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Fifteenth World Congress

# For lesbian and gay liberation

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**The unanimous vote in favour of the resolution on lesbian/gay liberation at the Fourth International's 15th World Congress culminated almost five years of work, and marked a big step forward in the International's lesbian/gay work. The two-hour debate at the congress itself confirmed that there was a lot of lost time to make up for, but also that there are major opportunities to make rapid progress in the next few years.**

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/31pride.jpg>]

The fact that the topic was on this World Congress agenda was clearly due to the upsurge of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) movements in several countries since the late 1990s. The size of annual Pride marches has shown the movements' rapid expansion. Marches of hundreds of thousands have now become the rule in capitals like Paris, Berlin and Rome - and Rio de Janeiro - where only a few thousand were marching each year a few years ago.

Speakers in the congress discussion mentioned several aspects of LGBT organizing that have been springing up in country after country. Co-reporter Sérgio Vitorino (of the Portuguese Revolutionary Socialist Party) stressed the importance of FI comrades' intervention for the growing LGBT dimension of the movement for a different globalization - this dimension became visible for everyone this year at the third World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, where thousands of people passed through the LGBT space, and the first European Social Forum last November in Florence. Examples of specifically LGBT organizing against the war on Iraq were mentioned from the US, Britain and France; Vitorino reported that the whole LGBT movement in Portugal has come out against the war.

Social issues are beginning to become more important to LGBT movements in at least some countries, Vitorino said, after years when the main focus was on lobbying for law reform. This process - part of which is getting LGBT movements involved with the global justice movement - often means explaining the links with other movements, starting with the labour unions, and explaining why other movements should put forward specific LGBT demands. Vitorino gave several examples of these links between LGBT issues and the struggle against neo-liberalism: "fighting against 'hate speech' by fundamentalist or far right forces that use the 'homosexual taboo' to intimidate opponents; the fight against cutbacks, which affect LGBT people in particular ways; the fight against restrictive immigration laws (LGBT immigrants often face double trouble); campaigns against the super-profits of pharmaceutical multinationals that don't want to give free access to treatment drugs in dependent countries". Also mentioned in the discussion were the fate of gay men in Nazi concentration camps, the early involvement of the LGBT movement in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, its presence in the peace movement in Israel and its resistance to ultra-nationalist forces in countries like Croatia and Serbia. The other reporter on the resolution, Peter Drucker of the Dutch Socialist Workers Party, talked about the spread of organizing among LGBT immigrants, particularly in Europe among immigrants of Muslim origin. This phenomenon was confirmed by speakers from the floor, for example from Britain. "We need to resist the demonization of Muslims, which is sometimes justified on the grounds that Islam rejects the West's 'enlightened' attitudes towards women and gay", Drucker said. "In fact the Islamic world has a rich history of celebrating same-sex eroticism, while Western enlightenment has always left a lot to be desired. At the same time we must not make any compromise whatsoever with any form of antigay prejudice, religious or secular", he added. A US observer spoke to emphasize the importance of the fight against religious fundamentalism.

## Theory and tactics

The report included a summary of the resolution's core analysis of the roots of LGBT oppression, an analysis that goes back to the International's 1979 resolution on women's oppression and liberation. In some sections, the question had been raised in pre-congress discussions whether the capitalist family played too central a role in the resolution's analysis, and whether the family has changed in recent decades to a greater extent than the text recognizes. But these questions were not at all particularly prominent in the discussion at the congress itself. On the contrary, a Uruguayan delegate argued for example that the text's analysis of the patriarchal system and family should be deepened.

As a French delegate pointed out, this discussion is part of a wider reflection in the international about who the social subjects are in the process of transforming society. Where we once had a narrow conception of the working class as the subject of a socialist revolution, she said, we have increasingly come to conceive of the subjects of transformation as more diverse and plural.

Our work in LGBT movements reflects not only the FI's evolving analysis of patriarchal capitalist society, but also our overall strategic and tactical approach. We recognize the social and universal role of sexual repression as an apprenticeship for submission and conformism, its material translation in people's lives and the vulnerability of even revolutionaries faced with its impositions on everyday life, we recognize that there will be no structural change that does not deal with the bases of sexual oppression. This shows the subversive potential of these struggles and renders logical our participation in these movements, according to Vitorino. The work of revolutionaries should be based on "respect for the autonomy, the self-organization and the specific priorities of the movement, but intervening for its radicalization, for the development of links with the other social movements and openness to their analyses, supporting campaigns for reforms but resisting the normalizing pressures and the integrationist theses that do not seek real social change" and which do not identify the material sources of homophobia.

## Partnership

Particularly, but not only, in European movements, demands for legal recognition of same-sex relationships, up to and including same-sex marriage, have been a central mobilizing issue. The discussion at the congress reflected how complex this issue can be for socialist feminists who see marriage as an oppressive, patriarchal institution. Some LGBT radicals in Austria and Germany, whom our sections work with, for example, are simply opposed to the demand and have refused to join in organizing for it. Drucker defended what he called the resolution's "dialectical and transitional" standpoint on this issue.

"It starts from the immediate needs and demands of LGBT people, explores the contradictions that the fight for same-sex marriage exposes, and lists several ways that radicals can and should deepen these contradictions: for example, by demanding full equality for same-sex partnerships in every respect, by challenging the centrality of biological descent in laws on parenthood, and by demanding universal and individual social rights independent of anyone's marital status", Drucker said. "These are ways we can use the fight for fully equal same-sex marriage in order to undermine and challenge the institution of marriage."

