



Out of the Red Closet

*Gay and lesbian
experiences in the
previous communist
movement*



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Kasama
is a communist project that seeks to reconceive and
regroup for a profound revolutionary transformation of society.

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Introduction

One of the most remarkable events on the Kasama site during the summer of 2011 has been the outpouring of discussion over the treatment of gay people in the previous communist movement.

Libri Devrim opened the door with her piece “My life in a red closet” – a heartfelt remembrance written with deliberate restraint.

There was a heartening outpouring of interest, experience and discussion. Kasama published several different, unsolicited new posts.

Three of them detailed experiences with the red closet in the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA: “Working with the RCP, Opposing the homophobia,” “Rejected by comrades: My love was just love,” and “Suzie’s story: Queer, isolated, invisible.”

Other posts dealt with experiences and summations from outside the RCP, including “Closet Rules: My Story of Survival” and “The Cahokian: Homophobia & the value of thoughtful excavation.”

There were (all together) about 200 comments and over 6,000 page views of these threads.

In this pamphlet, we gather and reprint these posts and some of the comments that followed.

Excavation and Self-Criticism

For a number of reasons, the discussion focused largely on excavating the methods of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA.

Previously, it has been widely known that the RCP (and quite a few other communist organizations before them) argued *theoretically* that gay people were inherently non-revolutionary or reactionary. But there has never previously been an open exposure of the *methods*

this gave rise to and (in turn) justified: The pressure for gay supporters to live as heterosexuals, the shunning or expulsion of those who refused, and so on.

Each of the remembrances that appeared on Kasama contained new details of what this line had justified. And these essays also contained *common* features — that help sketch a larger picture of what were clearly generalized, *national* practices implemented over years.

A process of communist summation

This enables us to soberly confront and explore how things had gone so wrong — how this could happen in a communist movement that *prided* itself on revolutionary disdain for tradition, on a stand with the oppressed and on a supposedly objective form of analysis.

How had it been possible to be so wrong in the evaluation and treatment of gay people? And how could it have gone on for thirty years (through the AIDS crisis, through several program rewrites, through pretenses of theoretical re-evaluation)? For those who participated in this period, as members and supporters of the RCP, our Kasama discussions have been an occasion for self-examination, for self-criticism and a real sense of apology.

These Kasama threads have represented one collective contribution — in excavation, self-critical examination, and in seeking lessons for future forms of communist organization.

My life in a red closet

by Libri Devrim

This piece was very difficult for Libri to write. We applaud her courage and her continuing hope for the communist movement. Some things in our history make us celebrate. Others make us grieve.

Much has been written about the Revolutionary Communist Party and its ban on gay people within its ranks. Some of us are familiar with the specific anti-gay rationalizations the RCP promoted for thirty years – including its notorious argument that same-sex attractions are a politically reactionary, personal-ideological choice.

But what was going on within the RCP was not just a stubborn and arrogant “error of line” – it was also an actual practice that had an impact on real people and real struggle. That is what I want to write about, including what it was like to live “in the closet” inside a communist organization.

I want to talk about what it was like to be attracted to the dream of revolution – and then be told that my lesbian feelings were ideologically part of a corrupt and oppressive world order, and that I force myself to have sexual relationships with men in an effort to develop the sexual feelings I was told I was supposed to have, as part of being a revolutionary. I want to talk about the way decent but incredibly ignorant communist comrades were instructed to correct me, my feelings, and my behaviors. And how, within a movement hoping to carry out liberation, the awful arguments and pressures of anti-gay bigotry were reproduced and enforced.

RCP cadre and leaders looked people like me in the eyes and told us to change, conform and be silent – or else get out. At the height of the AIDS crisis,

they knowingly opened a horrible split between communist activists and those fighting rightwing attacks on gay people. They reproduced within revolutionary ranks (and using “communist” rhetoric) the prejudices, arguments and repressive practices of rightwing religious nuts – and they tried to promote such views more broadly within the left.

It seems that most queer revolutionaries were attracted to what the RCP was putting out. That they’d go take out the RCP’s newspaper, the *Revolutionary Worker*, get involved, and then someone would meet with them to have serious talk about “the Homosexuality Question,” and then they would disappear.

In that respect, I was a bit different. I got involved before I came out.

After meeting the revolutionaries of the RCP, I joined the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade (RCYB), really throwing myself into it. I was convinced that a possible revolutionary situation might be just around the corner (remember that slogan, “Revolution in the ‘80s – Go for it!”?).

All my free time was spent building for the work this party was doing in my area: I was going to demonstrations, taking the paper out, talking to everyone about Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (MLM), posterizing a couple times a week, going to meetings. It was my whole life.

Falling in love

Then I started feeling attracted to another girl who was hanging around the RCYB. She was really funny and cute and smart. I thought she was great and I really respected her, especially the way she stood up for what

she believed at school, how she would face off the cops at a demonstration without fear, the way she was always ready to take the paper out even when the rest of us got discouraged by all the rejection. I wanted to be around her all the time and I thought about her constantly.

Everyone else could see I had it bad, but I never noticed! She gave me her green kaffyah and I wore it all the time, even when I went to bed. I always wanted to ride in the same car with her when we went someplace. Her high school was across town from mine but I'd always try to find a reason to go to her side of town to take the paper out in the afternoons so that I could be with her.

Finally, one of the other guys in the RCYB said something about me acting like I was in love with her. They were all teasing me about it. I realized that I had had feelings for girls for a while and I started to come to terms with the fact that I was a lesbian.

A family's anger...

When I came out, everyone at home was upset. I was prepared for their reactions, I'd heard other stories from teenagers who had come out about how they were rejected or kicked out of the house, so I was ready to face that from my family.

My family was upset and angry. They were disappointed in me and wanted me to just "get over" whatever young adult phase I was going through that made me "think" I was gay.

I was so depressed that they couldn't accept me, their daughter, for who I was. But knowing my family's conservative background, I had expected them to have a negative reaction so it didn't surprise me.

...then the rejection by comrades

What really shocked me was how leaders in the RCYB and the RCP reacted when I told them I was gay.

I have to say that none of the other Youth Brigade members had a problem with it except one guy. He was a little immature and made a joke about how he didn't mind if a girl was gay but there's no way in hell he'd sleep in the same room with a guy who was gay. (We'd

just stayed at a motel when we traveled to another city for an event and all of us had shared a room). But really most young communists of my generation never thought that being gay was wrong – it was something that had to be imposed on us from without, and was done without ever really hearing or respecting our insights.

But while the comrades in the Youth Brigade were fine with it I was really shocked by how hostile the RCYB leaders were. I was immediately separated from the rest of brigade – they stopped having me there for meetings and paper discussions, I wasn't invited to take out the paper or go running in the mornings, and when I showed up at the bookstore for an event I was told to leave.

Being educated

I didn't understand the reaction.

Finally, after several months of being excluded from everything and with virtually no communication from Youth Brigade leaders, I received a phone call telling me to show up for a meeting at a coffee shop across town the next weekend. Several Youth Brigade leaders were there as well as two RCP leaders (one of whom had never spoken to me before but was clearly in charge).

Everyone was very serious. I was pretty intimidated and scared.

They were there to explain to me what reality was, and what a communist view supposedly was: Why being a lesbian arose from unjustified hostilities toward men as a whole, how it was like being a feminist-separatist, and how in the new society, men wouldn't hurt women and so women would no longer respond to their oppression by becoming gay. Their argument was that lesbianism was a form of reformism – because it sought relief from oppression by developing a lifestyle within capitalism.

They made a series of deductive arguments – very divorced from reality and my own situation – that lesbianism was an ideological choice that embodied a reformist political program and that was therefore not compatible with being a communist revolutionary. Let me remind you that all of this was happening to me

when I was a high school student – just barely starting to sort out life, love and sexuality.

Looking back it seems clearer they had reproduced within revolutionary ranks (and using “communist” rhetoric) prejudices, arguments and repressive practices that were not far removed from rightwing religious nuts and homophobes.

I was very young and pretty naïve I guess – I took what I was told at face value as the communist verdict on gay people, and on me.

But at a gut level I couldn’t reconcile the idea that my feelings for other girls meant that I was being bourgeois. I still was attracted to other girls, even when I berated myself for feeling that way. I was told that I was viewing the girl in the RCYB that I liked as a sex object, that I was objectifying her because I had sexual thoughts about her.

In one painful meeting (at a Burger King – I never wanted to eat there again after this!) I admitted tearfully that, yes, I had imagined seeing her naked while masturbating.

I felt really guilty. I was pushed into the closet as a price for being considered a revolutionary by those I respected. And this was doubly painful: I was forced to deny my own feelings in public self-criticism, and I was being trained to confront my continuing feelings as reactionary in the privacy of my own mind.

Under watch

Once I started being allowed back to Brigade activities I apologized to this girl for objectifying her; but she just laughed and gave me a hug and said not to worry about it.

Local RCP leaders and the Youth Brigade coordinator kept me away from her though, and talked about sending me to live in a Brigade house in another city for the summer. That idea was dropped after I failed geometry and had to go to summer school, but for the next year or so, I was closely watched.

However, I was spouting the party line, so I was “welcomed” back in the fold. But part of me wondered, what would happen if I didn’t accept what I had been told to believe.

A few years later there was another change in the division of labor, I was sent to go work in another area with a new group of people. I had left high school and gotten my GED so I was anxious to start working full time and not having to depend on my family. When I was told to apply for a particular kind of job and live in a shared apartment with some other party folks, I complied. I didn’t really have any reason not to, even though I knew that living with people would be like being at the brigade house full-time; I would never be away from people who could scrutinize my actions and “tell on me” to my leadership.

This whole time I had been repressing my feelings, trying to just pretend that they didn’t exist.

My leadership brought up homosexuality during a paper discussion and I started defending a group of gay activists and one of their slogans. I was criticized by everyone but this time I didn’t back down, I kept on saying that I didn’t understand the RCP’s position on homosexuality. (Actually, I did understand, but I didn’t feel like I could say that I didn’t agree, it felt safer to just say I didn’t understand).

Isolated and out-gunned

Again I was separated from the group and started meeting with my direct leadership and two other people that I had never met before. We had discussions on a regular basis, a few times a week, for months. I wasn’t an idiot, but when it came to complex discussions about theory, I just couldn’t argue hard and fast enough.

Each meeting was a battle; we weren’t studying and discussing and criticizing, we were fighting with words and quotes and sources. I was totally outgunned.

I had gone to a crappy public school and never graduated from college, unlike my leadership, who were well educated and had apparently memorized the entire canon of MLM theory. I was a slow reader and had difficulty with understanding what I read. Every time they struggled with me, I felt stupider. I couldn’t keep up; much less argue for what I believed.

But inside, I always knew that I was gay and that it wasn’t in reaction to men’s oppression. It wasn’t because

I had had bad experiences with men or wanted to promote bourgeois ideals.

In fact, I wanted to accept being gay. I wanted to celebrate it because, in the end, being a lesbian was an integral part of what made me human and made me the person I was. I wanted to embrace it and be honest about how I really thought and felt.

I wanted to openly have a relationship with another girl my age, to experience building a relationship together and growing together and having that strong bond that can exist between two people who know each other in such an intimate and complete way.

To conform in love

Instead, I started dating a guy who sold the paper. I was never told I had to start dating a guy, but I felt immense pressure to prove that I wasn't a bourgeois feminist-separatist, that I was a revolutionary communist who was fully committed to bringing out change in this world. In so many ways, the guy I dated was wonderfully loving and supportive. We were good friends; he was fun and knew how to make me laugh. I was tired of being alone. And a part of me thought that a relationship with a guy would allay their fears about me. That if I dated a guy they would finally just leave me alone.

I tried, but I just didn't have feeling for him that I would have towards other women. We moved in together and I hoped that eventually I would develop feelings for him, but it didn't happen. I liked him a lot and loved spending time with him. But I dreaded having sex with him.

Eventually we stopped having sex; he was very supportive and caring, but still very hurt that I didn't find him attractive sexually.

He was one of the first people who told me that he thought the RCP's position on homosexuality was bullshit; when he said that we were in the the RCP's Revolution bookstore and I shushed him. I didn't want either of us to get in trouble.

We broke up and soon after I was moved to a different area. I couldn't work up the same enthusiasm for building the RCP and I became very depressed. I stopped returning phone calls and just drifted away.

For the RCP it was important that, if you left, the summation had to be that you were the one with some fatal flaw. They argued that being a lesbian was a form of backwardness and reformism – and then when someone like me drops out of political life it was taken as a confirmation of the individual's ignorant prejudices and their own revolutionary character.

Slippery change without a real accounting

When, around 2002, the RCP started having discussions about changing the stance on homosexuality, I couldn't believe it. Why couldn't this have happened sooner, before my life and the lives of so many other people were adversely affected?

I thought things had changed so I started getting involved again. I was criticized for having disappeared for so long, but the local leadership felt like now that that "issue" was dealt with we could just move on. And I tried to do just that.

But I never saw any real self-criticism from the RCP's leadership – I never heard anyone say "Hey, we totally fucked up and this adversely affected people in the party, people were pushed back into the closet, and shit, we're sorry about that. We bought into these homophobic lines being pushed by the religious right and we contributed to oppressing GLBT people and that was wrong. Let's examine how and why we embraced a fucked-up line. How had this been possible? What does it mean that this was done for decades with a "scientific" pretense? Let's evaluate what its impact was to our members, our supporters, gay people generally and our cause."

Instead it was just like, okay, you can be in the party and be openly gay now.

There was no honest self-criticism or accountability happening. So I guess for the RCP it was all over and done with, but for me it wasn't. At that point I just couldn't live with myself if I had stayed, so I left.

One reason I need to write all of this for all of you is that the RCP has still (to this day) not acknowledged that they banned gay people from their ranks, or that their party had a "closet" within its ranks, or publicly accounted for the cost of this to people like me and to the movement for radical change.

This long history of mistreatment and backwardness by the RCP (and by communists movements preceding them by decades) was compounded by the RCP's stubborn refusal to make a real accounting. That too is something we cannot allow to go uncriticized, and that too is something we cannot ourselves allow around future problems and mistakes in our next communist movement.

I'm also writing this because I feel it is a cautionary story for our common future – because in the grip of dogmatism, ignorance and arrogance even revolutionaries can do awful things. We should be aware of how much we often remain ensnared in the views of the very system we seek to overthrow. We need to see how easily we sometimes set ourselves up as the arbiters of right and wrong – often with little investigation or serious analysis – posturing perhaps as revolutionary or scientific, but in reality merely reflecting backward views that are quite common in the society around us.

The comments that follow are just a few of the 100+ responses to this post. We encourage all to go to kasamaproject.org to read (and participate in) the full, rich discussion on this topic.



<http://kasamaproject.org/2011/07/05/my-life-in-a-red-closet/#comment-40085>

Red Amadeus said

The line on homosexuality I thought was borrowed from China. It really bugged me the most, but the areas where the RCP was correct (many!) led me to continue promoting the group.

Tell No Lies said

Red Amadeus,

“Borrowed” like one “borrows” a raincoat and then wears it for thirty years? What a cop out. All of your comments indicate a powerful desire not to seriously

think about, much less discuss, the damage that this line did to revolutionary communism in the US.

The Bolshevik-led Soviet government was the first modern state on the planet to legalize same sex relations. This was reversed in the 1930s under Stalin as a piece of an overall cultural conservative turn that was then taken up with differing degrees of enthusiasm within the ICM. And yes it was taken up by China and undoubtedly that provided an initial justification for reproducing this line in the RU and then the RCP. But lets be absolutely clear that this line was taken up precisely in the wake of the Stonewall Rebellion and the explosion of the (then) Gay and Lesbian liberation movement, It wasn't something accidentally adopted, like some inexplicable vestigial piece of code from an earlier version of an operating system. It was an active response to a controversy unfolding in US society at the time on which a decision was made to adopt a reactionary position. This was grounded in both the actual homophobia of many of the leaders of groups like the RCP AND a crudely opportunistic view that such a stance would make it easier to relate to working class people. But of course the effect was only to make it easier to relate to the more conservative elements within the working class who were least receptive to communism. It was utterly and totally reactionary. The efforts to dress it up as part of a commitment to women's liberation only made it more insulting. It is critical to understand how profoundly damaging this line was. Hundreds of police and FBI infiltrators could not have done more damage.

