The rebirth of a radical lesbian and gay movement can be dated to the summer of 1969. A routine police raid on a gay bar in New York led to the Stonewall riots. Inspired by the huge street demonstrations of the mass campaign in the USA against the Vietnam War, by the street battles of students in France and Germany and sick of the incessant police harassment they suffered, gays fought back with a vengeance. For three days and nights gay men battled with the cops. Their action set rolling a whole new movement. Prior to Stonewall the campaigning for homosexual rights was low key. Organisations were dedicated primarily to lobbying people in high places and were dominated by bourgeois liberals seeking limited reforms that would help make their lives easier. Typical of such groups was the Homosexual Reform Society in Britain, set up in 1958 and geared more or less exclusively to getting the then Tory government to implement the Wolfenden proposals. The Society was strictly non-political, and confined its activities to persuading potentially sympathetic MPs of the need for law reform. This class collaborationist approach was also followed by the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE), which originated in the North West Committee of the Society.

To many activists back in the late 1960s and early 1970s CHE offered little or nothing. It was particularly dire on the question of lesbianism. The sheer energy and militancy of the Stonewall riots and the ?liberation? movement they inspired, were far more appealing to the younger lesbians and gays undergoing a general radicalisation. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was created, first in the USA and then in Britain, as the radical alternative to CHE.

As against CHE?s discreet pleas for toleration the GLF advocated and practiced an unapologetic pride in gayness. Gay liberation was viewed as first and foremost liberation from self-oppression, from life in the closet. The GLF?s proposed means for achieving liberation was for more and more gays to ?come out?. If this occurred on a sufficiently mass scale homophobia would be challenged and overcome. This strategy stressed the courage of the individual ? helped by groups of course ? but it placed no special stress or reliance on the labour movement and the working class.

This approach led the GLF in the USA and Britain automatically towards a separatist position. From feminism it took over a radical critique of the family. But this critique was largely limited to the restrictions that the family placed on homosexuality. The various GLF manifestos did not explain why the family was the root of lesbian and gay oppression, what its role and function was in society and consequently how to overcome or transform it. Its tactics were, as a result, individualistic and separatist.

The use of drag by gay men, for example, certainly challenged bourgeois society?s stipulations concerning gender based dress codes but did nothing to change bourgeois society itself. Radical drag could never have mass appeal as a means of struggle, based as it was on self-expression and individualistic activity. Worse, it alienated many lesbians in the GLF who saw woman-deprecating mimicry at work amongst at least sections of the drag activists. The importance of drag within the GLF revealed a fundamental
weakness in its strategy. The individualistic methods of struggle it proposed were a reflection of its largely petit bourgeois social composition. And that radical petit bourgeois individualism led to dress, along with a host of other things that constituted a particular life-style, becoming more important than collective struggle.

Gradually the campaigning gave way to the creation of a cultural scene—a life-style that lesbians and gays could live, within capitalist society. Of course individuals developing their own lives, personal, sexual and social in a way that recognised and celebrated their gayness was a necessary and totally legitimate thing to do. But it was not and could not be a strategy for eliminating the root causes of oppression. The rapid growth of gay culture—even of a gay capitalism—to cater for it whilst it made life better for many gay men and, to a lesser extent, for lesbians, in San Francisco, New York, London and Amsterdam, did not achieve the breakthrough of overcoming capitalist society’s homophobia. Indeed as the liberal 1960s and 1970s gave way to the reactionary 1980s—the decade of Jerry Falwell, Ronald Reagan et al—it became plain, even before the tragedy of AIDS, that a moral counter-offensive was being launched. AIDS added a moral panic to a developing moral reaction. The life-style solution? available at its peak only to those who could afford it and who lived in the larger cities? has proved to be a very precarious buffer between the individual and his or her oppression. Capitalism can and does intrude into the life-styles of lesbians by denying them custody of their children and, under the gross indecency laws, gay men are imprisoned for cottaging.

Life-styleism, as the response that eventually dominated within the GLF, led to its collapse as a fighting movement. It had made important gains for lesbians and gay men. The GLF, along with the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) and to some extent inspired by it, placed the question of sexual politics back onto the political agenda. But like the WLM, its failure to develop a collective response, a class response to oppression, turned it in on itself and caused fragmentation to the extent whereby a lesbian and gay movement, in any meaningful sense of the word, ceased to exist.

