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Obituary:

# Rest in peace Leslie Feinberg

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**"Did we fight back because our love was outlawed? Or because we were gender outlaws? I never thought to ask myself that question. (..) We just closed ranks and fought hard." (Leslie Feinberg, In the Spirit of Stonewall)**

Leslie Feinberg is dead. Zie [\[1\]](#) identified as an anti-racist white, working-class, secular Jewish, transgender, lesbian, female, revolutionary communist. The radical movement and the queers have lost an important person.

Leslie succumbed last Saturday November 15, 2014 after a long sickbed to the effects of multiple tick-borne diseases. Hir writings have been life saving for many young queers and hir engagement with many struggles made hir an example for many to follow. Zie died at home in Syracuse NY, with hir partner of 22 years, Minnie Bruce Pratt, by hir side.

Born September 1, 1949 in Kansas City, Missouri in the USA, Leslie Feinberg grew up in the 1960s as a young butch lesbian in the bars and the factories of Buffalo, New York. There zie had her coming out, hir first jobs and experienced direct discrimination but also did hir first organizing.

Leslie was arguably the first one to develop a Marxist approach to transgender liberation. In June 1992 zie published *Transgender Liberation: A Movement whose Time Has Come: A Marxist View of When and Why Transgender Oppression Arose*. This booklet was to my knowledge the first to couple the fight for our gender identities with revolutionary communism.

Zie writes there (as in hir later book *Transgender Warriors*) that transgender is ages old. "It is passing that is historically new. Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility. Transgendered people should be able to live and express their gender without criticism or threats or violence. But that is not the case today." Nowhere, I might add. Not even in Argentina, which holds the gold standard for gender recognition these days.

The word transgender was coined by Virginia Prince in 1969 and is an umbrella definition that, in brief, indicates that a person's deeply felt idea of who they are is different from the sex/gender assigned at birth and the expectations that accompany that. Trans\* stands for all forms of transgender such as cross dressers, genderqueers, "transsexuals" (an identity taken from the psychiatric handbooks, requiring "full" transition), gender-blenders and other gender-non-conforming people and is a complex of gender (identity and expression) diversity.

Feinberg links transgender oppression directly to the patriarchal structures of society and offers a historical materialist analysis of how the trouble began: with the transition to feudalism and with Christianity (Catholic only in those days) as the rising religion of the landowning elites, which needed to stamp out the old religions in order to rule. And continued to do so with its colonial conquests.

We know gender diversity existed in pre-Columbian Latin America. Feinberg traces trans\* people from early history through Joan of Arc to the post-Stonewall years. Hir *Transgender Warriors* reclaims and queers activists and saints from the dust of history.

Feinberg is most famous for hir 1993 novel *Stone Butch Blues*, which tells the story of Jess Goldberg, a young white working class butch lesbian who left hir family and started working in the factories around Buffalo, New York. This engaging story of butch and femme, working class queers and masculine women, was for many young butches and

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trans masculine people in the 1990s and beyond the first book through which they encountered a positive view of themselves. Not like the tormented Stephen of the Well of Loneliness by Radclyffe Hall [2] some generations before.

In all Feinberg's work, hir white working class revolutionary trans background shows: both in the novels Stone Butch Blues and Drag King Dreams and in hir nonfiction works. Feinberg may not have contributed much to a Marxist theory on transgender liberation, but zie was a living example of solidarity. Talking about transgender liberation in the same breath as other forms of liberation was already revolutionary in itself. Leslie Feinberg's communist work also took the form through hir membership of the Workers World Party (WWP) [3] of fighting for all oppressed groups, opposing imperialist wars and standing with the exploited Chicano workers of Coca-Cola and other big brands. Hir last campaign, for which zie was sent to jail, involved actions in solidarity with CeCe McDonald, a black trans woman who got jailed for self-defence against transphobic attackers, because one of them died in the aftermath of the attack.

Leslie Feinberg's revolution was grounded in feminist revolution. The personal is political. And zie took the political into hir personal life, as zie shows in Drag King Dreams. Living with and working for the cause of all oppressed at home. With the WWP zie may have adopted some dubious standpoints on solidarity abroad, but zie was engaged early on in the fight for the rights of Palestine and at home in an intersectional and anti-capitalist women's, LGBTI rights and workers' rights struggle.

We will miss hir great example of trans involvement in revolutionary struggle, who made solidarity practical. Zie showed the revolutionary movement how not forget gender identity issues. May hir work live on in all our organisations.

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[1] Leslie used "zie"/"hir" and "she" as personal pronouns. I stick with "zie" to prevent erasing hir transness. When using "she" etc that happens all too soon.

[2] Radcliffe Hall's Well of Loneliness was published in 1928 and was the first novel in which lesbianism appears openly. It talks about lesbianism as 'sexual inversion'; a theory developed by sexologists Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds at the end of the 19th century. This theory which talks about butch lesbians as men trapped in female bodies and camp gay men as the reverse seems very reactionary to us today. But in its time it was ground breaking and associated with the left because it argued that different expressions of sexuality than the heterosexual norm were natural.

[3] A US socialist group that split from the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party in 1959, among other things in defence of the 1956 Soviet intervention in Hungary.