As a very rebellious bisexual teenager in the late 1970s and early 80s it would have been unimaginable for me to consider joining an ostensibly “revolutionary” organization with such a line. It would have made no more sense than a Black man seeking to join the Mormons. I first read the RU's position paper “On Homosexuality” as an anarchist pamphlet filled with amusingly homoerotic pictures of various communist leaders embracing, Fidel smoking cigars and so on. It is not an exaggeration for me to say that the anti-gay line of groups like the RCP pushed me towards anti-communist politics. For every queer person like Libri who toughed it out for years within the RCP probably

a hundred prospective young communists were chased away. And not just queer ones. Also large numbers of radical straight youth who quite rightly found such bigotry appalling.

Like you, I thought the RCP had enough going for it on other fronts that it was worth struggling with people in and around it. But such efforts were emotionally exhausting and in the end I think the damage done was too severe. It is important to understand how the maintenance of this terrible line and the training of people in defending and upholding it when they knew in their hearts and minds that it was hateful bullshit was central to the cult-like bubble-world the RCP was able to create around its members, with all that implied for the theoretical health of the organization. The anti-gay line chased away critical thinking people in droves and left the organization unable to intellectually regenerate itself from decade to decade. Obviously the anti-gay line wasn't the only piece of this, but it was very important, and the failure of the RCP to really reckon with this is a testimony to its present irrelevance.

Mike E said

I want to tear off a small piece of this tonight:

When talking about the "red closet," Gary writes:

"I knew the party was homophobic. And even while in the Brigade in the 70s I opposed the "line of homosexuality"...Anyway, this is the first I've heard about this kind of Revolutionary Communist Party POLICING of people's sexuality.

"We're not interested in being bedroom police," the RCP used to say when (properly) attacked for their position of homosexuality. But here they were trying to do exactly that....

Jed writes:

"I have not read this before, and the actual means by which authoritarian control techniques (badgering, guilt-tripping, isolation, etc) were used to impose a line that was also, in itself, reactionary — people need to read stories of what that has looked like. How else do we learn?"

In other words, what Libri is describing here has not been revealed or known before. This is not com-

mon knowledge inside or outside the RCP. *This* (to my knowledge) is where it comes into the open.

To put a sharp point on this, let's add what Joseph writes:

"I really think when comrades acknowledge their mistakes and change their line it's wrong to keep on attacking them."

This has never been acknowledged by the RCP (internally or publicly). It has not been criticized. This has been hidden, denied and suppressed. We were all told (inside the party) to move on without demanding (or receiving) such an accounting. And those who did not accept that were targeted for removal from leadership, and ultimately from the party.

To be precise: The RCP has never acknowledged in public that it banned queer people from its ranks. And it has never acknowledged publicly that it pressured gay members and supporters to become heterosexual. And it has never criticized either of those practices.

To turn to my own experiences for a second:

I do feel a joint responsibility in a number of ways for the RCP's politics and practice (good and bad) — and this is part of that. This is not a process of blaming this or that individual — for what we are learning *an organization* did. I have, in private conversations (including with Libri) expressed my own sense of responsibility for this (despite of, and perhaps also because of, my degree of disagreement with the analysis the RCP made of same sex attractions). And I will say more about that as I have the time, and as I am able to put it together clearly.

But for now (to tear off that piece), let me just say that it is not just a moment when this "red closet" becomes visible *publicly*. These practices were also not visible or common knowledge *internally*.

In that sense, my own discussion of this will be unsatisfying for people who want to know "how did you deal with this?" and "why did it go on so long?"

First, I never knew about such practices. I had no idea that this went on. If I had encountered a gay person within our organization, I would never have *dreamed* of suggesting that they "convert" to heterosex-

uality. If I had been ordered to conduct such a session, I think it would have brought it all to a head for me — since I can't imagine that I could have carried out such a policy. (And I assume they would have selected for such a task someone they know *could* carry out the browbeating and pressure.)

And I imagine it is not just me who did not know of this. I think it was *generally* unknown that this was the policy. I suspect it is still not known within the RCP. (And to point out the juncture in Libri's story — the actual meetings of "struggling" with her were conducted in isolation from her Brigade chapter, away from others, with "reliable" people, and (I assume) were secret from anyone who was not in the room.

Certainly, in the period of "changing the RCP's line" (in 2002-2003), it was sharply forbidden to question "who had this political analysis hurt," and "what was the cost of this analysis," and "what exactly were the policies that flowed from this analysis," and "who was responsible for this analysis — where was it decided, when and by whom." All such questions were forbidden, and when the lid came off (and when they were raised with passion and determination), the whole explosive mix was one of the triggering events of the Avakian self-coup of 2003.

And to be explicit about the double-think: As we were discussing (inside the RCP) the new line and analysis, a leading person said that we must deny and repudiate the claims that we have a policy banning gay people from membership. (This was aimed at me, since I had been arguing we should, finally, reverse that policy). The situation was, this person went on to explain, that we had a specific analysis of the reactionary nature of same sex relations, and that knowing this, it would be strange if gay people wanted to join. In other words, in this logic, not only was being gay a quasi-political choice made by gay people, but not joining the RCP was also a political choice that *they* would make after understanding our analysis. This was not a ban or a discrimination — this was merely a disagreement of analysis (they chose to think being gay was ok, we chose to think it was not).

So it was even said that it was an "anti-party" lie to claim that the RCP had discriminated against gay people. (And, to be clear, this was the view *after* the "change.") And so to ask that the ban be lifted was itself a misrepresentation of what the situation had been.

I was myself accused of encouraging such "anti-party" demands of accountability and self-criticism within the party. And that was an early part of the framework for the struggle that led to my resignation.

But, still to this day, there are no answers to those questions of why it took so long to change. There was an official explanation: It is embedded in the conversations between Bill Martin and Bob Avakian — where Avakian essentially says that the problem was uncritically adopting analysis and reductionist method from the Comintern — and that he (and the rest of the leadership) was too busy (in the 1980s) with other matters to dig deeply into the problem of reductionism inherited. In other words, this was not hostility toward gay people, it was merely a reductionist analysis of complicated matters. And the policies had continued because other things had, naturally, taken priority — this is speaking about the 1980s, with the Religious Right attack on gay people, the AIDS epidemic raging, and important struggles rising from ACT-UP and many other corners! I think we should publish that passage, so that everyone can themselves evaluate this explanation of why and how the policy lingered!

And agreeing with Avakian's assessment (apologia) in that chapter of the Conversations book was considered a litmus test of anti-party and anti-leadership sentiment — it was considered a confession of hostility to communism and Marxism, etc.

irateadri writes above:

"I am interested in looking at how those holding positions of leadership in the RCP who were against the policy tried to combat it, and why the RCP held onto such a bogus line for so long. What were the people who worked with Avakian doing, and why didn't their efforts for progress, assuming such efforts existed, produce results?"

Well no shit. Everyone is interested in looking at that too. But at this point, we (none of us!) don't have

any idea how the struggle and formation of policy went on in that leadership.

And to be clear: I was personally never in the leadership of the RCP — in the simple sense, that there were places where policy and line were set, and others where it was accepted and implemented. I was never at those places in the party where policy and line were set and therefore where the actual formative line struggle took place.

And within the party generally, there was very very little discussion of these views and policies — it was suppressed. And that is why the lid blew off so violently when a discussion was opened at all levels in 2003-2003. (Avakian writes that he was afraid opening the “Gay Question” might tear the RCP apart — and I believe it ultimately played a major role in doing just that.)

This was an organization of watertight internal secrecy. Those involved in carrying out a policy knew of it. But there was very little gossip where I was, not casual telling of tales, or sharing of political qualms outside of tightly defined (and non-functioning) channels.

Incredible as it now seems (especially after reading Libri’s horrible story): I never heard of people being identified as gay and then pressured to be heterosexual. What Libri is expressing here is something that was not generally known or announced. And yet I suspect it happened, and not just once or twice.

The fact that this has not been known, never been acknowledged, and never been criticized is, after all, why she and I decided to publish this for discussion — precisely because it reveals something denied and hidden. And because it gets to the heart of the implications of such an anti-gay line — but also the implications of such a structure utterly without internal debate and accountability.

Vern Gray said

On two particular aspects of this:

First, Libri’s is the only public account that I have seen of what it was like to have been struggled with by the RCP to change one’s sexual orientation. But yes, there were other cases.

I heard it on good authority, around 1990, i.e. following the RCP’s “first change” (an extremely limited

one) of its line on homosexuality in 1988, that there were “some” women (I would not be surprised if that meant two) in a particular city who had been provisionally recruited into the RCP with the stated understanding and on condition that within some definite period of time they would change their sexual orientation. And, of course, that was seen as an “advance” on a policy that banned any lesbians outright from being party members (there still were to be no gay men admitted, a policy that also followed from the 1988 position).

I don’t know what happened after that—whether they were “converted” or whether they had to withdraw from the party. But since the basic policy was the same as in Libri’s case, rooted in the same view that sexual orientation was an ideological choice and lesbianism was politically a type of feminist reformism, it seems reasonable to think that the basic attitude toward the struggle that had to be carried out by and with these women had many similarities with the struggle that Libri was a victim of, even if—IF—it may have been in some ways carried out less crudely.

The other thing I want to say is that we should dig into more at some point the general attitude of the RCP toward self-criticism.

The short-on-substance but contorted, long-winded, and obscurantist “self-criticism” in the 2003 pamphlet about homosexuality has much in common with many others that the RCP has issued over the years, whether around the Boston busing issue in 1974 (see Avakian’s autobiography), the work of World Can’t Wait and the party’s work in it (after the second major push in 2005), the analysis of the Christian fascists, some of Avakian’s own philosophical writings, the party’s summation of the world situation and analysis of current capitalist economy in the 1980s and into the 1990s (for one thing, there was no explanation in the 1999 pamphlet about why it had taken ten years since the collapse of the USSR to publish even that rather thin analysis)—one could reproduce many other examples.

And it is important to realize that these were only the cases in which the party made some kind of pub-

lic “self-criticism,” even if only a minor one. There were many more cases where it did not.

Avakian’s own stated attitude was that he “did not like to be criticized”; later, during the RCP’s “cultural revolution,” he stressed that no one should raise any critical thoughts about his writings until they had read them many, many times. (I knew one dedicated revolutionary supporter of the party who said he had watched the 2003 video about 40 times . . . holy Moses.) The RCP simply did not function as what Mao called, “a party of criticism and self-criticism.”

And the result? “Where the broom does not reach, the dust does not disappear of itself.” Using the Kasama site, we have the opportunity to wield a big broom.

Mike E said

I agree with what Vern is saying. Part of taking responsibility and avoiding new mistakes is accountability.

It was never enough to “change your line” without excavating what it had meant and how it was done. And this requires a real accounting by the leadership. Some people on the RCP leadership and standing body must have insisted on these ideas and policies for many years — and they should have been known to the membership, and it should have been possible to remove them from posts of such influence if this was decided by a party congress.

And, obviously, it is hard to imagine that this small knot did not include Bob Avakian himself — which is what made this whole affair so explosive.

* * * * *

This is in real contrast to Joseph’s misconception of what he is seeing:

“But if we are going to attack RCP-USA for what it upheld in the past but does no longer, then this criticism cannot just stop with the existing RCP-USA. What of those who left RCP-USA and joined Kasama?”

Indeed! What should we do — those of us who left the RCP and joined Kasama?

We should do this work. We should excavate what we know of these errors. We should end the shameful whitewash and cover up. We should attempt to sum up

causes for such errors — structural, ideological, even psychological. We should speak about how it was possible — in a political trend that was otherwise so radical and thoughtful in other ways, in a membership that was so dedicated and lofty in other ways. How could such an organization have been blind (no, hostile!) to the justified struggle against bigotry and abuse?

Who can ever trust communists if we don’t treat this seriously? Or if we repudiate this merely with a simplistic and superficial distancing?

We are doing an excavation in the context of an internal coverup. The RCP leadership attempted to suppress anger and exposure over this anti-gay line — and was a significant factor in the purges that quickly wracked the organization. Those determined to demand explanations and accountability were targeted — removed from leadership in some cases, run out of the organization in others, simply browbeaten into silence in other cases.

This is not only about homophobia (and passivity by those who didn’t share it). There were clearly structural problems that we need to identify — mis-use of security culture, leadership posts for life, whateverism, an organization with no channels for challenging anything. The RCP’s leadership was able to maintain this bigoted (and theoretically ridiculous) policy in the face of *serious* but diffuse dissent within their party and its periphery. They were simply immune — their membership was kept uninformed and passive, and they were held above criticism and accountability.

Exploring these events — critically and collectively — is not (as Joseph mis-perceives it) some exercise in “attacking the RCP.” That would *truly* be beating a dead horse. The RCP is moribund (though Joseph may not see that from Britain). There is no reputation to destroy. It has destroyed itself. No one cares about the RCP today. No one.

This is not about the RCP today. It is about a very important and damaging episode involving one part of the communist movement of the U.S. This was one of the reasons the RCP lost “the 80s generation” of radicals. Whether gay or straight, that generation of radicals was not going to join an organization that banned gay people. This episode also created significant and

somewhat cynical distrust for communist “analysis” among important and often quite radical sections of people (including veterans of the RCP itself).

How can we *not* excavate this?

For those of us who were part of the RCP, this is a way to “make things right” — to help others learn from our blindness, or passivity, or (in the case of those persecuted) from our bitter experiences. This is taking responsibility. We will simply appropriate the history of the RCP for our coming project of communist regroupment — absorb what was positive and sum up what was negative. (And not just from the RCP, obviously).

Mike E said

To tear off a second piece:

I spoke earlier about my own relationship with this anti-gay line within the RCP. Let me be more explicit (if still fragmentary).

The RCP line after 1988 had three parts:

1) They argued that discrimination against gay people was wrong. And gave lipservice to opposing sodomy laws, gay-bashing, etc.

2) They argued there was something fundamentally wrong and reactionary about same sex attractions, and with gay and lesbian relations, and the existing gay communities as such.

3) They argued that “the homosexual question” was not a “cardinal question” worth splitting over.

These three arguments are rather obviously in contradiction.

How can you claim to be against discrimination if you argue that homosexuals will be re-educated until homosexuality disappears (pre-1988 position), or if you maintain the right to exclude gay people from your organization (post 1988) — an organization you claim will be the key social and political organization of a future socialist society?

When I talk about taking responsibility for this — I think that those of us who were members of the RCP should take responsibility for *all* of that. We may not personally have believed or supported all of the official line — but we were part of the organization, and

we did (as part of its discipline) publicly defend those views.

And, as several people have said in various way, the reason we were part of that organization is that we believe it was a valuable revolutionary attempt. We believed that it made major contribution to the political landscape. And (this is important) we also thought that (at this time in the 1980s and 90s) it was capable of correcting itself, learning and reversing wrong approaches.

It is not itself that startling that a political organization had anti-gay politics. The whole society had an entrenched, ancient, visceral, un-apologetic hostility toward gay relations. But it is startling that *after* clear and vocal mass struggle arose against such anti-gay bigotry, that the RCP leadership did not question their views. And it is particularly stark that they imposed those views — in the face of internal opposition, in the face of many kinds of external critique (friendly and unfriendly), in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, in the face of rightwing anti-gay offensives, in defiance of widespread research and analysis of same sex attractions.

One part of society after another moved toward tolerance and equality. And it has to be said that the RCP was (literally!) behind the U.S. military and even Dick-fucking-Cheney in their political stance and evolution. That is why the question became, not just how could we be so wrong, but also *how could this have taken so long*. It was not simply (or mainly) a question of theory and analysis (or as Avakian claimed, methodology and priorities) — it was a problem of entrenched bigotry in high places, and an obvious untouchability and unaccountability in the RCP leadership.

And, since the RCP has (with great force and vehemance) refused to treat this seriously — we who have left the RCP (as precisely part of our responsibility) need to do so.

Let me say a few things about my own views and self-justifications.

I have always felt great attachment and loyalty to the RCP. I believed (and believe) that it was a serious, important and determined attempt at preparing

revolution. When I was in its ranks, I obeyed its rules. I defended its line publicly (even when I disagreed). I respected its channels. And (quite obviously) I also gave the organization itself great respect — I often assumed (when I disagreed) that I was wrong and the organization was probably right... and I believe there were many times when that view was right.

In regard to queer relations and attractions: I grew up in New York City's Greenwich Village — in the middle of one of the world's most developed gay communities. I was not part of that world, but was certainly part of a climate of tolerance toward interracial and sexual subcultures. Personally I had many of the typical male avoidances of gay life — but when the Gay Liberation movement emerged in the late 60s, it was (I assumed) part of *our* movement (even if I didn't then understand that deeply).

When I joined the Revolutionary Union in 1970, it was in a part of the country where anti-gay assumptions had not been part of the process (and where several early RU cadre had been recruited out of the local campus Gay Liberation organization).