The movement was replaced by numerous, and sometimes competing, pressure groups. Acrimonious clashes arose from the fact that individualism paved the way for subjectivism. The self became the centre of everything and triumphed over what had been the uniting features of the movement—the common fight against oppression. Different people chose different life-styles, waged disputes as to which were the best and parted company. The key institutions of oppression ceased to be central targets and were left intact.

One group to emerge out of the GLF and also from sections of the left, was the Gay Left Collective. It published Gay Left, the first issue of which came out in the Autumn of 1975. The Collective’s members had been profoundly influenced by the class battles that had raged in Britain in the early 1970s. These battles had shown the real power and potential of the working class. The 1974 miners’ strike, for example, had led to the Tory government being forced to call an election which they lost. Gay Left was initially a positive response to these developments. The journal attacked life-styleism as an introspective retreat from the terrain of struggle and as a failure to register the significance of the class struggle for lesbian and gay liberation. The first issue scathingly criticised the gay movement’s life-style thus:

“...the power structures of society were left completely untouched, and the lives of the majority of gay people were left completely unchanged by the sweet smells of incense, inspiration and home-baked bread.”

Rejecting an individual road to liberation, the Collective unambiguously declared, “Sexual oppression cannot be destroyed under capitalism.”

This development out of the gay movement was extremely significant. It reflected the failure of both the lesbian and gay movement and the established groups on the British left to offer lesbian and gay socialists (though the Collective was initially all male) a perspective of struggle.
None of the left groups had provided a class answer to the lesbian and gay question. Therefore, a small group of gay men who regarded themselves as Marxists set out to try and do just that. Many of the contributions to the journal, particularly in its first year of existence, were very valuable. At a theoretical level they endeavoured to develop a class based theory of sexual politics. At a practical level Gay Left promoted the building of gay groups in particular workplaces and unions, unifying such groups in a Gay Workers’ Movement. However, a definite trend away from class politics began to emerge, growing stronger as the left itself fragmented in the early years of the Labour government.

As the 1970s wore on the politics of feminism began to exercise a greater influence over Gay Left than the politics of Marxism. The absence of an authentic and influential Trotskyist organisation, which took sexual politics seriously, helped this process along. The emphasis of the journal began to shift away from collective struggles and more and more to purely personal struggles. The slogan ‘the personal is political’ came to mean that the personal, the way you felt and behaved, was more important than politics in the sense of taking collective social action. Even sexual politics started to be defined in purely subjectivist terms.

Gay Left began to replace rather than supplement, the method of Marxism with the methods of psychoanalysis as the key means to understanding oppression. The turn away from Marxism was signalled in an article in the fifth issue of the journal entitled ‘Why Marx?’. This article argued that Lenin and Trotsky were, despite everything they wrote against it, guilty of economism. Economism is a tendency to regard economic or trade union struggles as self-sufficient, as the class struggle par excellence, and therefore tends to denigrate political struggles or any issues originating outside of the workplace. Economism believes in tailing economic struggles, not in leading them and linking them with other struggles. Lenin and Trotsky were opponents of this tendency not practitioners of it. In the Althusserian and feminist jargon popular in the 1970s, however, economism came to stand for the class interests of the proletariat, which were compared unfavourably with ‘ideological struggles’ waged by intellectuals on behalf of the oppressed. Indeed for many feminists the working class (white, male and heterosexual by definition) was enemy number one.

Gay Left took on board this false definition of economism which denigrated the class struggle at the workplace. Instead of seeking to integrate the fight for lesbian and gay liberation with the struggles of workers for better wages and conditions, for trade union rights, for jobs, the Collective started to counterpose a concern for ‘personal politics’ to the class struggle. Without at first realising it Gay Left was helping petit bourgeois individualism to make a comeback. Sexual oppression was removed altogether from the field of class struggle and taken upstairs to the ‘ideological level’. This meant that the fight for lesbian and gay liberation and the class struggle were increasingly seen as totally distinct spheres of practice. Marxism was suitable for class struggle but psychology was the key to understanding oppression: ‘Psychoanalysis and the debates on ideology [debates largely amongst Stalinists of the Eurocommunist stripe] provide a theoretical basis for the continuing struggles of women and gays against patriarchy . . . As gays our specific oppression is ideological, though as socialists we fully participate in the necessary economic and political struggles against capitalism.’

