at previous congresses is to support the GRA reforms. In the meantime branches in UCU and other unions can strengthen the pro-trans position by passing resolutions in support of Transgender Day of Remembrance in November and Trans Visibility Day on 31st March, and by supporting Trans Prides and of course any protests or vigils against LGBT+ attacks. Getting a branch banner and a delegation to such events can speak volumes.

The government consultation

Despite positive recommendations several years ago from the parliamentary Women and Equalities Committee the Tory government has recently delayed the report on its consultation around proposed GRA amendments which closed last October.

Similarly, after an initially positive position the SNP Scottish government disappointingly also recently announced a delay in implementing trans-friendly reforms after heavy lobbying by transphobic groups and individuals.

These governmental responses and numerous surveys and reports demonstrate that transphobia is not only evident in civil society but remains built in to current institutional policies and practices and the attitudes and perceptions underlying these.

An example of state transphobia has been the recent review of prison regulations in respect of the treatment of trans prisoners following several deaths of trans prisoners. This has also resulted in a disappointing step backwards by insisting that only those prisoners who possess a GRC will be treated initially as their appropriate gender. Those without – who may well have been living in their acquired gender for many years - will in the first instance be sent to institutions matching their recorded birth sex. This seems counter to the spirit of the 2010 Equality Act as well as being unnecessary and humiliating.

Meanwhile various media outlets such as The Times, Sunday Times, Sun, Telegraph, Times Educational Supplement, Morning Star and even the Guardian, as well as programmes like Radio 4's Today and the BBC's Newsnight, have continued to provide platforms for hostile commentary on gender identity clinics, trans advocacy and support organisations like Mermaids, and the very existence of trans people.

Journalists, columnists and 'expert' guests have been able to attack the notion of self-identification as well as the possible introduction of non-binary categories in official data collection such as the Census. The TES lost their pro-trans columnist Natasha Devon in May in protest at carrying an article which effectively promoted a teaching pack produced by the

transphobic website Transgender Trend, and in 2018 Guardian US journalists protested the paper's editorial stance on trans rights.

In June this year, after lobbying by transphobic groups, trans blogger and activist Munroe Bergdorf was dropped by the NSPCC as the first LGBT+ campaigner for Childline. This led to a letter of protest signed by nearly 150 NSPCC employees appalled that the charity should cave in to such pressure.

In late July one of Boris Johnson's first acts following his election by a tiny cabal of white, middle aged, Tory Party reactionaries as Prime Minister was to appoint an old mucker of his from the right wing Spectator, Andrew Gilligan, as government transport advisor. Gilligan is also a notorious transphobe and, like Johnson himself, prone to making up stuff. More an inventive journalist than investigative he was sacked from the BBC for lying (a tad ironic given the state of the British media a la Corbyn, antisemitism and so on). He has been working for the Murdoch empire at The Sunday Times and has written a number of anti-trans articles, for one of which the paper was forced to print an apology as it (yes) made up stuff.

Various transphobic websites and, unfortunately, a minority of radical feminists and people ostensibly on the Left, have either echoed or given political cover to the transphobia of the Right. Some in unions like the NUT, UCU and FBU have voiced trans-critical positions, despite the Easter 2017 NUT conference for instance voting strongly to support trans self-identification.

Since March there have been protests, starting in Birmingham, by some religious conservatives hostile to LGBT+ awareness education outside Parkfield and Anderton primary schools. The tone of the protests has been both homophobic and transphobic. Birmingham police and LGBT+ organisations have reported a surge in LGBT+ hate crimes since the protests began. Protests have spread to some schools in other areas of the country and seem likely to re-emerge after the summer break.

Not only is anti-LGBT+ hate crime likely to surge further if the protests resume when schools return in September but if the campaign is not vigorously resisted a worst case scenario is that it could lead to a sort of 'Section 28 by the back door'. The claim by the protestors that they are not homophobic or transphobic is obvious nonsense. The willingness of organisers to ally with notoriously vile Islamophobes like Katie Hopkins is testimony to how politically rotten and opportunist is their homophobia and transphobia.

The protests are very damaging in that they attract criticism not only by those defending equal rights and diversity but also by those with Islamophobic motives and the Left has both to call this out while simultaneously giving no ground on defending schools' responsibilities to promote sex education, equality and respect for gender and sexual diversity.

All of this is taking place against a backdrop of rising physical attacks and harassment of LGBT+ people both in Britain and abroad which is well documented in statistics and media reports. For example, in Trump's US, despite overall crime rates decreasing, hate crimes last year rose to a decade high with LGBT+ people among the most targeted. Transgender hate crimes in the UK (excluding N Ireland) rose by 81% in the last financial year. In West Yorkshire transgender hate crime has more than trebled in three years.

All this makes the failure of a minority of the Left and some feminists to offer solidarity and support to trans people in the face of attacks from the alt-right, far right and religious bigots even more inexplicable and disappointing.

Some on the Left have couched their criticisms in terms of effectively endorsing the Right's ideological attacks on 'gender identity ideology'. The Right see this supposed ideology (claimed to be subversive of family values, heterosexuality and the gender binary) as an aspect of their bete noire - 'gender ideology' (the notion that women are equal to men). Those on the Left deploying the argument that 'gender identity ideology' should be decried as an aspect of identity theory (ie counter to a historical materialist approach) seem blind to the danger that this might compromise their simultaneous rejection of 'gender ideology' in the name of defending women's rights. They end up in a position of defending women's right to control their own bodies but opposing the same right for trans people, among other contradictions.