The anti-gay policies of the national RU were something that had to be *adopted*. And it happened even as we were aware that some other organizations welcomed gay people. (Workers World Party, in particular, welcomed gay people and had organized gay caucuses then, in 1970, and we knew it. It is odd to realize that our problem with that, politically and organizationally, revolved, as I remember it, more about the idea of internal identity-related caucuses, and less about the acceptance of gay people.) But the point around the WWP is that it was not just "the times" — it is not possible to say "it was just the times" that led the RU to have an anti-gay policy. In fact, precisely in *those times*, other forces (including gay activists themselves obviously, but also left forces like WWP) had much better and more radical and (frankly) more courageous views on this.

I think that the secrecy culture of the RU/RCP helped this policy to survive — because it is not as if we were all conscious of a stream of people uncovered and expelled, or conflict over gay people turned away. There was (I assume for the vast majority of RU/

RCP members) simply a silence around this — where the implications and conflicts of this policy were not shared. I am not aware of discussions on these things at all — which is rather damning. And I mean both internal and external discussion.

When I was an organizer in the coalfields, this policy really did not come up, and it was hard not to ignore it. We were not in contact with openly gay people. When I met gay coalminers (and I did) this was not a source of conflict. We did take distance from some "sexual minorities" — in particular we chose, in two cases I know of, not to politically work with people who were notorious locally for their known incestuous practices (in one case an inbred family, and in another case, a militant miner who had taken his eldest daughter into his bed).

And in passing I would like to note that there is some argument raised that it is wrong to take into account the sexual attitudes and verdicts of working class communities. I think there is cowardness and social backwardness in seeking to tail anti-gay prejudices among working class people. But I'm curious if anyone thinks it was wrong to take distance from men publicly associated with incest — and whether it was wrong to respect the discomfort of the surrounding communities toward these practices.

After I moved to Chicago to work on the RCP's press, and after the Reagan era started, it did not take long for the questions around gay people to sharpen up for me. In particular, there was a major supreme court decision in the 1980s denying gay people had a "right to privacy" in regard to their sexual practices — and upholding Georgia's sodomy law. I wrote the RCP's article on these events, and (as is my habit) started an intense period of study and thinking on same sex attractions and relations (and I have to say it was the first time in my life where I thought seriously about these things). I read several histories of queer relations (and learned about the "invention" of the term "homosexuality" in the late 1800s, and the socially constructed views that were dominant in the U.S.) What struck me in particular was that Chief Justice Burger argued that there is no right to privacy if there are no women and children — because (in his view) the Anglo-Saxon

right to privacy is inseparable from the right of a *man* to conduct *his* domestic affairs without state interference. Since gay men had no women or children to regulate, there was no “right to privacy” involved. This was a truly naked patriarchal argument — that explicitly associated “privacy” (as a legal right) with male-right and father-right. (In other words, to Burger, there was no *individual* right to privacy — but only a man’s right to rule *his* home and its inhabitants).

I was very grateful to a particular gay feminist activist (a lawyer in LA) who I interviewed for that article — who said to me simply that the Hardwick decision underscored “that the family is a fuck-box.” That stayed with me a long time — and I struggled to understand the implications.

After those studies, discussions and reflection, I never again believed there was something wrong about gay people, their attractions and relations. I informed my leadership of those views (and those disagreements) for the first time. And I remembered being asked (in a half-open way) if I was gay (and being amazed by the assumptions beneath that).

I tried on the RCP’s analysis (the way someone tries on a suit of clothes) — because of the respect I had for the organization and its leadership. I did that again when the “new” position emerged in 1988 — gay people and gay sexuality was still considered reactionary but now the reasons were that they were anti-woman and reformist, not bourgeois decadent.

But I was never able to make myself agree with them.

But what I was won over to is the third position listed above: the RCP leadership argued that “the homosexual question” was not a “cardinal question” worth splitting over. And I accepted that. And that was itself very wrong, and required a real indifference to the mistreatment of gay people (by society and by the RCP itself).

When the RCP said it was “not worth splitting over,” they were of course developing talking points for people *in the mass movements* who were furious over the RCP’s bigotry. And they were arguing that our hostility toward gay people should not be a basis for

breaking up alliances against war, or against the state, or whatever.

But it also applied *inside* the RCP. It was simply an argument that all this was *not that important*, and that other things were far more important. Gay people were looked through the wrong end of a telescope — they were some distant “phenomenon” to be talked about in clinical abstract terms (like a five legged frog studied as a curiosity). And the very approach, and the very assumption of “non-cardinal,” denied their reality, their humanity and their suffering.

It was simply a lie that the RCP was consistent (in the 1980s and beyond) in defending gay people from abuse. (Avakian claims this in the *Conversations* book). I was responsible for trying to list (on our RCP webpage) later the articles that documented this — and there weren’t any (or hardly more than one or two). (You can look at the list yourself on their site) — and see that before 1998 I could not find *any* articles opposing the mistreatment of gay people. (We did not go back and resurrect my article on the anti-sodomy Hardwick decision... but there was little else over those long years other than reporting on AIDS. There is a whole discussion to be made about how the RCP dealt with AIDS and its many controversies. but let’s just say that it was often done carefully without ever implying acceptance or approval of the gay relations themselves, and we had struggle over this.

As a writer and editor of the party’s newspaper, I started a simple policy of inserting the mistreatment of gay people in our written indictments of U.S. imperialism. And had them carefully taken out each time. I started a policy of suggesting that we honor Stonewall every year, by writing its history in our press — and this was politely ignored each year.

This was not a serious confrontation (on my part) with the party’s policy — but my experience does refute the current claims that the RCP was consistent about defending gay people during all those years when they also labeled them reactionary, decadent, antiwoman and reformist.

I take responsibility for participating in the whole of that. And, in particular, was responsible for “buying” the argument that this “homosexual question” was not

important enough to split over — to raise hell over, to dig in over, to speak truth over, to confront over.

And the mechanisms that supported this lame line.

...My interest in these discussions is the “old” RCP—i.e. understanding how a group (in its vital and revolutionary days) could have such a backward and oppressive set of sub-currents. And I’m also interested in uncovering how the methodologies of this anti-gay campaign (isolation, browbeating, forced submission, “science” as manipulation, authority-based pressure etc.) *became* far more generalized as dominant organizational mechanisms within the RCP and its orbit (after the 2003 coup). In other words, while these methods were used on gay people in 1990, they were used on the party membership generally in the “rectifications” after 2003 (followed by the isolation, expulsion and shunning of dissidents as “counterrevolutionaries”).

Put another way: My own experience is quite similar to Libri, Andrew and Suzi. The moment I was identified as critical of the (often unspoken) goals of the “Avakian as cardinal question” campaign — I was isolated, removed from influencing anyone internally, forbidden to speak publicly (even attend a friend’s funeral), and placed in “the incredible shrinking box” where I was not contacted for weeks on end. I was invited to portentous meetings (intended to intimidate) where there was a panel of interrogators but no advocates. Unlike some of our gay comrades, I was not a newbie, but a rather hardened cadre — and not easily intimidated or “out-articulated” — so these events were not quite the same, or quite as damaging. But the whole was isolating and humiliating. The goal was to either make you submit (in a cultish, emotionally collapsing “I’m yours” kind of sense) or else make you leave demoralized (and politically paralyzed, self-blaming and silent.) One stark and startling memory is the newly empowered leadership person, saying (over and over): “You just have to vomit up your errors. All of it. Give it up.” (think about it “vomit up your errors, all of it” !!) Like we were in some classic cult “ego crushing” session.

All of this had been developed (as methods) *some-where* in the organization... but had not been familiar or generalized until after 2003.

Working with the RCP, Opposing the homophobia

by Gary

The following comes from a long time supporter of the RCP who describes experiences of questioning and opposing the anti-gay line.

I feel so many emotions reading Libri's piece.

First of all, compassion for someone so abused by supposed comrades. I can imagine the pain (and fear) inflicted at those coffee shop and Burger King meetings.

Secondly, anger at those inflicting the pain.

Third, puzzlement as to how people who think of themselves as "scientists" (or at any rate have in more recent times been encouraged by Bob Avakian to see themselves as "scientists") could be so STUPID as to regard homosexual attraction as a problem requiring this kind of interference into a member or supporter's intimate life.

I knew the party was homophobic. And even while in the Brigade in the 70s I opposed the "line of homosexuality." I did so quietly, partly because I thought it might raise questions about my own sexuality. (It now seems strange to me that I would have once cared about such things. Why should I have ever held back in expressing my views about homosexuality, fearing that I might be considered gay? These days if someone mistook me as gay, I'd see it as similar to misspelling my name or misidentifying my ethnicity. Not a big issue. Such has society evolved; you certainly see it in the youth.)

Anyway, this is the first I've heard about this kind of Revolutionary Communist Party POLICING of people's sexuality.

"We're not interested in being bedroom police," the RCP used to say when (properly) attacked for their position of homosexuality. But here they were trying to do exactly that, expecting that Libri's commitment to the cause of revolution and to principles of democratic centralism would cause her to abandon her desire for women and even, to the party's relief, have some sex with men...

It can only be compared to the counseling programs providing by some Christian groups designed to "cure" gay people of their sinful inclinations.

To be sure, decent reasonable people have at many times in history held irrational prejudices about sexuality. In Marx and Engels' correspondence you find clear evidence of homophobia. (Engels after receiving a book from Marx by a pioneer on sex research proclaimed homosexuality "unnatural" and depicts it as such in *The Family, Private Property and the State* and elsewhere...)

But Marx and Engels lived in Victorian England, just before "sexology" emerged. They can be forgiven a certain amount of ignorance about sex, just as they can be forgiven a certain amount of ignorance about race (although they were among the most progressive Europeans of their time in thinking about both).

The RCP on the other hand was attacking gay people while U.S. society was undergoing a massive sea-change in knowledge and attitudes.

And they WERE attacking. That has to be said. The way the party has always tried to depict their “position on the question” just reeks of dishonesty and denial. The fact is, the wording of the first two versions of the party program depicted homosexuality as a social evil that the proletariat in power would get rid of. (I don’t have those documents on hand right now but there was no doubt about the intent.) I heard Bob Avakian, in November 1977, at the founding convention of the RCYB (where we changed the name from Revolutionary Student Brigade), make derisive allusions to “faggots.” He won some laughter and applause but also some negative reactions among the over 600 youth assembled in Illinois.

And the mistreatment of Libri was an attack. An effort to make her feel bad about who she was, related to issues of intimacy the party was pitifully unable to understand or “objectively analyze.” I don’t know how much that is rooted in party activists’ own lifestyles and work methods—which might simply deny them exposure, or prevent them from developing sensitivity, to the richness of human sexual possibilities—and how much it’s based on thoroughly dogmatic methods of thinking.

I was at a major event in ca. 1976. We were occupying a building from which residents were at threat of eviction. The RCP was playing a good role. This issue came up in a sidewalk conversation I happened to overhear between the local spokesperson of the RCP and a supporter. The former said something to the effect of, “Look, men love women, women love men. It’s dialectical. If a man doesn’t love women, he hates them...”

I thought to myself, how fucking stupid... But I was a college kid, and I did respect the guy, who showed good leadership in that and other struggles (before leaving the party a few years later). I remained silent.

Someone in that anti-eviction fight, highly respected in the community, was very impressed by the RCP and keen on attending the newly formed United National Workers Organization—I think that was what it was called—as its local representative. But the party vetoed that.... The guy was gay.

This was frankly discussed in the Brigade.

The contradictions were complex. There was a party member who served as a kind of liaison with the RCYB. I rarely disliked comrades but she really rubbed me wrong. She tried to bludgeon people into ideological obedience. I don’t think she liked my attitude of honest inquiry or really understood the nuances of my arguments. But she did have a certain flexibility on the issue of homosexuality. She said something like, “Maybe the party will give a special exception here, for cultural reasons...”

At the time I did have some hope there would be a revolution sometime soon, and that the party would take power. So her comments were on the one hand somewhat comforting, but on the other hand, so irrational... Why should there be geographic specificities to party policy on this question?

My point is that she, in hoping the party would “allow” homosexual behavior (not prosecuting or “re-educating” gays) wasn’t trying to (and probably couldn’t) address the issue honestly. She had to work within the party’s dogmatic, authoritarian framework.

At one point in the 90s Noam Chomsky, who’d agreed to give a fundraising talk at a Revolution Books, pulled out of the arrangement after learning of the RCP’s position on homosexuality. I was requested (as a friend of the party) to call him and urge him to reconsider.

“What am I supposed to tell him?” I asked. Well, I was told, you should explain that the party isn’t against gay people, it just doesn’t think homosexuality is the answer to women’s oppression. It was just the nonsensical line of the 1988 document revising the earlier line (and changing the subject).

I declined to call Chomsky and said I think the party should learn from this experience and really change the line.

The RCP basically went from associating same-sex attraction with “bourgeois decadence” to emphasizing that it wasn’t the answer to patriarchy (as though anyone was seriously arguing that it WAS) to (finally) acknowledging error—with some fanfare, issuing that “self-criticism” in (I think it was) 2000. That was largely a self-righteous defense.

“We had to study the question, and that took time. Now we’ve studied it, and produced this brilliant, lengthy, footnoted document that explains what we now believe about homosexuality—and, hey, good news, guys—we now think it’s ok to be gay!”

I was glad to see it at the time, because I thought the party was doing good work overall and that they would be able to do better work now that they’d dropped their old line. But I also thought the “self-criticism” didn’t go nearly far enough. Among other things, it made no acknowledgment of homophobia within the party. It made the party’s earlier position sound like one of scholarly caution, changed due to the accumulation of scientific knowledge.

Now the RCP depicts advances in gay rights, including marriage, as products of mass struggle (“forced concessions”). But I agree with Selucha that they are not necessarily that. Yes the Stonewall Rebellion was a key moment. But broad changes in the understanding of sexuality and changes in social networking and institutional policies etc. have produced social changes influencing everyone from Log Cabin Republicans and Pentagon brass and the leaders of the Methodist church to self-defined communists. There was a significant historical connection between the CP-USA and the old gay rights movement in the U.S. (Mattachine Society founded by Harry Hay in 1950) but it’s largely DESPITE radical left opposition or indifference that the gay rights movement progressed as it did.

The amazing thing is how the RCP went from seeing homosexuality as something that would be “eliminated” under socialism to seeing it as a right (and even depicting opposition to homosexuality including gay marriage as a key component of “Christian fascism”). How they went from condemning homosexual behavior to championing Queer Pride without knowing what that specific term even means.

I was interviewed once on the radio by an RCP supporter, concerning the controversy over the film the Passion of the Christ. The interviewer wanted to establish the Mel Gibson film as an example of “Christian fascist” propaganda and made reference in passing to the Christian fascist agenda as including opposition to homosexuality and gay marriage. I remarked—as any

normal person would—well, the RCP has had a bad history on this. And the interviewer (seeming almost hurt) said, something to the effect of, hey be fair, they changed their line...

He seemed to want to quickly change the subject.

But the dishonesty and superficiality, as well as opportunism, of the line change should be obvious. The RCP’s engagement with issues of sexuality (including pornography) remains simplistic, dogmatic and primitive.

There are a number of responses to this post. We encourage all to go to kasamaproject.org to read (and participate in) the rich discussion on this topic.



<http://kasamaproject.org/2011/07/07/simplistic-dogmatic-and-primitive...-the-rcp-on-homosexuality/#comment-40176>

Rejected by comrades: My love was just love

by Andrew Copper

After reading Libri's painful account of her time in the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade and the pressure that was placed on her to change her sexual orientation, I feel compelled to tell my own story.

I was active in the Revolutionary Union, the precursor to the Revolutionary Communist Party, as a college student and then, years later, with the RCP. During those intervening years I was out of touch with comrades from the RCP and so it was no surprise that they didn't realize I had come out as a gay man and that I was living with a male partner, Mark, who had first been my college roommate and then become my lover.

Mark's sudden death in an accident in the late 1980s forced me to reconsider the direction my life had been taking. I had been so involved in the details of my life, my education and nascent career, and everything else in life, that I had stepped back from political activity (temporarily) and never returned.

I decided to get involved again and began to volunteer at the local Revolution Books Outlet. Within a few months I was taking the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper out every weekend, selling door to door and organizing against the invasion of Panama. A national speaking tour of *Revolutionary Worker* journalists [1991] was being organized and I volunteered to work on the project. This became almost a full time job and consumed my life for more than a year. I loved the work though and enjoyed getting to know the writers whose reporting I had followed over the years; hearing their

stories first hand made me even more committed to the kind of solution we were working towards.