The old critique of the GLF and the fragments coming out of it, which recognised the specific nature of the family within capitalism and its importance to the capitalist economic order, was dropped. Instead the Collective criticised itself in its first year because it had ‘probably overstressed the purely economic aspects of the family?’. And the Leninist party was abandoned in favour of the organisationally and politically autonomous movement:

‘. . . gay liberation is the self-defined activity of gay people fighting to gain control of their own lives and
destinies... We believe an autonomous gay movement (and an autonomous women's movement) to be essential, and reject any effort to subordinate the movement to any one political sect.

So, liberation was self-defined by gay people as a whole, no matter what their class, their politics or their beliefs. Gay Left had come full circle. By the fifth issue its principal contributors were lighting their own incense sticks and baking their own wholemeal bread.

The reason for Gay Left's demise was its inability to develop Marxism on the question of sexual politics and break decisively with feminism. For that matter it also failed to develop a revolutionary critique of the real economism on the British left, embodied in the practice of the International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party (IS/SWP). Jeffrey Weeks, one of Gay Left's regular contributors, wrote in the first issue that the failure by socialists to tackle sexual oppression:

?. . . represents, above all, a theoretical failure to grasp that a ruling class perpetuates itself not only through the economic and ideological forms of exploitation and oppression, but also through the character structures, the emotional formations of its members.?

This ?not only but also? approach is simply not a Marxist, materialist approach. The real question is what relationship do the ?character structures? and ?emotional formations? of individuals bear to the system of exploitation and class rule? For Marxists the mode of production is the decisive basis on which the family, and consequently the general patterns of individual psychology, rest. Therefore, you cannot understand problems of individual psychology ? the existence of which we do not at all deny ? or the sexist and heterosexist consciousness of most men and women, without understanding that our society is capitalist. Only on the basis of this understanding can individual psychological problems be tackled and sexist/heterosexist consciousness fought. Any psychology, no matter how radical, that starts with the individual rather than with capitalist society and its social relations, including the family (and the sexist/heterosexist norms that prevail within it) will end up offering individualistic and utopian solutions to the problem.

The bourgeois family which, by its very nature, oppresses women and homosexuals, can only be replaced when its roots in the capitalist mode of production are dug up. The only class that has the ability to do this is the working class. Therefore to counterpose as separate tasks the struggle for socialism and the fight to overcome character structures is totally false. The separatism it involves confirms and reinforces the sexism and heterosexism of the existing reformist labour movement. It hives off lesbians and gays into a utopian project of psychological self-liberation. Feminism had already gone down this path. Gay Left followed.

By the second half of the 1970s feminism had come a long way. The modern WLM was not, at the outset, all that sympathetic to lesbians. When lesbians in Britain left the GLF and turned to the women's movement they found not only an unwillingness to accept sexual orientation as an important question but also open hostility to lesbianism. In Sisterhood is Powerful one activist recalled:

?When a woman showed up at a feminist meeting and announced she was a lesbian, many women avoided her. Others told her to keep her mouth shut for fear of endangering the cause.?

However, the question of lesbianism refused to go away. In fact the opposite happened. The issue kept being raised. In 1978, at a women's conference in Birmingham, a split on the issue of lesbianism between radical feminists and socialist feminists occurred. The split was a sign of the fragmentation that was wracking and destroying the WLM. In fact the origins of the split lay in an earlier period of feminist history. The radical feminists had argued at a national conference of the WLM in 1971 that men were the enemy?
all men. In their position paper, “Thoughts on Feminism,” they argued that to achieve liberation women had to stop sleeping with men:

? . . . as long as the Sex Act remains the norm for sexual relations, we remain the habitual givers, pawns in the male power game. And we will continue to be dominated by men . . . As long as we have our closest emotional/sexual relationships with men, women?s liberation can be no more than a lobby.? 