The transphobic arguments being deployed by the Right today, notably the old anti-gay trope of the need to safeguard children from predatory 'perverts', now newly applied to 'the trans lobby', are decades old but have become (re)heated amid accusations of women being 'silenced', lesbians being 'erased' and even of alleged violence between some feminists and trans activists. Some people are (wrongly) claiming that women's rights are undermined by trans rights. Trans people respond by pointing to the damaging transphobic abuse, misrepresentation and scaremongering that fuels rejection, hostility and physical attacks.

2004's Gender Recognition Act was a big step forward for trans rights but it had serious limitations. It allowed trans and non-binary people to get a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) and a new birth certificate in their chosen name and gender but the process is medicalised, lengthy, judged by a faceless panel, and quite costly.

It doesn't require evidence of gender affirmation surgery in Britain but does require a 'gender dysphoria' diagnosis from doctors, two years of living 'in role', and there's still the potential for a 'spousal veto' despite the Same Sex Marriage Act.

Several years ago the parliamentary Women and Equalities Committee carried out their study of trans peoples' lives and they subsequently called for changes to the GRA and better

training for NHS staff and a range of nearly thirty other recommendations pertaining to improving trans people's lives.

As noted above, the most controversial element exercising the transphobes has been the proposal to introduce self-identification in the GRC application. Critics claim this would make it easier for trans women - considered 'men' (eg 'male-bodied trans') by transphobes and some radical feminists - to enter women's spaces and attack or harass them. This conveniently ignores the fact that there is nothing right now to prevent cisgender men pretending to be women in order to gain entry to women's toilets and refuges if they want to attempt this. It's a bizarre stretch to suggest that some men might seriously go through a process of self-identification just to be in a position to do something which they can do now anyway.

These critics rarely mention the fact that de-medicalised and streamlined self-identification processes have in recent times been adopted in various countries including Ireland, Denmark, Malta, Columbia, and now Brazil and even Iceland with no reported cases of procedural abuse. The sky hasn't fallen in over these countries and there has been no evidence of male abusers rushing to masquerade as transwomen by applying for a certificate or endorsement as trans in order to attack or abuse cisgender women.

In any case the possession or not of a GRC is for almost all practical purposes of daily life actually irrelevant (and how would this be policed anyway?) but the issue is being presented as a threat nonetheless, in some cases by people who really should know better.

When considering this issue any socialist needs to start from the reality of trans oppression and, specifically, support for the modest GRA changes that could make life a bit easier for trans people. Trade unionists can help by adopting pro-trans motions in their branches and ensuring that unions get behind trans rights just as they got behind lesbian and gay rights in the past and helped fight homophobia in workplaces and in society in general.

Gender is socially constructed, biological sex is not as binary as people have assumed in the past, gender identity is nuanced and complex but as real as sexuality, transwomen are women, transmen are men and non-binary identities are increasingly a reality.

People who subvert the gender binary in whatever ways and consequently attract hostility and oppression deserve the solidarity of socialists and all progressive people. Crucially, it is a reactionary myth to propose that trans rights and women's rights are opposed to one another. The plain fact is that transwomen's rights *are* women's rights. Transwomen are women both on the basis of their gender identity and because they live in gender oppressive societies and are exposed to sexism and misogyny on a daily basis.

Concrete demands and joint campaigning in defence of both women's and trans rights against their common enemies – Tories, bosses, misogynists and transphobes – therefore offer the only progressive, non-divisive way forward. It's unfortunate that low levels of class

struggle for decades seem to have led some on the Left to forget that socialists offer solidarity to all the oppressed, not just certain groups.

The USS pensions strikes in 2018 and recent FE college strikes showed how mass struggles can unify workers. Collectively organising picketing, rallies and teach-outs makes social class so much more of a reality. When we fight alongside each other our particular identity categories are less likely to be perceived as the fundamental divides that we're encouraged to falsely believe they are in capitalist society. I doubt that the toxic trans arguments of recent years would have gained the traction they have done if mass strikes and social movement campaigns had been more widespread.

There is real hope, therefore, in the climate change strikes not least because the age profile of many of the new activists is such that for them antagonism between oppressed groups makes very little sense. Quite rightly they argue that humanity faces existential threats due to global warming and environmental degradation, so we need maximum unity. This sense of unity may often be expressed by their use of the terminology of 'intersectionality' which for them, it seems to me, means the recognition that people are often multiply oppressed. We Marxists might take issue with the term, and certainly we take issue with intersectionality theory and privilege theory that is associated with it, but our starting point of wanting to fight oppression collectively is a shared one which can unite us in common action.

Oppression is most effectively fought through unity in action as a class. Historically levels of oppression – racism, sexism, antisemitism - have been driven down during periods of mass working class struggle. Fundamentally, however, Marxists are that no oppressed group can win its liberation within capitalism since the system rests on various forms of endemic oppression to divide our side, increase our alienation and make our control and exploitation by the capitalist class more viable. Ultimately capitalism is the seed bed for oppression and has to be overcome.

We need both the longer term 'maximum' strategy of building organisations capable of directly challenging capitalism as a mode of production and replacing it with socialist society, and involvement in immediate struggles to defend rights already won and extend them when a system in crisis turns on the most vulnerable in society.

The best way to support both trans and women's rights in this current period of right wing assault on both is to make no concessions to transphobic arguments or sexism, misogyny and bigotry and to fight jointly alongside all those who want to resist for concrete demands that challenge austerity and the impact of the neoliberal order. We need to support the specific trans proposals currently under discussion and resist rising LGBT+ hate crime within the broader context of challenging and explaining the roots of oppression and pushing class demands and a universalist, democratic vision for education and a just society which can ultimately only come about through revolutionary means.

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