Hoping to join

Several years after returning to the work with the RCP, and after an appropriate amount of self-criticism for previous decision to withdraw from politics for a spell, the leader of the group within the RCP that I worked with agreed to meet with me to talk about joining the party. I knew it was a big decision and not one to be taken lightly. After a series of conversations with this leader and others (both within our small group of party members/supporters and with leaders from other areas of the party), people seemed convinced that I was serious and was not planning on dropping out and disappearing again like I had as a youth.

As part of this process of joining the party I had a sit down meeting with a party leader in which I was interviewed about my personal background including my education and work history and, interestingly, where I had lived and with whom I had lived. This whole process seemed a little excessive but still perfunctory until I mentioned that Mark had been my lover.

Honestly, I don't know how and why I never realized that the party had an anti-gay stance. It just never came up.

Most of the work I was doing revolved around the anti-war movement (Panama and then the Gulf War) and promoting the party newspaper. My sexual orientation and the "homosexuality question" had never

been raised as an issue. I had never been very involved in identity politics and so I usually called myself a revolutionary communist or something of that sort when I had the rare occasion to self-identify. I knew I was gay but since I wasn't dating anyone it just never really came up. And now, four years after getting involved in the party again it was all of a sudden a huge issue.

As a youth being around the RU, I wasn't out and wasn't even aware of my own sexuality and so whatever discussion had happened about the homosexuality question then had gone in one ear and out the other. I vaguely remembered some discussion of lesbianism right when I first became involved in the party again, but at that time I was so wrapped up in the newness of getting reacquainted with the Left and my new comrades that I had missed the whole 1988 *Revolution Magazine* article that outlined the RCP's reactionary stance on sexuality.

Several things happened at once

My request to join the party was "put on hold" (as my leader put it) and I began the first of a series of meetings with my leader, a party member who was a former lesbian, and several others from the party to discuss the Homosexuality Question.

At the same time there was a clear shift in the way that party leaders interacted with me; I was obviously out of favor, so much so that it was noticeable to a bookstore volunteer who remarked, after the local spokesperson reamed me out for some mistake at a campus book table,

"Wow, that's crazy, what did you ever do to deserve that? There's no way that anger is all about you forgetting to pack a box of books."

The argument of concentrated misogyny

The discussions on the Homosexuality Question were about what you'd expect: there was little actual discussion.

We read through the *Revolution Magazine* article. ["On the Question of Homosexuality and the Emancipation of Women," 1988]

We talked about what it meant and how it applied specifically to our lives (well, to my life). The party

member who was a former lesbian told me her story of being hurt by men, turning to women to avoid pain, feeling like women were superior to men and wanting a society of just women who loved and nurtured each other, etc. The punch line of her story, of course, is that she realized she was wrong and joined the party.

I thought the discussions were ridiculous and I said so.

No one had realized I was gay during the previous four years because they all thought my friend Mark who died was just my roommate/best friend and since I had been so wrapped up in building the party I hadn't had sex in years and didn't have any promising prospects to pursue in the immediate future. In my thinking: it wasn't interfering with anything, so why even bring it up?

One of the discussion participants (a party member, not a leader) said that being gay made me vulnerable in a way that heterosexual men were not as I could be arrested for having sex (we lived in a state with sodomy laws). Just like the RCP's "points of discipline" for party members forbade the use of illegal drugs to avoid being set up for legal problems, I was told that any decision I made to have sex in the future could have a legal impact on me and the party and thus put us both at risk.

This seemed rather dramatic. But at the time, I agreed with them that it was a possibility. I had a friend who had been arrested and charged with lewd acts for having sex with his partner at a state campground (while camping) even though they were in their tent and no one was around (other than a nosy state ranger).

The point of contention for me was with the accusation that my love for Mark (and possible future love for another man) was a concentrated expression of misogyny that stood as an obstacle to the emancipation of women. I never understood that argument with its twisted logic.

My love for Mark was just love.

It had nothing to do with my feelings for women in general or my commitment to fighting sexism or the transformation to a new society. It was just love for

someone who was a great guy who I sorely missed and wished every day was there with me.

Separated, isolated, cut loose

Since I clearly wasn't going with the program I was separated from the group (within the RCP) that I had been working with for the past couple of years.

I was totally isolated with no contact from anyone and was told not to go to the bookstore or to any public events. This shunning continued for months. People were told not to talk to me.

I ran into a comrade at the gas station and he said hello but didn't want to engage in conversation. At a protest I happened to stand near two people selling the *Revolutionary Worker* and they quickly moved away from me; I approached one, a woman I'd known for years, and asked why she didn't want to talk to me. She'd been told specifically not to talk to me, she said, for "security reasons."

That was the moment at which I realized it was all over.

The party wanted nothing to do with me and it seemed to all be because I was gay and because I dismissed the official arguments regarding the homosexuality question. Were there other issues? I don't know.

I know that I ruffled some feathers when, after several months of meetings to discuss the homosexuality question, I simply refused to talk about it anymore. I know that people suspected I had hid information because I never mentioned that I was gay for four years. I know that made some leaders very suspicious of me.

This major part of my life that consumed much time and energy and was so transformative for me personally ended unceremoniously one day at a Starbucks. I met with a party leader (the one who had organized the homosexuality discussions the year before) at a prearranged time. I turned in my key to the bookstore. (I heard years later that they had already had the locks changed months before that when it was remembered that I still had a key!) I returned some books and videos that belonged to the bookstore and various people in and around the party, as well as \$18 that I'd collected from a party supporter as a contribution for an event that had happened the month before which she'd

missed (I ran into her at the supermarket the week prior and she didn't know I'd been put aside by the party, I didn't have the guts to tell her so I accepted her donation and passed it on).

And with that, it was over.

The comments that follow are just a few of the many responses to this post. We encourage all to go to kasamaproject.org to read (and participate in) the full, rich discussion on this topic.



<http://kasamaproject.org/2011/07/10/rejected-by-comrades-my-love-was-just-love/#comment-40352>

CWM said

In my view, the RCP has had a negative influence on the Left to the extent that it has had any influence at all. I see nothing to celebrate in its legacy whatsoever. Indeed, reading these accounts of how the RCP tormented its LGBT members underscores what I despise and have despised about the group.

But it surprises me to see that some people are evidently shocked to read accounts like Libi's or Andrews. It was an explicitly homophobic, authoritarian cult. Of course, it would humiliate, marginalize, and pathologize its LGBT members. To expect that it would behave otherwise is very naive and, for people who were in the group, more than a little self-serving.

Tell No Lies said

Chuck,

Like you, I wasn't particularly shocked or surprised at these revelations. While I hadn't heard these particular accusations, they are the sort of thing that you would expect in an organization with the level of discipline of the RCP in possession of such a terrible line on homosexuality. And I don't necessarily disagree

with the characterization of the RCP as in certain respects an “authoritarian cult.” But I don’t think it really illuminates much. It’s a characterization that has as its main purpose ending a discussion rather than starting one. The Institute for Social Ecology had its own cultish qualities as you’ve acknowledged previously, but I don’t think identifying them tells you more than a small piece of what you would want to know about that group.

Similarly I’m unsure what the point is in chastising people for having joined or stayed in a group when they are in the process of critically analyzing it. It seems like you think Mike owes somebody an apology for the time he spent in the RCP. The RCP is hardly the only group on the left to embrace a crappy line on an important question. When I joined the anarchist movement (well after Mike had joined the RCP) the prevailing understanding of race and racism was characterized by a “white blindspot” the size of a barn. There was for all intents and purposes NO serious engagement with the question beyond the shallowest of liberal platitudes. In a country like the US where the oppression of Black people is central to the whole social order do you think that is more forgivable than Mike’s decision to stay in the RCP?

People join and remain in groups with problematic views and practices sometimes because they don’t see the problems, and in others because they think they are outweighed by other considerations. It seems pretty clear that Mike thought the strong points of the RCP’s program and its understanding of “what it will take” to actually bring down capitalism and imperialism outweighed a position that he thought was wrong, and that none of the available “democratic” formations had the potential to take on the specifically revolutionary tasks that the RCP prioritized. It wasn’t my calculus, but I don’t think it was a crazy one. More importantly I don’t think treating it as crazy helps us excavate the lessons that are to be found in the RCP’s experience.

Mike’s comment about this discussion giving you an opportunity to make a driveby comment goes to this. Can you name a single anarchist organization where the former members have made even a fraction of the effort to critically and constructively analyze and

learn from their experiences that the former-RCPers here have? The fact is that while you are looking for confirmation of what you already believed, others here recognize that the important thing is still to be good at learning. Instead of just cranking out anarchist boilerplate why don’t you tell us something about, say, the dynamics that allowed the ISE to go years without developing a serious analysis of racism and how they are similar or different from those that people are describing in the case of the RCP’s anti-gay politics?

laurie said

CWM writes: “but it’s difficult for me to understand why someone couldn’t see the range of political options available outside of the RCP.”

well, there was, at the time, to my knowledge, no other group that appeared to have a cogent analysis and mechanism for taking the monster down. that is, from what i saw over my 15+/- years as an rcp supporter, the left was fragmented, and, for the most part revisionist. i never felt comfy w/the anarchist movement b/c i am a COMMUNIST. that doesn’t mean i was down w/ the lbgt line; i chose to “blip” over/overlook it b/c there were other, more important analyses i felt were more important in the scheme of what was going on in the WORLD (not bedroom).

having said that, i’ve always identified myself as a bisexual. however, i never thought my personal sexual identity was more important than, say the overall analysis—which i thought held great merit— of global capitalism and communism. in that sense, i put others’ struggles above my own sexual identity. and i’m not saying that was right.

but it was — and still is — the elevation of avakian to this diety level that was a breaking point for me. among other things that were LESS IMPORTANT.

so, i’m raising this as a bisexual person, saying that i put up w/the idiotic line on lbgt b/c i thought other lines were more important at the time.

laurie

Mike E said

... In fact we are dealing with real contradictions — with what happens when revolutionary organizations make serious mistakes. And this is not solved by

just “leaving” — as an individual. (And obviously it is also not solved by staying — and ignoring or passively accepting serious problems.)

I don’t want to minimize the things we are discussing. I don’t minimize them — that’s why I have worked to bring them to light.

But let’s also not pretend this is an RCP-only problem. We are dealing with the fact that revolutionary organizations are not automatically revolutionary — we are excavating a lack of “automatic” correctness.

That sense of “automatic correctness” is part of what allowed this bigotry to dominate RCP policy without more struggle.

Living organizations can do terrible things. History and political life is full of such problems.

I remember well when a respected leader of SNCC and the Black Power movement announced that “the only position of women in SNCC is prone.” That was the theory, what do you imagine the practice was?

Or we could discuss how very contradictory the Black Panther Party experience was (for its members, for its supporters).

Or, this: It is little known that both the early Chinese revolution and the later Philippine communist base areas had episodes of anti-infiltrator witch hunts in which significant numbers of innocent cadre were accused of treason and executed.

The conclusion to draw from these episodes is not that “bad things happen so no big deal” — but on the contrary, they underscore the need for accountability, vigilance and struggle. And they dispel any naive sense of automatic correctness (which as TNL touched on elsewhere, gets embodied in assumptions about “the party.”)

Suzie's story: Queer, isolated, invisible

by Alessa Hill

After publishing Libri Devrim's "My Life in a Red Closet" Kasama received several accounts of the suppression of gay people within the revolutionary movement. Here is our fourth one.

Each recollection has added detail — but also confirmed a pattern where gay people were identified, isolated, confronted with the RCP's position, pressured to reject their same sex attractions, and then often just shunned. As this account notes, there apparently was a worked-out routine here, carried out after supporters have been sequestered and wrapped in a concealing cloud of invented security concerns.

I wasn't of the same generation as either Andrew or Libri, but in some ways I had a very similar experience.

I am heterosexual and was a member of the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade (RCYB) for three years. During that time I saw eager young people who were active and interested in politics become enthusiastic about what was in the pages of the Revolutionary Worker and would want to be involved in building the party. More than a handful, including one of my close friends, were GLBTQ. Some were actively discouraged from seeking to be anything more than "supporters" while others were active up until they heard the party's line on homosexuality and then they left in disgust.

But there were also a couple of people who were committed revolutionaries and looked past the fucked up line on the HQ and still wanted to join the brigade or join the party.

My friend — I'll call her Suzy — was one of those people.

A pattern, a routine, a policy

I think there may have been a pattern of how the RCP dealt with people in the movement and potential supporters who were gay.

Maybe this directive wasn't publicly known by people outside of unit leaders and an inner circle from the national office, but in different cities and different times there were similar stories of how gay people were responded to by the RCP and RCYB.

Suzy joined the Youth Brigade (YB) about a year after I did. She was young, smart, and very involved in the local anti-war movement. Suzy had a difficult childhood and her parents fought a lot. Her home life wasn't very nice. She had an aunt who was in a relationship with another woman and she went to live with them during her junior year of high school.

When Suzy came back that summer she got really involved in politics and going to demonstrations and meetings. She joined the YB and was super active in taking out the paper.

Critical thinking and questioning

At discussions Suzy was always asking questions and raising counter points. She'd ask: "How do we respond to Black nationalism and movements like that which are such a draw?" or "Why isn't Cuba a dictatorship of the proletariat?" or "What exactly happens in the transition from socialism to communism?" While the rest of us were screwing around, she was reading Marx, Lenin, and even Hegel — trying to figure out what this body of ideas was all about, "wrangling" about how it could be a reality.

Around the time we were both about to go away to college, homosexuality came up in a bookstore discussion. It wasn't like the party line was still putting out that the prevalence of homosexuality in the U.S. was reflective of imperialist decadence, and that ultimately, gay people needed to be educated or reformed and that they would be in a communist society, but the line was still fucked up.

And Suzy's reaction to the discussion was something along the lines of:

"What? Are you crazy? Nobody believes that anymore! I'm sure that if Bob Avakian was in the room right now he'd tell you you're full of shit."

That didn't win her any friends and already I was intimidated enough by YB leadership that there was no way in hell I was going to intervene and back her up. How fucked up is that?

I was just hoping she'd shut up and let the issue go before we all got in trouble. As I think back I'm not sure why I knew that was a dangerous area to delve into, I just knew that nothing good would come of it.

The next time we (the youth brigade) met, Suzy announced to the group that she was a lesbian. The leader's response was something like,

"Okay, well that's news. Now let's talk about building for the fundraising drive."

The party spokesperson for our area (who had been speaking at that bookstore discussion) wanted to meet with Suzy for some talks about homosexuality before we left for college. But as luck would have it, we were both busy and Suzy's mom kept her at home most of the next few weeks. That September we moved to a large Midwestern city to begin college.

Suzy, the invisible person

Suzy and I went to schools that were about an hour away from each other on public transit and I was much closer to Revolution Books than she was.

During the first month of school, a woman from the RCP visited me at my dorm to bring me the paper (and a stack of papers to sell on campus) and to invite me to various events and demonstrations. I went to some, although I was busy with school and my new work study job.

Oddly, I didn't see Suzy at any of these events, but I just chalked it up to her being farther away from the bookstore than I was. Whenever we'd message online we'd be so busy talking about other stuff that I forgot to ask her how things were going with the YB person and when she was going to come to a meeting.

Eventually I figured out that they weren't talking to her and hadn't even met with her yet. So the next time I was invited to an event, I brought Suzy along. Even though the YB and RCP leaders had never met her in person, they already knew who she was and they didn't seem thrilled that I had invited her. After the event, most of the YB went out to Taco Bell to talk about what the speaker had said and have a discussion. They "forgot" to invite us.

The easy uses of security

When the YB leader visited me on campus a few days later I asked why no one was inviting Suzy to anything or talking with her like I was being met with.

Her response was to say that it wasn't my business what other people did in or around the party, implying that Suzy was now assigned to a different unit and that my questions posed a security risk. I accepted this because I believed that my leader wouldn't lie to me. I assumed that Suzy had not yet been put to work but that she would be soon and that I should leave it alone.

Several months later Suzy still hadn't been contacted and she was depressed, saying that she thought people in the party didn't like her because she was too shy and because she stuttered. She hadn't made the connection between the bookstore discussion and her disfavored status.

Incidentally, the way the YB dealt with Suzy's stuttering problem in the past was shameful as well; she was treated like it was a personal failure and that she should just learn to "spit it out" (as one leader said), as if stuttering expressed a lack of confidence in the political line we were putting forth.

I knew that talking to my leader wasn't going to change things because I had already been told not to ask about Suzy, so I contacted someone from the RCP back at home. He told me "just persevere; keep trying to find someone who will listen to you. They must just

be really busy and so no one has contacted Suzy but it can't be because she's a lesbian. There's no rule that you can't be in the YB or work with the party if you're gay."