Seeing the division in society as being primarily between genders opened the door to attacks on the male working class (no different to male bosses because of their shared anatomy) and left the radical feminists classifying the women of the ruling class as potential sisters in struggle. The whole reactionary theory was encapsulated by Leeds Revolutionary Women in 1979 who denounced the masses of women who are heterosexual:

?Every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps maintain the oppression of her sisters and hinders our struggle.? 

Such a position not surprisingly split the WLM since it stigmatised its heterosexual members as scabs.

The radical feminist wing of the WLM held a definite appeal for many lesbians. The GLF ? an alliance with gay men ? had not really provided the answers. The WLM was, to some extent, wary of making lesbianism a major issue. Radical feminism seemed to be the only creed that took lesbianism seriously. Yet its logic was extreme separatism and bitter hostility to the ?male dominated? working class. It led to political lesbianism. Sexual orientation became determined by a strictly political consideration ? men are the enemy. We believe that people should be free to choose their sexual orientation for whatever reason they like. But we do challenge the premise that political lesbians base their choice on, the premise that all men are the enemy. It is a premise that leads to disunity in the face of the class enemy in whose interests sexual oppression is perpetrated. It undermines the possibility of building unity between lesbians and gay men, let alone between them and the working class as a whole.

Radical feminism identified the system on which male power was based as patriarchy not class society. This justified the theory that all men oppressed all women and were therefore the real enemy. It led to some horrendously reactionary ideas such as the control of the male population through eugenics to keep it at the 10% required for reproductive purposes, an idea seriously put forward at a US women?s conference. Socialist feminism did not dare challenge the false theory of patriarchy and male power head on. As a result the socialist feminists found themselves, despite their formal split with the radicals, adapting some of the most ?radical? feminist ideas. They saw women?s subjection to men as being based on ideological, psychological and sexual oppression and articulated as an initial answer to this consciousness raising.

It soon became apparent that only a tiny number of women could be drawn into this process. Why were most women impervious to it? Not because the principal terrain of struggle lay elsewhere for the mass of women, said the socialist feminists ? echoing their radical sisters ? but because women were subjected to the terror of sexual violence. Sexual violence was the most important means of enforcing male power. This violence was defined as being an unbroken chain starting from verbal comments, through domestic violence and sexual harassment at work right up to rape.

Such a definition fails to recognise that all acts of violence take place within particular contexts, and while all, including rape, are manifestations of the oppressive nature of human relations under capitalism, qualitative distinctions between sexist verbal comments, sexual harassment and rape clearly exist and have to be made. They cannot be understood as a simple continuum. Yet both radical and socialist
feminism argued that male power was exercised through an interconnected sliding scale of violence. This was summed up in the slogan ?pornography is the theory, rape the practice?. Hence the campaigns sponsored by socialist feminism (amazingly, by the British SWP as well during the height of its feminist Women?s Voice turn in the late 1970s) such as ?Reclaim the Night? and the anti-pornography campaigns. As the tactics and strategy of the women?s movement became more and more anti-male and separatist, its base became narrower and as a movement, even as a socialist feminist movement, it had virtually ceased to exist by the early 1980s.

While socialist feminism and lesbian and gay activists influenced by it, avoided the worst excesses of man-hating they did embrace the theory that oppression stemmed from male power. Thus while patriarchy and class society were related, they were at the same time distinct. To fight class society you needed ? eventually ? socialism. To fight patriarchy you needed feminism ? now. This outlook permeated the positions of one of the most important socialist contributions on lesbian and gay liberation in the 1980s, Gay Liberation in the Eighties by Jamie Gough and Mike Macnair (Gough being a regular writer in the publications of the British section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International ? the USFI ? until it split a few years ago). This book has influenced the Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights (LCLGR) and, in some respects, must take responsibility for leaving that organisation floundering when the separatists and class collaborationist liberals hijacked the Legislation for Lesbian and Gay Rights Campaign conference. The book?s central argument is that male power results in an alienated sexuality for all, and that this is at the root of lesbian and gay oppression. In this analysis class society becomes a secondary factor. The authors write:

?The repression of lesbian sex and of men playing the ?passive? role are, then, based on male power and the family system.?

And again:

?. . . sexuality is arranged around a system of male power.?