The discussion at the congress confirmed once more that children are always a particularly sensitive point in discussions of sexuality and the family. One delegate, himself a father, expressed his anger at the way the media often target LGBT people as perpetrators in sexual abuse of children. He pointed out that the great majority of child sexual abuse is heterosexual and takes place within the family. A young delegate from Catalonia said that the oppression of young LGBT people needs to be seen in the context of the pervasive exploitation of young people and their sexuality that is more and more characteristic of contemporary capitalism.

Vitorino talked about specific issues raised in organizing among LGBT youth. "The imposition of restrictive gender roles and the learning of prejudice, shame and fear of transgression are aspects of sexual repression that have youth as their main targets", he said. "Plus, most young people lack the means for sexual emancipation, a tendency deepened by the attacks on social benefits in many countries, which reinforce dependence on families" and are threatening "basic pre-requisites for LGBT youth to be able to live apart from their heterosexual families". Young LGBTs are particularly affected by distorted images of same-sex relations, because they have no historical memory and no positive references in their still painful process of discovering same-sex desire.

Several speakers remarked on how difficult it still was for them to get up and speak on a subject as personal as sexuality. Although one speaker said that the resolution itself dealt too much with issues that are personal and private rather than political, others vehemently disagreed. Hard as it is to talk about one's own sexuality, a Danish woman delegate said, it is politically important. Many felt that a young British delegate's announcement of his own bisexuality, his comments on his difficulty in being "out" on the left and on his attraction to the British FI section because of its comparatively better stand on the issue was a high point in the discussion.

## Past and future

This discussion was far from the beginning of work on sexual oppression and liberation in the Fourth International. The Left Opposition was on record from the beginning as opposing Stalin's 1934 recriminalization of homosexuality in the Soviet Union. Penelope Duggan, one of the authors of the International's 1979 resolution on women's liberation, was on hand to remind this congress that the 1979 text had also defended gay rights and talked specifically about lesbian struggles. The FI's 1995 World Congress had also listed lesbian/gay liberation as one of the 16 points that we see as fundamental to our current's identity today and to building a broader mass international in future.

Three international seminars on LGBT issues, held in 1998, 2000 and 2002, have helped make it possible to deepen understanding and increase coordination in the international. The 1998 seminar launched the process of drafting the resolution adopted at this World Congress, and continued it through email exchanges and in the FI's international leadership bodies as well as at the later seminars. The aim from the beginning, pursued until a few days before the congress met, was to reach the broadest possible consensus among the FI's LGBT activists - a goal that was evidently achieved, given that compromises were reached in the drafting commission on all controversial points before the resolution reached the World Congress floor.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/33sfbgc.jpg>]

Still many people said, and no one denied, that the international has been too slow to take up lesbian/gay issues. The fight against AIDS, a life-and-death issue from the early 1980s on, became important for us only years later, one delegate (herself active in ACT UP) remarked. Other speakers commented on the heterosexual norm that is still a fact of life in FI sections. "We seek a profound transformation of gender relations and a society where, with the progressive elimination of heterosexual privilege, sexual identities change and sexual categories are not central for social organization", Vitorino said - and we want the change to start now, in the daily life of our organizations. "This means questioning the so-called private sphere of personal relations among militants, precisely where homophobia and sexism are more complex." For Vitorino, this does not imply only opposing prejudice inside our sections, but understanding the specificity and importance of these subjects and acting accordingly: understanding that, as with women comrades, the self-esteem and self-confidence required for political activism are at stake, and that supportive environments are essential.

This means challenging the many subtle ways in which the message is transmitted that "after all there are more important issues than sex". It also implies understanding that when the heterosexuality or homosexuality of any member is presumed inside our organizations, we could either be promoting gay invisibility or hurting someone going through a process of self-discovery. At the same time, "recognizing the right to LGBT self-organization does not

mean leaving the subject to LGBT comrades", said Vitorino. Inclusion must be specific and at the same time transversal, from organizations' base to their leaderships. This still rarely happens. He also noted, in spite of these obstacles, the important role of some FI sections in building and politicizing these social movements. In many other countries, sections have - or should have - relations with existing LGBT movements. "We must be ready to have each one of our militants take up campaigns for LGBT rights and to integrate these issues into our general agenda", Vitorino concluded.

One disturbing fact that surfaced in the discussion was that the French and Portuguese sections, probably the two sections of the FI in Europe with the strongest and best organized work in LGBT movements, did not even take up the resolution on lesbian/gay resolution in their national pre-congress discussions. Drucker commented in his summary that the process of delegate selection for this congress also showed how far the International still has to go. Although half of the seven or eight people who played the biggest role in drafting the resolution were women and several were from dominated countries, the report at the congress ended up being shared by two male comrades from European sections, in part because the women and Third World comrades were not given priority by their sections when it came time to choose delegates.

In fact, the first FI section to make LGBT work a major focus and play a prominent role in its country's LGBT movement was the Mexican Revolutionary Workers Party from the late 1970s on. One of the Mexican delegates to the congress, a veteran of those years, took the opportunity to remind the congress of that history and talk about the situation of LGBT people in Mexico today. Since then however, the balance has clearly shifted, with a greater proportion of the FI's organizing and thinking on lesbian/gay liberation being done in Europe. A Uruguayan delegate, whose organization is carrying on discussions with a Uruguayan radical LGBT group, urged the International to right the balance in future.