Trying to warn the party

I figured out who my leader's leader was; or at least, who I *thought* was my leader's leader.

And I wrote a letter saying that I thought Suzy was being discriminated against because she was gay and that they weren't inviting her to anything and that I had been told not to ask about it for security reasons but that Suzy had volunteered to me that she was being excluded and no one from the RCP was talking to her anymore. I took the letter and after a meeting, gave it to the man I thought was my leader's leader, telling him that I needed to get this to the "party leadership."

He was NOT happy to take it and gave it back without looking, telling me to give it to my leader. I said no, I needed this to go above her. So he took it, I think to avoid a scene more than anything else.

The next week my leader met with me. She was pissed. I was told in no uncertain terms to stop butting into other people's business and that what was going on didn't concern me. Again, allusions were made to party security that I was potentially violating.

The story should end there, except that I think my letter got to someone because a few weeks later the RCP sent someone to go visit Suzy. They met at a McDonald's near campus and had a general "getting to know you" conversation. Suzy was given a copy of the paper and invited to attend a weekly newspaper discussion group nearby. She started going and for a while it seemed like old times. We'd talk about the paper and current events. I never saw her at bookstore events or demonstrations but assumed that she was now back in the groove.

It was short-lived though. The same week that Suzy was asked to take out the paper to a local Spanish-speaking neighborhood (she's fluent in Spanish and the two guys she was paired up with don't speak a word), she was also "invited" to a private discussion with nameless individuals. We assume they were from the party but I think they were just introduced by their first names only.

Suzy messaged me as soon as she got back from the first discussion, saying that they had talked about the emancipation of women and how sexuality could objectify women.

"I was agreeing with them and saying, 'right on, yeah that's right' until one of them was like 'and that's why lesbian relationships mirror the fucked up sexual relations in capitalist society.'"

Suzy went to five or six more meetings like this. All were at fast food places or local cafes, all were with the same group of people (though not each person was at each meeting). In all of them, Suzy said she felt like she was clearly being targeted and that she was being bullied into agreeing with their conclusions.

After one meeting she sent me an email that I still have. It reads in part:

"I am torn. This is the only party capable of leading a revolutionary situation in the US. It's the only party with the line, the leadership, the vision to unite those who have nothing to lose but their chains. There is no other option and I want to be part of the revolutionary struggle.

"I'm trying to grapple with this. With all of this. I don't think their understanding of my sexuality is correct, but everything else the party does and says is correct. So what do I do?"

"I can't just leave and work for reforming the system, joining some feminist or pro-voting or 'peacenik' group. That would be pointless because the only real change will happen when this whole system of exploitation and oppression is torn down. So what do I do?"

Against my advice, Suzy openly shared these feelings and questions with those who were meeting with her.

And eventually as it was realized that she was not going to agree with them, one woman began to berate her in the meeting, saying that she was petty bourgeois and that she wasn't "understanding" the party's position because she was choosing not to and wasn't really committed.

The last meeting she had with them, it must have been bad because she cried for hours with me over the phone. At one point she told me,

“I just wish I was into guys.”

Suzy never left or was officially kicked out. She was just “separated” and no one contacted her again. Her newspaper subscription was suspended even though she had already paid for a full year. She never tried to come to events at the bookstore so I never knew if they were planning on telling her to leave or if they were just going to freeze her out and not talk to her.

*There are a number of responses to this post.
We encourage all to go to
kasamaproject.org to read (and participate in)
the full discussion on this topic.*



[http://kasamaproject.org/2011/07/12/
suzies-story-queer-and-suddenly-
invisible/#comment-40433](http://kasamaproject.org/2011/07/12/suzies-story-queer-and-suddenly-invisible/#comment-40433)

Opening the red closet door . . . then a demand to shut it

by Mike Ely

One of the most remarkable events on Kasama this summer has been the outpouring of discussion over the treatment of gay people in the previous communist movement.

Libri Devrim opened the door with her piece “My life in a red closet” – a heartfelt remembrance written with deliberate restraint.

We experienced two responses, very different in kind:

Response #1: Rushing through the open door

There was a heartening outpouring of interest, experience and discussion. Kasama published six different, unsolicited new posts.

Three of them detailed experiences with the RCP’s red closet:

“Working with the RCP, Opposing the homophobia”

“Rejected by comrades: My love was just love”

“Suzie’s story: Queer, isolated, invisible”

Three other posts dealt with experiences and summations from outside the RCP:

“Closet Rules: My Story of Survival”

“1975: Early Maoist critique of anti-gay bigotry among Maoists”

“The Cahokian: Homophobia & the value of thoughtful excavation”

There were (all together) about 200 comments and over 6,000 page views of these threads.

Excavation and Self-Criticism

For a number of reasons, the discussion focused largely on excavating the methods of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA.

Previously, it has been widely known that the RCP (and quite a few other communist organizations before them) argued *theoretically* that gay people were inherently non-revolutionary or reactionary. But there has never previously been an open exposure of the *methods* this gave rise to and (in turn) justified: The pressure for gay supporters to live as heterosexuals, the shunning or expulsion of those who refused, and so on.

Libri wrote:

“[W]hat was going on within the RCP was not just a stubborn and arrogant ‘error of line’ – it was also an actual practice that had an impact on real people and real struggle. That is what I want to write about, including what it was like to live ‘in the closet’ inside a communist organization.”

And then Libri peeled back what that practice had meant (in her case):

“I want to talk about what it was like to be attracted to the dream of revolution – and then be told that my lesbian feelings were ideologically part of a corrupt and oppressive world order, and that I force myself to have sexual relationships with men in an effort to develop the sexual feelings I was told I was supposed to have, as part of being a revolutionary.”

“I was pushed into the closet as a price for being considered a revolutionary by those I respected. And this was doubly painful: I was forced to deny my own feelings in public self-criticism, and I was being trained to confront my continuing feelings as reactionary in the privacy of my own mind.”

And each of the remembrances that followed on Kasama contained new details of what this line had justified. And these essays also contained *common* features — that help sketch a larger picture of what were clearly generalized, *national* practices implemented over years.

A process of communist summation

This enables us to soberly confront and explore how things had gone so wrong — how this could happen in a communist movement that *prided* itself on revolutionary disdain for tradition, on a stand with the oppressed and on a supposedly objective form of analysis.

How had it been possible to be so wrong in the evaluation and treatment of gay people? And how could it have gone on for thirty years (through the AIDS crisis, through several program rewrites, through pretenses of theoretical re-evaluation)? (We won't try to capsulize the engagement over those questions, but this thread is a good place to look.)

For those who participated in this period, as members and supporters of the RCP, our Kasama discussions have been an occasion for self-examination, for self-criticism and a real sense of apology.

One thing that is worth examining more deeply is that this abuse was not just rooted in pervasive anti-gay sentiments (seeping from larger society into revolutionary ranks.) This was clearly also facilitated by a particular, over-centralized form of organization where the membership was generally kept in the dark and powerless (even as many of them were increasingly eager to champion equality and justice for gay people).

There was misuse of security culture (and centralism) that literally meant that the actual practices and policies of the RCP were often unknown even to their own members. Until the moment Libri started this

discussion on Kasama, these practices were still not known.

Even the people who *experienced* these practices personally (the denunciation, isolation, bombardment meetings, shunning, pressure to sexually conform, secret expulsion) did not quite realize these were elaborated *national* practices.

It also stands out that those same methods then became much more generalized in the organization — in the period of so-called “rectification” following Avakian’s 2003 self-coup. Organizational techniques previously used to isolate and expel gay people were already in place, and put to use in the more generalized purges that gripped the RCP in 2005-8.

These Kasama threads have represented one collective contribution — in excavation, self-critical examination, and in seeking lessons for future forms of communist organization.

Libri wrote:

“I feel it is a cautionary story for our common future — because in the grip of dogmatism, ignorance and arrogance even revolutionaries can do awful things. We should be aware of how much we often remain ensnared in the views of the very system we seek to overthrow. We need to see how easily we sometimes set ourselves up as the arbiters of right and wrong — often with little investigation or serious analysis — posturing perhaps as revolutionary or scientific, but in reality merely reflecting backward views that are quite common in the society around us.”

Response #2: Demanding the door be slammed shut

The other response came this week from the current RCP. It is both revealing and disturbing.

A day or so ago, the RCP reposted a 2008 denunciation on their main website page.

This essay is (strangely enough) labeled a “Glossary” entry — which purportedly defines the term “Counter-Revolution.” It was originally posted as one of the RCP’s early public response to the Kasama’s discussions of communist experience. We answered it at the time.

Now they have reposted this Glossary essay, presumably as their response to this *new* discussion of communist history (focused on the mistreatment of gay people).

And so they repeat their earlier claim, that unauthorized discussion of such experiences is “counter-revolution.”

Here is one operative passage from that longer “Glossary” piece:

“The whole culture these days is shaped way too much by tabloid voyeurism, made up of superficiality plus ‘narratives’—my personal story, my personal reality, ‘the more sensational the better.’ We live in a culture which makes hounding and exposing the lives of prominent cultural and political figures a national pastime; unfortunately this same mentality also has been taken up by people playing at revolution. We get *National Enquirer* sensationalism in the “movement” fired by personal careerists who build themselves up by posturing as ‘those in the know’—which fosters a climate where people think it is OK to publish and broadcast lies about people, to ask about people’s whereabouts, to speculate and gossip about the role of different individuals, and try to provoke people into responding to this level of discourse.”

It is rather stunning to compare the discussions on Kasama, with this white-knuckled demand for silence from the RCP. It needs to be said, the victims of these policies don’t “*posture* as those in the know.” They actually *are* in the know.

Carefully appropriating a common history

This historic communist experience involves matters of sexuality, security used to prevent accountability, false claims of science, uncritical promotion of reactionary ideas by communists, unprincipled standards of recruitment, and methods of *protracted* denial.

And clearly that experience does not belong solely to those who still use the name Revolutionary Communist Party. This is a *common* history of revolutionaries in the U.S. as well as the *personal* history of those who were victimized. This history is not *the* personal property of the RCP’s leading core, it is *our* common

legacy. Communists have every right to *appropriate* this history (piece by piece by piece) and sum it up critically. In fact this discussion is not *about* them.

Of course they can participate and engage if they choose. There is an old Maoist expression: “Be both target and motive force for the wave of criticism” — why not join us in trying it?

In the absence of that, empty accusations of “counter revolution” can’t deter communist summation of communist history. The RCP rump organization doesn’t set the rules for communist summation or define who is revolutionary. This all goes on utterly without them or their permission.

Libri spoke to that in her initiating essay:

“I guess for the RCP it was all over and done with, but for me it wasn’t... the RCP has still (to this day) not acknowledged that they banned gay people from their ranks, or that their party had a ‘closet’ within its ranks, or publicly accounted for the cost of this to people like me and to the movement for radical change.”

The comments that follow are just a few of the many responses to this post. We encourage all to go to kasamaproject.org to read (and participate in) the full, rich discussion on this topic.



<http://kasamaproject.org/2011/08/02/opening-the-red-closets-door-then-a-demand-to-shut-it/#comment-41111>

Sylvanus Windrunner said

This conversation on Kasama about the RCP’s line (and former lines) on LGBT issues and the related question of the culpability of those of us who went along with those lines despite disagreeing with them (along with the question of what exactly we were culpable of) has been an opportunity to reflect on my own past with the Party, the ethical implications of that involvement, and how this relates to larger ethical ques-

tions in the history and current comportment of the ICM.

It has been troubling to me that this has had to come out as a series of anecdotal stories, rather than as an attempt at making a comprehensive summation of the past practice of the Party. Yet, this seems to me to be a product of necessity. In the absence of a sweeping command of the experience of the Party, people who want to explore this topic only have, for the time being, the various data points of individual experience that are necessarily anecdotal (the term anecdotal has, at times, been used as something akin to a slur in online discussions about the experience of the revolutionary communist proletarian internationalists in the United States [in particular, during the 2changetheworld.info discussions and the discussions that followed in the wake of the closure of that worthy project], so I want to be clear that I mean no slur or disrespect in using that term here). (Of course, this assumes that none of the leaders of Kasama were in a position to have a comprehensive understanding of the overall workings of the Party. They have claimed that this was not the case, and for the time being I am willing to grant them that assumption.) Since there is a collective project going on of piecing together this history through sharing anecdotal histories, I would like to share my own experience as a contribution to the synthesis that will come out of all this (even if no one puts together a well-researched synthetic piece, everyone reading this is in the process of creating their own synthetic understandings in their own heads [although I do hope something more synthetic comes out of all this]).

During my time as a close supporter of the RCP, I had a history as a bisexual man that was well-known to my immediate Party leadership from early in my time working with the Party. In my area lesbian women participated as members of the RCYB and I do not remember anyone being challenged about their sexuality. In fact, I remember very clearly a young woman in the YB, who later joined the Party after the line changed, telling a comrade who played a leading role in the work she was doing among our base that she was a lesbian and him telling her that he didn't care and then the conversation moved on. In my experience, we made

frequent efforts to link up our united front work with LGBT activists and organizations, and we often dealt with attacks (both principled and unprincipled) on our united front efforts (in a variety of areas) by forces that disagreed with our line on LGBT issues.

The principled attacks were made by LGBT people who legitimately sensed that our line was wrong and struggled with us to change it. The unprincipled attacks were made by groups that saw this as a weak point where they could attack us since they knew they couldn't get by with straightforward anti-communism. (And sometimes the principled and unprincipled combined in the actions of particular individuals, who combined righteous opposition to a bad line with anti-communism. (For example, some of the forces who decided to stage a kiss-in at Revolution Books in NYC as part of the Stonewall 25/Stonewall Now! events.))

So my experience was with a Party that was not overtly homophobic, except in its written policy statements. I disagreed with these written policies and I was relatively open about this disagreement. I never argued for this line and, whenever I thought that it did not undermine the work of the Party, I semi-publicly stated my opposition. I know many other people who did the same. At the same time, when faced with what I, or we, perceived to be anti-Party attacks, I always upheld the right of the Party to hold this line and struggled against efforts by anti-communists to use the Party's wrong line on LGBT issues to ice the Party out of various coalitions or discredit the Party's work in a variety of fields.

The stated politics of the Party were troubling, despite the fact that I saw no follow-up in the form of overt homophobia on the part of Party members or supporters. Initially I decided that despite these errors, the RCP was the closest thing to a serious revolutionary organization in the USA, and I combined this with a nationalist error of my own in seeing the RCP's work among oppressed nationality base communities in several major cities as far outweighing its line on LGBT issues (even though I recognized that, were the RCP to triumph in a revolution the day after I began supporting the Party, I would likely be a victim of its bad line). I think that there were many other people who made a

similar decision. The whole effort that the RCP made among our base is largely unappreciated, and it seems that leftists who have not seen it or, better, experienced that work cannot actually believe that it occurred, despite the fact that they have been told about it in some detail numerous times. (And it is clear that no one with detailed knowledge of that work has appeared to talk about it on Kasama, apart from Mike Ely's experience of the 1970s.)

Personally, it became clear at one point that my own bisexual history was an obstacle in going forward with my party membership application, but this was one of several issues and we never went in depth in talking about it as an obstacle.

After several years, I and others that I knew were told that young party members had waged a heroic line struggle resulting in the change of the line on LGBT issues in the Draft Programme, and young communists were brought from another city to explain the new line at a conference. Clearly, judging from the discussion here on Kasama, this is not how this news was delivered to the people commenting here.

To be clear, I am communicating this experience to provide another data point for this overall summation of the RCP's line on homosexuality. This experience was very different from the experiences that have been communicated on this website so far, and is not meant to challenge or to try to invalidate those experiences. Rather, this is to help us understand just how varied people's experiences were. Under these conditions, the RCP still had a wrong line, it just didn't express that line very often (except when attacked for having that line). It made it much easier to focus on the many positive aspects of the Party's work, and it seems that in retrospect I benefited from having a local leadership that either a) disagreed with the stated line or b) pragmatically decided to ignore the stated line whenever it could (or both).

The change in line, and lack of self-criticism, produced a lot of different responses. Most people I knew cheered the new line and just wanted to move on. We had disagreed with the line and now we wanted to just get away from it. Other people, who had apparently really gotten some heat when struggling over the old line

internally, were furious at the lack of self-criticism. One good friend/comrade of mine left the Party over the struggles that ensued over this, after having swallowed the earlier line that she disagreed with for decades.

So that's my experience, and I suspect that it is representative of many others who did not leave the Party or its orbit over this issue, despite having serious disagreements for many years. Despite this suspicion, I only speak for myself, and I may well be wrong about this being a representative example.