Systems of sexual order replace those of economic order as the bedrock determining causes of sexual oppression. Now, we do not deny that the ideology of male dominance has a profound influence on the way in which society, in its majority, views and treats homosexuality. It will take working class state power and years of education to lay the basis for eradicating this ideology. But neither the ideology of male dominance, nor even the limited benefits that many men do gain from the oppression of women, should be confused with the economic and class relations that these things are based on. The ideology of male dominance is not a reflection of a reality called male power, but of the reality of class society in which sexual order is arranged to suit the needs of the ruling class.

Gough and Macnair?s false analysis is no mere academic mistake. It leads to a class collaborationist practice and to support for the idea of an all class lesbian and gay movement. They argue:

?As with the women?s liberation movement, socialists must support and help to develop the existing gay liberation movement. To wait until there exists a uniformly ?socialist? or ?communist? or ?working class? gay movement is a recipe for doing nothing about gay liberation.?

That the authors put inverted commas around the terms relating to class and class politics, but do not when they talk about the gay liberation movement speaks volumes about their own politics. The working class exists. Revolutionary communism is the only politics that fights consistently for the historic interests of that class and for all those oppressed by capitalism. To downgrade them in the way Gough and Macnair do is to abandon the terrain of class politics. This is particularly true given that they counterpose to a
working class perspective the existing gay liberation movement. Which gay liberation movement?

There simply isn?t one in Britain, or indeed in most countries. There are numerous disparate campaigns. There are class divisions between different wings of the lesbian and gay communities. No matter, Gough and Macnair argue, this movement is central, whereas class politics are peripheral. In fact, as the experience of those lesbians and gays who organised support for the striking miners and printers discovered, this movement or more accurately the lesbian and gay community in the larger cities is split along class lines in any case. Sections supported the strikers, sections refused to. We say that it is necessary to take the split further.

Capitalism, not male power, is the real obstacle to sexual liberation. The struggle for liberation cannot be separated from the class struggle for socialism. If it is, it will lead to the triumph of bourgeois and petit bourgeois elements whose perspective is limited to piecemeal legal reform within the framework of capitalism. This was demonstrated in real life by the hijacking of the Legislation Campaign at its May 1987 conference. It was seized from the Gough and Macnair influenced LCLGR by a motley alliance of anti-working class liberals and feminists, whose radicalism was such that they saw fit to bait, in a completely reactionary manner, bisexuals, transsexuals, straight supporters of the campaign and left groups, all in the name of autonomy.

A major reason for the triumph of feminist and separatist ideas amongst lesbian and gay activists was the failure of the centrist left to provide an alternative. Indeed, hostility to even discussing the lesbian and gay question on the part of the British left groups, which were growing in size and influence in the early 1970s, drove many women and gay men towards separatism. Later adaptations to feminism by the SWP, the USFI and others merely served to bring the influence of separatist ideas into the labour movement. In the early 1980s this meant these ideas being carried into the left of the Labour Party.

The IS/SWP tradition in Britain reveals the real errors of economism on the question of sexual politics. Economism is not a serious involvement with the economic struggles of the working class but a refusal to raise transitional demands or political slogans within these struggles. It is not active involvement in work in the trade unions, but a refusal to raise anything but the narrowest issues in them. It is, in short, the tailing of the present consciousness of the mass of trade unionists in the belief that this consciousness will spontaneously develop into a socialist one if the struggles intensify sufficiently. The economist therefore tends to exclude difficult questions which seem to bear no relationship to the economic struggle.

The IS group took the question of racism very seriously especially after the London dockers, a militant section of workers, marched in support of Enoch Powell. But the lesbian and gay question did not (apparently) threaten to split the workers in their economic struggle in the same way as racism did. Therefore IS relegated it to a footnote.

Indeed when gay activists tried to raise it inside IS they got short shrift being accused of splitting the working class over secondary questions.