This does, however, beg the question: Why stick with the Party when I did in fact have serious disagreements with this line? Why not seek out other venues for 'activism' or 'revolutionary activity'? I'm sure everyone has their own answer to this question, but mine hinges on an understanding of the historical context of the RCP as a legitimate heir of the tradition of the ICM in the USA. If you believe(d) that the RCP is(was) the embodiment of the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao in our time period, or recent past, in the USA, and you have an actual understanding of the real-world limitations of the historical experience of the ICM, how on earth could this question on its own drive you from the Party? After all, if you uphold the experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat in China, you have to come to terms with the actual real failings of that experience in addition to its triumphs. At the end of the day, was it an advance for humanity that the Great Leap Forward happened, despite its costs? What about various efforts during the Stalin years that advanced and harmed both our cause and millions of human beings? Or, to push the envelope in simplifying the issue, do we throw out Marx because he impregnated his maid (what an ugly juxtaposition with Strauss-Kahn)?

As someone who likes to think of himself as a thorough-going materialist, it did not surprise me that the RCP had serious shortcomings. But it had other marks of seriousness and potential that no other group on the left came close to, not the ISO, Love and Rage or the Lurpies. And for that matter, it also displayed signs of being more serious about revolution than groups like the EZLN, the PKK or the FARC, but substantiating that claim would be a whole other discussion. On the

other-hand, this desire to think of oneself as a 'thorough-going materialist who recognizes shortcomings' has the shortcoming of predisposing one to forgive errors of this kind. The 'tough-minded materialist' has often been unkind to LGBT people historically, and this is something worth thinking about.

To extend the parallel: How do we characterize people who supported the Soviet Union during the 1930s when it carried out heroic efforts which ultimately benefited humanity and simultaneously carried out genocidal policies against border peoples who were deemed enemy nationalities? This is a question that the ICM really hasn't opened up, but I would say that these people could be both heroic and despicable simultaneously. I guess those of us who put up with unconscionable politics regarding LGBT people in order to make heroic efforts for revolution in the USA in other contexts also qualify for a similarly contradictory label, and I do not mean here for the positive side of this contradiction to 'eat up' the negative side.

I do think it is likely that the RCP's re-posting of its "What Is Counter-Revolution" (http://revcom.us/a/146/counter_rev-en.html) article is related to this discussion, although I think the Kasama community should be open to the notion that the RCP has a hand in many issues and events and that, as Ball stated, this may be in relation to any number of things. The RCP remains the most advanced detachment of revolution in the United States, and I think that Gary's singling out of its anti-war work only reveals his own blindspots, because there are many other areas where the RCP is doing admirable work. It is clear to me how the various exposures of homophobia within the RCP in the past could be used to attack the RCP today, and the denials of this fact by commentators here seem disingenuous to me. Whatever the motivation, of course these stories of the RCP's past can (and probably will) be used to attack the RCP today. Because of this, I post this comment here with some trepidation. Still, this conversation will happen whether the Party wants it to or not, and the attacks are the results of a wrong line and bad actions on the part of figures of authority within the Party over many years, and not mainly the machinations of revisionists and counter-revolutionar-

ies out to destroy the Party. The Party should embrace what is correct in the criticisms and move forward, not stick its head in the sand and declare people counter-revolutionary who are dealing with the emotional grief of having been denied a chance at making revolution (see Mao on Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q" in "On the Ten Major Relationships").

As a final note, I do want to mention that there is a tremendous need for this type of knowledge to be synthesized into a larger summation and not left at the level of individual stories, even though these are currently our necessarily primitive data points for a more comprehensive synthesis. I have an ironic anecdote about the weakness of anecdotal accounts. When the friend that I mentioned above left the Party after the change in line on LGBT issues, she claimed that one of the people who was a big stalwart of the old LGBT line was Mike Ely. After meeting with Mike shortly after he left the Party, I concluded that she was wrong and that she was mistaking his position as someone upholding the Party (at that time) for his actual position on the Party's LGBT line. I suspect that over the years my own defense of the Party came off to others as much more of a defense of a wrong line that I disagreed with and that I did not intend to defend and not as the defense of the Party itself, as I intended. I suspect that many of us who defended the Party at the time inadvertently came off as homophobes. If that happened to Mike, who is sponsoring this discussion (or at least moderating it), surely there were many other miscommunications that might inadvertently be portrayed inaccurately in an anecdotal account.

Mike E said

Some thoughts provoked by SW's extensive commentary.

"It has been troubling to me that this has had to come out as a series of anecdotal stories, rather than as an attempt at making a comprehensive summation of the past practice of the Party. Yet, this seems to me to be a product of necessity. In the absence of a sweeping command of the experience of the Party, people who want to explore this topic only have, for the time being, the various data

points of individual experience that are necessarily anecdotal.”

I’m not sure what is troubling, or why it is troubling? Doesn’t investigation and excavation *necessarily* precede summation?

Before Libri submitted her piece, I (despite decades in the RCP) had almost zero idea of how gay people in the party or its periphery were actually treated. And I suspect this is true of others who were in the RCP.

I knew they were not recruited — and I knew that “contacts” who were gay were (unjustly, secretly) sometimes allowed to go uncontacted — since they had become unlikely prospects for recruitment etc.

But I don’t believe it was known what happened when active party supporters were discovered to be gay. And when those other stories appeared about the experiences of Andrew and Suzy, it became clear that there were common threads, themes and the outlines of an established national policy.

So again, why is this troubling? Because we have only gotten to this point so late? Because the RCP itself has not done this work already?

“the term anecdotal has, at times, been used as something akin to a slur in online discussions about the experience of the revolutionary communist proletarian internationalists in the United States (in particular, during the 2changetheworld, info discussions and the discussions that followed in the wake of the closure of that worthy project), so I want to be clear that I mean no slur or disrespect in using that term here.”

This is very true. Jed made a quip earlier:

“What they denounce as anecdotal, the rest of us just think of as our experience.”

And really, there is an element of hypocrisy here — because the RCP has made a whole culture out of anecdotal information used to buttress hype (over many years, not just recently).

Internally a “story” of some positive micro-encounter was treated as a sign both of “what is happening” (“out there”), and also “what could be happening” (if you did your work right). And many people were given the impression that the organization was far larger and

far more successful than it was — using positive anecdotes to imply real success. And of course, there is an overuse of anecdotal methods in the public press as well — where a “conversation” is often recounted to imply something larger about an event or campaign (or about larger potential).

Inside the RCP I often found their extensive anecdotal culture extremely frustrating and unscientific — and got the impression that policy sometimes pivoted (or at least was justified) on the basis of some brief, passing bit of contact that the otherwise sequestered leaders had with reality (often second or third hand).

Given that, it is a bit odd (in my view) that the discussion of experience (here on Kasama, or any other supposedly unauthorized venue) could be dismissed as merely “anecdotal” (and *therefore* suspect or inherently misleading).

An example: Here is a personal experience reported on the RCP’s website — it seems interesting and worth a thoughtful read. But why then is Libri’s rich and careful presented experience considered invalid, suspect, unprincipled, inherently subjectivist and even dangerous (“*superficiality plus narratives — my personal story, my personal reality...*”) by the RCP (and its Glossary statement)?

What is the difference? There is no difference.

What is discussed here on Kasama is *experience*, sometimes very personal experience, but also sometimes broader experience. (And after all: “the general resides in the particular” as Mao says.)

And such discussion of experience involves both perceptual *and* conceptual thinking (and both of them matter). This discussion is the result of synthesis (in the form of these powerful essays and discussion), and the basis for further synthesis *and new practice*. And such is the spiral of knowledge, right?

And it has been remarkable how out of the mix of remembrance and discussion it has become already possible to develop new and deeper understanding of that history.

(Another example is our discussion of the communist policies toward alcoholism and mental health — and a kind of checkerboard of opposing policies that

alternated ignorant reductionism with more scientific approaches).

And (to return to the “Glossary” essay) to treat these discussions as if they are irresponsible or a threat to important secrets — well, it defies credibility, and suggests intentions to defend crude coverup.

And the 2changetheworld discussion site (which Rosa and I collaborated in creating for the RCP) was treated as something to be killed as soon as possible — as something suspect and alien. And while many participants summed it up as a positive new thing — there was quite a bit of bitter hostility thrown its way internally (since it opened up horizontal communications, and leaked into water tight kingdoms). In many areas, party members and youth supporters were forbidden to participate (go online to read, or post), and many were reduced to reading this complex threaded discussion in the impossible form of thick printed pages delivered weeks apart. (Which made it impossible for those reading it to grasp the lively, fast moving conversational nature of this medium, and just made it look fragmented and confusing.)

That discussion community was destroyed without discussion or explanation or appeal. I simply received a note that said kill it now, end of story.

And it was not until we created Kasama a few years later (with many of the same methods and people) that we resumed that work of wide-open, unafraid, horizontal engagement over communist theory and politics.

“Of course, this assumes that none of the leaders of Kasama were in a position to have a comprehensive understanding of the overall workings of the Party. They have claimed that this was not the case, and for the time being I am willing to grant them that assumption.”

I think it is safe to conclude that one of the things excavated here is *precisely* how hard it was for *anyone* to have an overview of those “workings” (outside a very small group of inner core leaders). And it is a problem when an organization’s membership is deprived of an overview of successes, failures, policies, strength, membership size etc. since this imposed ignorance then makes it even harder for that same membership

to participate (knowledgably) in critiquing policy and carrying out accountability.

It was explicitly argued in the RCP, that (supposedly according to their version of marxist epistemology) it was impossible to have a scientific overview *without* being at the apex of a “chain of knowledge.” In other words highly centralized decision-making was not just necessary for unity and security reasons — but also because insight and decision-making were *only* possible at that apex. And it doesn’t take much to realize that this (mistaken) view of epistemology has profoundly anti-democratic implications — where there is no value in trying to give a membership an overview (other than as part of the preparations to accept, understand or carry out the decisions of others).

Often I would say something like “It seems there is a bit of growing interest among students these days in xxx and xxxx.” And often the response would be “What basis do you have for that kind of assumption? Are you reading party reports? All of that is fragmentary and subjective.” And this falsely implies that someone can’t get a correct insight or observation from *other* means (other forms of investigation) and that there is something especially authoritative (even magical) about the summation processes of a centralized organization. (In fact we have learned since then how faulty, subjective and walled off *that* summation process was.)

“even if no one puts together a well-researched synthetic piece, everyone reading this is in the process of creating their own synthetic understandings in their own heads (although I do hope something more synthetic comes out of all this).

Yes, each of us is working on synthesis — and are doing so without having some pre-digested synthesis given to us first. And yes, something should be written on this (and many similar topics) — though that is hard given the available recourses and the many conflicting priorities of seeking to regroup a communist movement.

“During my time as a close supporter of the RCP, I had a history as a bisexual man that was well-known to my immediate Party leadership from early in my time working with the Party. In my area lesbian women participated as members of the

RCYB and I do not remember anyone being challenged about their sexuality. In fact, I remember very clearly a young woman in the YB, who later joined the Party after the line changed, telling a comrade who played a leading role in the work she was doing among our base that she was a lesbian and him telling her that he didn't care and then the conversation moved on.

I have no doubt this was true in some areas, and became increasingly true over time (i.e. through the 1990s and into the 2000s).

The RCP view was three fold:

1) It was correct to oppose discrimination, gay bashing and inequality facing gay people.

2) There was something fundamentally wrong with gay people that prevented them from being communists.

3) disagreement over (2) was not something that should cause divisions, either in mass work or in the party.

It was quite possible to carry out all three of those views. And in fact, cadre carrying out this line often did not *appear* to be homophobic (and in fact often weren't), until questions of recruitment came into the picture.

Those of us disagreeing with (2) could overall emphasize (1) in our political work — while upholding the verdict on gay people when directly asked. And that is what many did.

If you were not considered "recruitment material" for a number of reasons, then it was quite possible to establish a longterm working relationship (in October 22 anti-police work, or antiwar work etc.) the strangeness came up when people were being considered (or trained) for membership.

"In my experience, we made frequent efforts to link up our united front work with LGBT activists and organizations...

Sure. That is undoubtedly true.

But such efforts were necessarily very difficult and uneven. It is hard to "link up" with active LGBT organizations when it is known that you have a blanket policy of excluding gay people. (Are you part of the problem? Or part of the solution?)

And in those cases the RCP's argument (that this should not be a dividing line issue) was seen as an argument that the rejection of same sex relations was not as important as other things (opposing the war or whatever).

And more: I remember being shaken up by the contributions of Hutu on the 2changetheworld site, where he described a circle of gay communists within the AIDS activist movement of the 1980s — and how they felt abandoned and betrayed by the RCP's unwillingness to connect with them, learn from them and lead them. I had (at that time) never considered the costs of the anti-gay policy *other than* the loss of a generation of activists (in the Reagan 80s generation) who were unwilling to join an anti-gay organization.

But here was sharply being raised the other impacts of this policy: the abdication of communist responsibility within the AIDS crisis, and the abandonment of gay activists trying to do revolutionary work, or (at the same time) the possibility of having a "red closet."

It is true true that the RCP tried to "link up" with LGBT groups — but the fact is that the RCP was explicitly anti-gay, and such "linking up" was understandably suspect and infertile.

"we often dealt with attacks (both principled and unprincipled) on our united front efforts (in a variety of areas) by forces that disagreed with our line on LGBT issues.

The principled attacks were made by LGBT people who legitimately sensed that our line was wrong and struggled with us to change it. The unprincipled attacks were made by groups that saw this as a weak point where they could attack us since they knew they couldn't get by with straightforward anti-communism. (And sometimes the principled and unprincipled combined in the actions of particular individuals, who combined righteous opposition to a bad line with anti-communism. (For example, some of the forces who decided to stage a kiss-in at Revolution Books in NYC as part of the Stonewall 25/Stonewall Now! events.))

The RCP's summation is that the criticisms of their line (coming from gay people and other leftists in the 1980s and 1990s) was wrong. And that a cor-

rect approach on these matters did not appear (in the world?) until the RCP reversed its line after 2001. And that therefore their problem was not one of “not listening” — since all the criticisms were themselves wrong (rooted in non-communist or non-scientific outlooks etc.)

This is both outrageous and self-serving.

It is obviously true that some of the people attacking the RCP’s view were anti-communist. And, sure, some anticommunists attacked the RCP’s line on gay people because it was a weak spot for attacking communists.

But really, the fact is that the fight against anti-gay bigotry has been one of the most powerful new social movements of this generation — and the RCP (for reasons that are still unclear) essentially opposed or ignored it (and had an outlook that was barely more enlightened than Dick Cheney). And if anti-communists took advantage of that to smear communism — that is not surprising. The communists were smearing themselves.

“So my experience was with a Party that was not overtly homophobic, except in its written policy statements.”

This is overall my experience too.

This was not an organization where casual anti-gay bigotry (“fucking faggots” etc.) was generally heard. There are incidents when a public RCP document used the expression “J. Edgar Faggot” (in Panther-style rhetoric within the early Red Papers) and one where Avakian called the bourgeoisie “faggots” for not fighting their own wars (at the founding convention of the RCYB).

But generally, that kind of language disappeared after the mid-70s (linked to the departure of the RWH and the resulting critiques of workerist posturing), and would not have been used (or tolerated) where I was in the 1980s or 90s.

But part of what we are learning from the discussion of experiences is how *deceptive* that is. And how *other things* were going on out of sight, in private meetings, in ways unannounced and therefore unknown to non-participants.

So yes, in areas like the October 22 coalition there were efforts to reach out, and Refuse & Resist tried to join the fight against discrimination or sodomy laws etc. R&R used the word “homophobia” in its literature (at a time when that word was banned from usage in the pages of the RCP newspaper as “unscientific”).

But again: something else was going on closer to the organization itself — in its youth organization and in places where recruitment was an issue, and within the party ranks themselves (when gay people were discovered).

“When faced with what I, or we, perceived to be anti-Party attacks, I always upheld the right of the Party to hold this line and struggled against efforts by anti-communists to use the Party’s wrong line on LGBT issues to ice the Party out of various coalitions or discredit the Party’s work in a variety of fields.”

There was a major incident when forces (associated with Prairie Fire) tried to have the National Lawyers Guild adopt a policy of denying legal support to activists arrested in association with the RCP — because of the organization’s anti-gay policy. I had just reached the conclusion that I opposed the RCP’s position around same-sex attractions, and started to raise it internally — but this attack really made supporters of the RCP “circle the wagons” and rally to the defense of the organization, and was used (internally) to beat down the growing sentiments for a change of policy. It was in connection with those Prairie Fire efforts that meetings were held around the RCP, and “the line” was hammered down. And the shameful 1988 re-working of policy was consolidated.

I’m not saying that those criticizing the RCP’s line helped strengthen it (i.e. that they are somehow responsible for its longevity). No. I’m just describing that those determined to preserve anti-gay policies in the RCP took advantage of such sharp external campaigns to put critics on the defensive and to entrench. And these tactics were part of “why it took so long.”

“I have an ironic anecdote about the weakness of anecdotal accounts. When the friend that I mentioned above left the Party after the change in line on LGBT issues, she claimed that one of the people

who was a big stalwart of the old LGBT line was Mike Ely. After meeting with Mike shortly after he left the Party, I concluded that she was wrong and that she was mistaking his position as someone upholding the Party (at that time) for his actual position on the Party's LGBT line.

It is true that I publicly upheld the RCP's line. I was a very enthusiastic and committed supporter of the RCP's politics *overall* for my entire membership — from 1970 until 2007. And I have always been a disciplined communist. I adhered to rules and policies closely. Generally, around gay people and homosexuality, I stressed those parts of the formal line that I most agreed with (the opposition to discrimination, gay bashing, and inequality.) But whenever it came up, I articulated the views of my organization (even where I disagreed), not my personal views.

I don't think it was wrong to be act according to these commonly agreed principles.

But I do think we should now discuss whether to adopt or modify those principles *for the future* — and whether it should be possible for communists to be both disciplined *and also* have more shades of opinion and discussion in public. I think we should have less scripting and more public variation in the future.

"The stated politics of the Party were troubling, despite the fact that I saw no follow-up in the form of overt homophobia on the party of Party members or supporters. Initially I decided that despite these errors, the RCP was the closest thing to a serious revolutionary organization in the USA, and I combined this with a nationalist error of my own in seeing the RCP's work among oppressed nationality base communities in several major cities as far outweighing its line on LGBT issues (even though I recognized that, were the RCP to triumph in a revolution the day after I began supporting the Party, I would likely be a victim of its bad line). I think that there were many other people who made a similar decision."

This is, as we have heard and experienced, a very common self-justification among those who opposed the anti-gay line but stayed with the RCP. I had a version of that thinking in my head during those years.

Those *not* guilty of thinking all gays are anti-woman or reformist *were* often guilty of thinking this was *not* the most important issue. (I said above that the RCP policy had three planks — and many of us were guilty of supporting the first and third plank — while waiting out the second far too passively.) And I think those of us who made that error need to criticize it — since it is part of the mechanism by which a serious and oppressive policy was able to continue.

And when the question was opened, there was an explosion of anger over the anti-gay policy. It was anger directed at the leadership — with a demand for an accounting of how this had taken so long to correct. But it was also (visibly and emotionally) an expression of anger at ourselves — for being passive, for taking an easy road on this matter, for not "daring to go against the tide" and for seeming to "forget" things we actually knew.

"The whole effort that the RCP made among our base is largely unappreciated, and it seems that leftists who have not seen it or, better, experienced that work cannot actually believe that it occurred, despite the fact that they have been told about it in some detail numerous times. (And it is clear that no one with detailed knowledge of that work has appeared to talk about it on Kasama, apart from Mike Ely's experience of the 1970s.)"

I agree with this. And I agree that we need to excavate the important work done in the housing projects and black communities in the late 80s and 90s. And that is part of what makes the RCP a *contradictory* and rich experience.

I summed up my experience of mass work in the coalfields (in some beginning ways). And it would be important if others stepped forward to do something similar with later efforts to build a base.

And (as you know, SW), I spent considerable time after leaving the RCP interviewing everyone I could find who had done such work in the housing projects (including Cabrini Green in Chicago), to fill in some gaps (while we were writing *9 Letters*).

"After several years, I and others that I knew were told that young party members had waged a heroic line struggle resulting in the change of the line on

LGBT issues in the Draft Programme, and young communists were brought from another city to explain the new line at a conference. Clearly, judging from the discussion here on Kasama, this is not how this news was delivered to the people commenting here.”

The official explanation within the RCP was that Bob Avakian had personally initiated a review of this policy. Nowhere was the younger generation credited with any struggle against this line — and in fact it was insisted (forcefully and powerfully) that *previous* opposition to the line had been wrong, unscientific and influenced by non-communist politics.

It is obvious to me that the reexamination was a concession — to the protracted and bitter struggle of people inside and outside the party. The RCP simply was not able to write yet another program that demonized gay people. But this was never conceded inside the party — and with great care, Avakian (personally) was credited with opening this debate.

“I do think it is likely that the RCP’s re-posting of its “What Is Counter-Revolution” (http://revcom.us/a/146/counter_rev-en.html) article is related to this discussion, although I think the Kasama community should be open to the notion that the RCP has a hand in many issues and events and that, as Ball stated, this may be in relation to any number of things.”

Yes it is likely — very, very likely. Which is why we wrote about it.

Are other explanations possible? Sure, but very, very unlikely.

Put another way: The RCP has a conscious policy of not engaging public discussions. And so when they feel forced to respond, they often do so *without explicitly mentioning* who they are responding to. This is so familiar that we all *know* what is going on (even if Joseph Ball does not, or pretends he does not).

The RCP is responding to our discussion of policy and experience. And they are trying to imply that any such discussion is dangerous and wrong (and somehow counterrevolutionary). And it is disturbing — especially because it involves accusations and smears of people who were, in fact, *victims* of an ugly set of poli-

cies — policies that the RCP is still trying to cover up and deny.

“The RCP remains the most advanced detachment of revolution in the United States, and I think that Gary’s singling out of its anti-war work only reveals his own blindspots, because there are many other areas where the RCP is doing admirable work.”

I think this is mistaken. The small circles that still use the name RCP are barely active politically, and are essentially irrelevant to the work of preparing revolution in the U.S. There may be members who are “doing admirable work” — I don’t doubt that. We all value those bookstores (even if we are banned from them). But a few cadre doing “admirable work” does not make an “advanced detachment of revolution.”

And *as a project* the RCP has gone over the edge — it emerged as part of a precious revolutionary movement in the 60s, in the ebb of upsurge it consolidated itself as an agitation-propaganda sect, it tried to break out to a political base in the late 80s and 1990s, and has now collapsed in on itself as a rather pathetic political cult.

The early RCP is worth studying and learning from. The more recent RCP is very unlikely to do anything but slowly and finally burn out. And it is most respected in those few scattered places where its current trajectory is least understood.

“It is clear to me how the various exposures of homophobia within the RCP in the past could be used to attack the RCP today, and the denials of this fact by commentators here seem disingenuous to me. Whatever the motivation, of course these stories of the RCP’s past can (and probably will) be used to attack the RCP today. Because of this, I post this comment here with some trepidation.”

Fair enough, that is your view. I respect the fact that you posted with trepidation — but engaged here nonetheless.

But in my view, this discussion is not *about* them. And the other past and future discussions of this kind are not *about* them.

The RCP has already (unfortunately) been destroyed (by Avakian personally). It is over. It is not

coming back. And it is now, mainly, an object of occasional mockery. There is little to “attack,” and little reason to “attack” it.

Again: this discussion is about *OUR* common history. Which they don’t own.

In fact in some ways, we are not hoisting these errors *onto them* — but taking them on *ourselves*. We are appropriating this history (piece by piece by piece). We are taking the responsibility that the past requires that we take.

This is about summing up the previous communist movement. It is not about today’s RCP, who do not participate in such matters, or figure much in anyone’s calculations.

It is the chance for some of us to do a combination of excavation and public self-criticism — which is important for any future communist movement. And there are other episodes that are not as grievous or negative — and we will learn from them with more celebration.

“this conversation will happen whether the Party wants it to or not..”

Yes, exactly. though as someone said calling the RCP “the Party” concedes far far too much.

CWM said

I don’t think “opportunistic” is the right word, but I think that Mike’s discussion of the RCP’s homophobia is a little fanciful insofar as he does not link it to a critique of Leninism or the long tradition of communist puritanism or any real insights into what led people to devote themselves to a loopy cult. After all, all these problems in and with the RCP have a context.

Mike E said

CWM writes:

“I think that Mike’s discussion of the RCP’s homophobia is a little fanciful insofar as he does not link it to a critique of Leninism or the long tradition of communist puritanism...”

I don’t think you understand my view, but I appreciate the chance to clarify.

I don’t think there is a single “Leninism.” There are many approaches that self-describe as Leninism, and

then there is (rather separately) the actual practice of the Bolsheviks and V.I.Lenin himself.

You (CWM) are much more fixated on closed/fixed doctrine than I am (or than I think we should be).

I view the communist movement as a bush — as an evolving set of ideas and practices that often are in sharp contradictions and conflict with each other. (See the essay “Marxism is more like a bush in an ecosystem”: <http://kasamaproject.org/2010/07/15/marxism-is-more-like-a-bush/>)

My own summation of the terrible RCP practices vis-a-vis gay people is precisely that it resides in the mistaken ideas inherited from the previous communist movement (and from the surrounding bigotry of society) *but also* that it was possible to entrench those errors *for decades* because of the particular practice of “democratic centralism” in the RCP. And I would add that a general indifference/hostility toward sexuality made the issue appear “less important” in ways that now look shameful.

Let’s look at one factor: The organizational structure of the RCP had no democracy in it. A former member mentioned to me yesterday that she doesn’t remember any serious debate during her years in that organization. I saw some (over articles on the newspaper staff, in some pre-congress discussions, etc.) — but that was rare since most members were rarely involved in such discussion.

Meanwhile, I think I can count the number of formal “votes” I saw on ten fingers — and they were virtually all “pro-forma” and unanimous votes, with very few exceptions.

In other words debate-followed-by-voting was not generally used as a mechanism for decision-making, and very few members were near *any* locus of major decision-making or involved in significant decision-making.

And with that problem (no democracy) you could have the perpetuation of *this* particular set of practices — even in the face of rising internal frustration. But that same lack of democracy also caused *other* errors and legacies and madness. The anti-gay policies are only one manifestation of a problem that caused *many*

forms of self-blinding and the promotion of a terribly passive habit of obedience among cadre.

But there is nothing inherently “Leninist” about that problem.

I believe history shows that the conditions inside Lenin’s own circles and periphery were very different (and also that they evolved over time, and the organizational practices of the Bolsheviks were radically different in different periods). To put it crudely: I don’t think Lenin’s Bolsheviks operated anything like Avakian’s RCP (even if the RCP would take Lenin as their justification).

Further: Lenin never spoke of “democratic centralism” as some overarching principle (I believe you can only find the words once, in passing, in his works). And the attempt to establish a single universal set of organizational principles — codify them, impose them on the world movement, and elevate (through that universalization) those *particular* rules (no factions, no real debates etc.) — was not the work of Lenin, but the invention of a particular Leninism *by others*.

If you look back over what I have written, CWM, you will see that over and over again I raise the matter that the RCP’s problem (and the lesson to draw from it) was not *simply* some simple sinister blanketing homophobia — but involved a deeper organizational problem (no accountability, no ability to reverse wrong decisions, no penetration of the outside world into inner circles, inability to hear others, overemphasis on inherited orthodoxy, etc.)

I am not engaged in a critique (demonization, rejection) of Leninism — since I don’t believe such a Leninism exists *as a fixed, closed* doctrine. — but mine is a critique of previous organization assumptions of many previous Leninists (including myself).

Put another way:

There is a simplistic caricature sometimes painted of the RCP — where it was a bunch of raving haters, foaming with homophobia, who manufactured cynical “theoretical” language to disguise their raw bigotry. And it is assumed that this whole practice was (more or less simply) to be placed at the feet of Avakian (because, in this scenario, he is the little puppet-master running this small authoritarian structure).

Like all caricatures, it has a tiny whiff of truth, but it is essentially false.

And that is why it is worth pointing out (as I have done, but also as Dom does and as Sylvanus Windrunner does) that you could conduct *years* of political work in and around the RCP without hearing anti-gay slurs.

SW writes:

“The stated politics of the Party were troubling, despite the fact that I saw no follow-up in the form of overt homophobia on the part of Party members or supporters.”

Andrew writes:

“Honestly, I don’t know how and why I never realized that the party had an anti-gay stance. It just never came up.

Think about that!?! Isn’t that a bit amazing?! This is a *generalized* experience.

I’ll go further — (to take up Joseph’s question of “attacking Bob Avakian”) — I have known Bob personally. We spent a lot of time together at various points — in ways that didn’t just involve meetings. And I never saw any sign of a virulent anti-gay bigotry (you know the seething kind I mean). No casual expressions of hatred, no comments when seeing gay people on the street. Nothing. Ever.

I’m not saying there were not wrong ideas involved! Obviously there were.

I was certainly guilty of “wrong ideas” on this (including specifically on the relative importance of this so-called “question” — but not *just* that).

And obviously Avakian is also guilty of wrong ideas on gay people (including the very idea that there is something inherently wrong about being gay). And he has particular responsibility as a leader (and, one assumes, motive force) in these anti-gay policies and views.

But I am saying that this whole episode is an example of a *revolutionary* community gone wrong — and it happened in ways where very different things were going on *on the surface* and then *behind the scenes*. And where (for us, now) an overview *requires* an excavation.

Eric (above) says the things that I would want to say in answer to Joseph's misrepresentation of my views.

But on one level, I don't blame Joseph for finding it hard to believe that you can be inside the RCP (for decades!) and not *know* what is happening to gay people discovered in the organization. It *is* shocking — and I was shocked. And I don't blame Joe (or anyone else) for finding it strange.

As I said: we all knew there was a "theoretical position" — but there was zero discussion (ever) of subsequent policy implications — other than that gay men and lesbians could (supposedly) not be communists. I knew that gay contacts were kept off the recruitment track, but we also all knew (as SW mentions) that there were active efforts to reach out to gay activists on common issues (by mass initiatives like Refuse & Resist). And even as the RCP claimed to "change their line" — the leadership only repudiated their "theoretical position" but never acknowledged their practices (shunning and expulsion of gay people, certainly not a practice of urging gay people to adopt heterosexuality under pressure (!), and so on...) And anyone who started to unravel their own homophobia or start to excavate the results of this "theory" — they were sharply criticized and rather harshly snapped back. (could give many examples of this).

The point of this excavation — actually comparing what most people knew with what was actually happening — is hardly to avoid blame. It is to *take* responsibility. It is to confront the results of passivity and organizational insulation — and prevent it from happening again. It is to identify the techniques in play (of info diet, secrecy, imposed discipline despite disagreement, etc.)

And, at the same time, there are people who *did* know the details — there were leading people who conducted these bombardment sessions, who suggested that lesbians live as heterosexuals, who organized the shunning and expulsion of people. And it would be good if they would step forward too.

* * * * *

If we were to take a different approach — to simply dismiss the whole process as just a cultist bunch

of authoritarian homophobes — then (a) we would be misunderstanding what happened, and (b) we would precisely prevent a summation that can help guide a new communist effort.

A strange anti-sexual current

I want to end with a note of uniting with CWM on one point: I don't think we have (yet) excavated much about "the long tradition of communist puritanism" (at least not here on Kasama).

We have started this — for example the widely visited post "Telling Each Other How to Fuck" (<http://kasamaproject.org/2008/04/23/on-telling-each-other-how-to-fuck/>). But we have barely scratched the surface.

And even here, the issue is not some monolithic "Leninism," since (as I'm sure many people know) there have been both libertine and puritanical currents within modern communism — and many examples where the approach on sexuality was very radical (for time and place, like rural China and Nepal), while *seeming* puritanical to those within American sexual subcultures.

We need to address that more.

Enforcing the red closet: Deep regret and an explanation

by Pat

We continue to receive contributions by people hoping to understand and sum up the anti-gay policies of the RCP.

What stands out about Pat's comment (reposted below) is that s/he directly participated in the pressuring of a young gay revolutionary.

Pat wants to discuss the kind of training and thinking that led to such actions. And, at the same time, Pat remains a supporter of the RCP and expresses belief in that organization's continuing viability and capacity to correct itself.

This originally appeared as a comment on a longer thread.

Like Sylvanus Windrunner I am also posting with trepidation. As a former member of the party I still support the party and view it as the only viable force for revolution in our country. My contact with them currently is limited but I left on good terms and want to keep it that way.

At the same time I think I do need to weigh in on the discussion because I was part of series of discussions with a potential recruit from the YB who was gay. The descriptions given by Libri and others are similar to what we did with this youth who came out while in the brigade.

At the time my thinking was that it was our responsibility to publicly uphold the party's line even if we didn't personally agree with it. I deeply regret being part of this and the damage it caused a very impressionable and somewhat immature high schooler.