The issue of homosexuality was taken up for the first time since Dallas? articles of the 1950s (see Chapter 2) in 1973. A gay activist, Don Milligan, submitted an article on the GLF to Socialist Worker and raised the lesbian and gay question at the group? national conference. The matter was referred to the incoming leadership who promptly ignored the whole question. In the years following, an IS Gay Group was set up but the leadership repeatedly obstructed its functioning. It was refused advertising space in the paper and any official status within the group. A conference on sexism planned by the Gay Group in 1973 was cancelled as a result of pressure from the leadership. Typical of the attitude of the leadership was a response to the Gay Group? s request for a conference from the Publications and Training Committee?.
stated:

?IS does not take a position on what you describe as ?sexism?, and also contrary to your opinion we have not found the issue to cause any concern amongst the working class members of IS.?

In other words it was not the business of IS members, supposed revolutionaries, to champion the cause of the oppressed inside the working class. This, alongside the IS/SWP attitude to the woman?s question and to Ireland was symptomatic of its deep and consistent economism. Not surprisingly it led to many lesbians and gay men leaving ? or to put it more accurately, being driven out of ? the organisation.

It was only after feminism?s ideological impact on society began to make itself felt inside the unions and the Labour Party that the SWP, as IS had become, turned its attention to matters of sexual politics. It was prepared to adapt to feminism to catch a few recruits. In 1977 Women?s Voice groups were set up. In 1979 the SWP published The Word is Gay. In both cases the politics of the existing autonomous movements were tailed, not challenged. Just as economism in the early 1970s led IS to tail the economic struggle of the workers in the hope of winning recruits, so in the later 1970s it tailed the struggles of the sexually oppressed, likewise in search of recruits rather than revolutionary answers and a revolutionary strategy. For good measure it ritualistically added the call for trade union action on matters of sexual politics, but it did not attempt to construct a Marxist alternative to feminism.

When the recruitment ceased and the danger of losing members to the movements increased, the SWP?s turn to feminism was abruptly ended. Women?s Voice groups were wound up and, during the Thatcher years, the ?downturn?, as the SWP called that period, the organisation confined itself to abstract propaganda on the lesbian and gay question. If the working class could not fight on the economic front how could it be expected to take up other causes? Nothing, therefore, could be done until the dark clouds of the downturn had faded away. Doubtless, if a renewed period of aggressive wage struggles materialised the SWP would revert to saying that the question of lesbian and gay rights was a side issue or a diversion.

Militant, the other major group on the British left claiming to be Marxist, has an even worse record. Only since 1983-84 did it allow the LPYS, which it controlled, to take a position on lesbian and gay rights. Whereas the SWP chopped and changed its position on the movements of the sexually oppressed, ignoring them one minute and tailing them the next, and the British section of the USFI (a tradition represented by Gough) consistently adapted to feminism, the Militant stood firm in the tradition of 1930s ?Marxism? ? that is, Stalinism ? on sexuality. For years it classified homosexuality as a ?bourgeois perversion?. Gay-baiting inside the LPYS was encouraged and physical attacks on gay men took place at the LPYS summer camps in 1981 and 1982. Those who raised the question of homosexuality inside the LPYS were dismissed as ?middle class?. Not only was lesbian and gay rights, in their view, ?not a working class issue?, it was not even acknowledged as a legitimate democratic issue.

Militant?s attitude remained unchallenged until lesbians and gay men within its own ranks organised themselves unofficially. This, combined with pressure from the Labour left, which had begun to identify the lesbian and gay issue as one of its worthy causes, forced Ted Grant, the leader of Militant, to put his 1930s outlook into the closet. However, despite the change of position inside the LPYS and the visibility of lesbians and gays in Militant, the tendency?s position today is a long way from Marxism. Just as its answer to the working class on most issues is ?socialism?, plus a few reforms now, so for lesbians and gays all it offers is socialism in the millenia and the reduction, not the abolition of, the age of consent.

Against such distortions of Marxism one group on the international left which has tried to develop a serious programme for lesbian and gay liberation is the International Trotskyist Committee (ITC). The British section of this tendency, the Revolutionary Internationalist League (RIL) published an action programme
for lesbians and gays. The ITC?  s section in the USA, the Revolutionary Workers League (R WL) is distinguished for the importance it attaches to the struggles of lesbian and gay men. Many points made by the ITC on the realities of lesbian and gay oppression and its relationship to the way in which capitalism structures and uses the family unit, are valid. The ITC have also stated, formally at least, that their interventions into various lesbian and gay movements are aimed at winning them to a class position or splitting them on a class basis.

However, there is a crucial aspect of their analysis of the ?specially oppressed? that undermines the ITC? s claim to to be the real Marxists on this question. The RWL in particular have long argued that the ?specially oppressed? ? blacks, women, lesbians and gay men ? are the people who are most likely to be radicalised in an anti-capitalist direction. Without any explanation the RWL argue that the more oppressed you are the more radical you are likely to be. Thus they write that women and gays ?can be some of the most militant class struggle fighters?. This is true, but it does not flow automatically from the fact that they are oppressed. The question of class interest plays a vital part in determining whether or not this is what they become.

Moreover, it is without a doubt the case that white, male, heterosexuals can be amongst the most militant class fighters. But the RWL go on to stress that the ?specially oppressed? are the vanguard of the socialist revolution. Thus:

?The RWL has a special commitment to winning militant lesbian/gay workers and intellectuals to the struggle for socialist revolution.?

Special, that is, in the sense of prioritising lesbian and gay work, and work amongst other sections of the oppressed, over all other work, in pursuit of a vanguard of the oppressed. Despite their professed class politics the RWL are drawn into blurring the class line amongst the oppressed. They emphasise the separateness of the specially oppressed and, by compiling lists of which section is more oppressed than another and therefore requiring extra special emphasis, they pass value judgements. The most oppressed become the most highly valued, the best potential vanguard fighters. And the danger of this is that it counterposes sections of the class to each other. It stresses special divisions over the need for class unity. It is a strategy that risks reproducing capitalism?s own divisions amongst the working class.

A working class lesbian is likely to have more in common with a working class heterosexual, than with a life-stylist middle class lesbian.

Class interests will, eventually, triumph over the fact of common oppression. Of course in the USA it is true that one section of the socially oppressed, the black working class, is very much a vanguard element in the class struggle. But to generalise from this experience and assert that this will be true for all of the oppressed groups is not only revisionism, it also flies in the face of reality in many countries.

The elevation of the revolutionary potential of the oppressed and the role as foremost vanguard fighters assigned to them by the RWL pushes the ITC as a whole towards an uncritical stance towards the autonomous organisations of the oppressed. For the RIL, for example, gay activism in and of itself ? regardless of whether it is carried out under Trotskyist leadership ? is the vital thing. They wrote of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM):

?The fact that it has only been due to gay activists and not those from the left has been important.?

This misrepresentation of the facts (the organised left was the backbone of the LGSM campaign) was an attempt to justify the ITC? s belief that the ?specially oppressed sectors are the most militant? and that therefore ?intervention [amongst lesbians and gay men] is an essential process in mobilising the vanguard?. 
This oppressed vanguard theory is carried into the RIL?s Action Programme for Lesbian and Gay Liberation. The strategy outlined in this document is to ?seek genuine unity with all specially oppressed people in the struggle for liberation?. The need for this struggle to be rooted, above all, in the organisations of the working class, with self-organisation only as a tactical means of furthering the objective of class unity, is ignored by the RIL/ITC. The Action Programme is not a Marxist programme for the whole working class on the lesbian and gay question. It is a charter for mobilising self-organised lesbians and gays for democratic and civil rights. For, although we are informed that ?our struggle is a struggle against the capitalist class and the state which serves it?, the programme never makes concrete the link between the struggles of lesbians and gay men and the class struggle.

While we would agree with many of its demands they do not, unless they are actually linked with the struggle for revolutionary socialism, add up to liberation. Indeed at one point the programme leans towards the Gough/USFI view that the fulfilment of democratic reforms via a Labour government, actually equals liberation:

?We must demand that the Labour Party implement the demands for lesbian and gay liberation in this programme, for civil rights at work in the fields of housing, health care and education.?

Civil rights do not equal liberation. And what of the revolutionary workers? government, the smashing of the state, the socialisation of domestic labour? The programme makes no connection between the fight for these things, which the ITC claims to stand for, and the fight for lesbian and gay liberation.

As against the ITC?s view we believe that an action programme that links the struggle for democratic rights and civil liberties, the struggle for sexual liberation and the struggle for socialism is needed. Around it lesbians and gay men must organise on a class basis, with the clear objective of winning the working class as a whole to their cause.

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