In reflecting on what happened and why, and why I didn't reject the instructions I was given or stand up or question the authority of my leadership more, I see that there were three main issues:

1. My reactions and behaviors and decision making processes were strongly shaped by working with the party and I was taught, so to speak, not to question authority or to disobey directions no matter how abhorrent or even silly the directions seemed.

2. Information was used as a weapon of sorts, with it often being withheld unnecessarily to control and contain discussion or dissent. So within our local few people actually knew what was happening with whom and for what reason.

3. Security was given as the reason for everything. For a time I was frequently sent to take care of a background task. I had to rent meeting space, buy things, and arrange for transportation for people without knowing who they were, what the purpose of the meetings were or what was actually going to happen there. I did these things as I was told to do them because I assumed that certain information was being withheld from me for security reasons. Similarly, when later I was given directions to do things that had a negative impact on people (by shunning them, not following through on contacting them, etc) I did this even though I didn't want to because I assumed or was told that there was a larger security issue at stake that I didn't know anything about (and that I shouldn't know anything about for security reasons).

Although I disagree with much of the discussion on this blog I do agree that there were many dysfunctional aspects to the way that that party was organized, the way that leadership interacted with lower level cadre, the way some were favored over others publicly, and the process for dealing with conflict, disagreement and discussion. Whether this is/was a perversion of centralism, I'm not sure. But I do agree with some others here who have said that the party continues to do good work and I think it should be supported.

Yes, we should criticise what happened in the past, but also let's find areas in which we can still unite with them and let's encourage the party leadership to confront these problems and change. Because when we look at it there is really no other party capable of leading revolution in the united states.

The comment that follows is just one of the responses to this post. We encourage all to go to kasamaproject.org to read (and participate in) the full, rich discussion on this topic.



<http://kasamaproject.org/2011/08/06/deep-regret-over-enforcing-of-a-red-closet/#comment-41265>

Gina R. said

Thank you Pat for posting this.

In late 1999/early 2000 I was also involved in a similar series of meetings regarding the Homosexual Question with a comrade who entered into a gay relationship. This person decided to stay and give up the relationship (and, at least outwardly, to agree with the party's line on sexuality) but I was disturbed both by our interference in another comrade's personal (sexual) life, and by the lack of real discussion at our discussions.

Clearly we were there to support the person leading the discussion in convincing this comrade that this was the right position to adopt.

When the party's position on homosexuality abruptly changed a short time later it was a bit of a shock.

Where was the discussion regarding that? Or were we too low to be included in the process of changing a position?

Clearly there was no communication or there was some information gathering or disseminating that we were not included in.

At the time I wondered if that was because of this individual in our unit who may still have been suspected of being gay. But now I think it might just have been the general dysfunction of the party as a whole.

The comrade with whom we had held the homosexuality discussions was miffed by the party's change in line, saying like:

"what the hell is this? One day I'm PB [petty bourgeois] and contributing to the oppression of women and the next day I'm okay???"

Closet Rules: My Story of Survival

by ish

*We recently published the personal story “My life in a red closet” about experiences within the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade (RCYB) with the methods of the RCP. There are of course other stories to tell. Here is one that appeared on **The Cabokian** about political experiences within several Trotskyist groups.*

More on Left-Wing Homophobia: My Story of Survival

When I was writing the other day about the “Forgotten Legacy of Left-Wing Homophobia” I kept wanting to add a coda about what was generally my own ultimately positive experience of finding a corner of the left that was pro-gay. It seemed too much to squeeze into that post, but in thinking about it all some more I remembered some forgotten details and am reminded that my own experience was actually a little more mixed.

I first became involved with the organized left when I was at college in Chicago. In 1976 I joined the “Spartacus Youth League” which was at the time the youth group of the Spartacist League. I had known I was gay since I was a small boy, but in those long-ago days before high school gay-straight alliances I kept it to myself. None of my friends seemed to be also gay, and when I got to college where there were a very small handful of openly gay students I was confused and uncertain about how to cross the threshold out of my closet.

That today gay and lesbian high school students can go to their proms with same-sex dates seems like something wonderfully hopeful and miraculous. Back then I think I was afraid to even say the word “gay.” The

Sparts had a party line on the issue that was couched in their typically archaic dense Leninist prose. “Full democratic rights for homosexuals” was their rousing slogan; like the *New York Times* of the day they had a distaste for using the word gay in print, viewing it as prettified, faddish and generally coddling of reformist petite-bourgeois tendencies. The SL had many lesbian and gay members, including especially many gay women in national leadership, and dry as it was, its pro-gay-rights line was shared by precious few left parties at the time. Anyway I wasn’t out so who was I to quibble.

In 1977 I travelled to a Spartacist national conference in New York; afterwards I stayed in the city for a few days. My visit coincided with a major protest against the anti-gay orange juice spokeswoman Anita Bryant, then inflaming the ignorant with a crusade of bigotry. That’s me in these two yellowed photos from the SL’s Workers Vanguard paper carrying the “Stop Anita Bryant Full Democratic Rights for Homosexuals” sign. My visit also coincided with 1977’s Christopher Street Liberation Day celebration: Gay Pride.

Out alone

I left my host comrades for the evening and went off to that alone. I had never seen anything like it in my life. Christopher Street had a grittier feel back then: the West Side Highway was still elevated, and the piers were still crumbling multi-level structures, not astroturfed parkland. The intersection of Christopher Street and the dark space under the Westside Highway was full of gay bars: it had an edgy, industrial, down-by-the-docks fringe feel, unbelievably distant from today’s gentrified landscape of glass condominiums. A

stage was set up down there, from which blared Donna Summer's hypnotic synthesizer-beat hit "I Feel Love." And the streets were packed with gay men celebrating the night. I was unbelievably excited, but unbelievably scared.

Strangely, at one point I saw one of the gay SL members walking in my direction. He began to smile and wave at me and Judas-like I abruptly dashed into the street to hide behind a car to avoid talking to him or confronting several of the obvious facts now hammering at my head.

At a party meeting the next day he gave me a knowing smile which was sort of warmly reassuring. I thanked him silently for not forcing me to acknowledge what had happened.

The Closet Rule

All of this is ironic because what the Sparts supported was gay rights but what they hated was gay liberation. They held that the notion of gay liberation was a middle-class lifestyle issue, somehow false and misleading in its disconnection from the struggle of "the workers." Gay people, er, homosexuals, deserved legal rights but their issues were secondary to the struggle for Women's Liberation.

Further, they had a rule for their membership called "the closet rule," whereby gay Spartacist members were forbidden to publicly identify themselves as gay. "Disciplined communists do not risk victimization for their extra-political conduct, for instance public avowal of homosexuality" was how the SL described this monstrous rule in a 1977 issue of their press.

Despite this unbelievable bit of bigotry, the Sparts attracted most of a small gay communist collective in California called the Red Flag Union (though the minority split to the RSL, the group I ended up in a few years later).

That trip to New York had really expanded my mind. I was only 18 that summer; it was a lot to process.

Back home

Back in Chicago I really failed to apply myself to school. I lived with other party members. I socialized

mostly with my political comrades, and that was a peculiar blend of liberating experiences and horrifying ones.

I remember one female comrade who worked as a waitress took me out one night to my first gay bar: it was a drag bar on the near north side called The Baton. She went there all the time with her coworkers and thought it would be fun to take some of us.

It was an amazing evening: unbelievably beautiful drag queens lip-synched perfectly to pop and disco songs. The highlight of the evening was some performer whose name I have long forgotten strutting about and mouthing the words to Linda Clifford's "Don't Give It Up." It's probable that the following Monday morning I'd be up at dawn to attempt to sell newspapers to the shift change at the factory gate at a steel mill on the city's southern edge.

Another time hanging out at some bar or restaurant with comrades after an event this wretch of a woman named Tweet, an older woman in party leadership with an oddly aristocratic southern air about her and a younger boyfriend sitting on her other side, rammed her tongue in my ear and announced that she was trying to determine if I was gay. I felt completely assaulted. I had peers in the group who were also wrestling with questions of sexual identity and their friendship was valuable and life-transforming; but this was a singularly unpleasant episode.

Not long after party leaders suggested I avail myself of some therapy available to me at school. When the therapist asked me why I was there, I told her my friends said I needed therapy. She said I probably needed new friends. I left school and left the SYL and came out at the end of 1978.

How the Spark went out....

I got a job, I got an apartment on the north side near Wrigley Field, I made some attempt to socialize in the gay world, but I remained a radical. I started to talk to a woman from the group Spark, which was trying to break out of its Detroit home turf.

Spark had been founded by people who had left the Spartacist League many years before. After the high-octane arrogance and self-righteousness of the Sparts I

needed to go back to basics; I needed something more gentle. Spark tried to recruit people through what was basically a reading club. I met with a Spark activist and a couple other people to talk about a piece of assigned fiction. The books were actually really great: rather than dry Marxist Leninist theology we read things like Howard Fast's "Spartacus." The discussions were pretty interesting. These works of fiction addressed issues of class consciousness and the possibility of revolution in a really useful way.

I went up to Spark's annual "Winter Festival" in Detroit. A fairly apolitical event, it was like a giant house party for all its contacts and members: hundreds of people attended, an interracial crowd larger than any Spartacist event I had ever attended, even if it was social rather than activist in nature.

I was struck by how the leadership of this group seemed mostly female, and to my eyes, mostly apparently lesbian; actually the woman in the group who was trying to recruit me, although she never discussed her personal life, gave off a strong lesbian vibe as well (and I really mean that as a compliment!).

Here was the odd thing about Spark: in our open, fairly liberal society, Spark operated under the rules of a Bolshevik cell ca. 1910. Anyone working with the group had to choose a new first name: even peripheral contacts like me (now "Daniel") and the very nice (probably lesbian) woman "Carrie" who became my same-level trainee partner. Phone numbers were not to be shared: as a contact I only had a number I could call — from a payphone — to leave a message for Sarah and was to use it only in emergency.

Otherwise meetings were to be by regular place and location, with an emergency fallback. I had regularly scheduled meetings with "Sarah" and separate ones with "Carrie" and "Sarah" together either to discuss our readings or to sell papers. It must be said the Spark newspaper was fairly vapid and written for a very low reading level, although I enjoyed the theoretical journal that was published by Spark's international tendency in France.

So finally I decided I had to come out to "Sarah." I asked her something abstract about Spark's position on

the issue. She asked me if I was asking hypothetically or because I was gay.

Then she floored me. She told me,

"Well if people who are that way want to work with our group we ask that they no longer be that way."

In other words, being gay might be offensive to the workers Spark was trying to recruit so being gay was incompatible with being one of their activists. I was flabbergasted; even though I was recently out my gaydar was finely tuned and I knew there was no way I was reading these people so completely wrongly.

It was an extension of the Spartacists' 1950s-style closet rule taken to its logical extreme: not only can you not tell people you're gay you can't actually be gay. She said it as softly and gently as she said everything; it was without rancor or moral condemnation. She didn't spit out a complicated justification about the proletarian family like the Canadian Maoist tract I reported on, it was just matter of fact. And I knew, having gone through what I had already gone through, I could not settle for that kind of personally corrupt defeat.

So that Spark went out.

Moving on...

I realized that my gay identity was too important a part of me—too hard won—to be able to set aside. I had been talking off and on to a guy named Joe Galanti who was in the Revolutionary Socialist League. As a Spart I had learned to sneer at the RSL, but I gave them a second chance. Joe was proudly and openly gay; and the slogan of the RSL was "Gay Liberation Through Socialist Revolution."

I went to the first national gay march on Washington with them in 1979, and formally joined the League in 1980. In 1981 I even moved to New York to be the art director of their newspaper. While in the end the organized Leninist left was not the place for me, I felt that in the RSL I could truly be myself. It was liberating and empowering to discover like-minded people who walked the walk as well as talked the talk. That's me, above, surrounded by red gay liberation flags, in the RSL contingent of a gay pride march in New York City in the early 1980s.

The Cahokian: Homophobia & the value of thoughtful excavation

by the Cahokian (aka “ish”)

Kasama gives space to critical and even hostile remarks, and rarely dwells on praise. Consider this an exception.

Recently we have been focused on excavating a particular and painful history: bigotry aimed at gay people within the revolutionary movement, its justifications, its policies and impact. It is gratifying to see evidence that our collective effort is being understood and appreciated — in this case from afar, by someone outside the organized left.

*The following is excerpted from an essay originally published by **The Cahokian**.*

One factual note: Ish described several people as “former RCP members” — when they have, in fact, been members of the organization’s youth group and supporters. Such mistakes are easy to make, but the distinctions are nonetheless important. Some of the commentators on our threads spoke as former members, but not the ones writing the main posts. We have corrected this in the excerpt we reprint below.

Kasama: Coming to Terms with a Legacy of Homophobia

I’ve been following a number of left-wing websites which strike me as attempting to re-grow a meaningful left. The most exciting part of this to me is that following the obvious failure or defeat of the left in the last century, the people engaged in this attempt are going over the dogma of the past and trying to find what to hang on to and what to discard.

The Kasama Project is an organization and website based in Chicago that has been running some really fascinating discussions on the legacy of the last-century’s left movement (as well as information and discussion on today’s struggles). Organized primarily around people with a history in Maoism, including former cadre of the Revolutionary Communist Party, Kasama’s discussions are particularly thoughtful and challenging. While I often find much to disagree with, I give them full credit for daring to look backwards as well as forward.

I wanted to call attention to a discussion they’ve been having on the legacy of homophobia on the left, a subject dear to my own heart.

In fact Kasama picked up my own story that I wrote here last year as part of their discussion. Their discussion has been ongoing and quite thorough and open. It’s worth reading the main entries as well as the comment threads. Most of the people telling their stories went through the Maoist movement, so it’s interesting to me, as a former Trotskyist, to compare notes and experiences.

Start with “My Life in a Red Closet,” the story of Libri, a former member of the RCP’s youth group. After reprinting my story, there’s “Working with the RCP, Opposing the Homophobia,” by a long-time RCP supporter. Then there’s “Rejected by Comrades: My Love Was Just Love,” by Andrew Copper who was refused membership in that party despite being a hard-working activist. Another recollection is “Suzie’s

Story: Queer, Isolated, Invisible.” Today Kasama has unearthed an analytical document from the 1970s by a group of Maoist Lesbians: “1975 – Early Maoist Critique of Anti-gay Bigotry Among Maoists.”

This discussion is amazing to me. I can’t imagine the left as I knew it being so daring or honest with itself: and it’s done with the intention of being constructive and healing. It’s also incredibly encouraging to me that if anyone in this discussion has defended the old anti-gay ways of the left, I’ve missed it. Perhaps one day a left will rise out of the ashes that can move beyond the defeats and mistakes and betrayals that too often stained its path. What Kasama is doing gives me hope.

Appendix:

Excerpt from “On the Position on Homosexuality in the New Draft Programme”

From the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (2001)

The following selection contains the concluding paragraphs of a position paper “prepared in 2001 by a specially constituted writing group assembled by the RCP, USA.”

To those who would argue that we took too long to review this question, we would say: while there may be some truth to this, it takes time to unravel what is right from what is wrong, and also to recognize aspects about which too little is known to take a clear position. And it wouldn't do any good if we simply catered to fashion and scrambled to try to “correct” an old position by simply adopting whatever has become popular at any given time, and without being pretty confident that a new position actually better corresponds to material reality and represents an improvement over the old. Searching for the truth with any real integrity of purpose and method is a process which has to be done right, and this takes time and resources. And the process of forging a new Draft Programme served as an important juncture for stepping back to carry on serious re-examination.

Which brings us to a second point: we are a revolutionary party, which necessarily entails a broad and complex agenda. We are not “single-issue” activists (in relation to this or any other single issue), and we also cannot function like individual scientists, historians or social scientists, though we embrace and investigate all such disciplines and more. We are a revolutionary party and as such we seek to work in a collectively disci-

plined way to apply the scientific method of dialectical and historical materialism and the scientific viewpoint and method of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism as a whole to all spheres of human life and to all the major questions of the day, as we constantly struggle for a better, more accurate and more comprehensive understanding of material reality. And we do this not to understand things just for the sake of understanding them, but to try to better find the ways to concretely lead people in the direction of the seizure of power and the revolutionary transformation of all of society. We try not to work piece-meal here or there but to relate everything we do to the broader strategic objectives of preparing ourselves and the masses for the revolutionary seizure of power and the building of an entirely new kind of society, while contributing all we can to the overall world revolution.

Part of the art of revolution is recognizing that you can never do everything that objectively cries out to be done at any given time, or do all things equally well or with the same degree of attention. It involves recognizing and correctly dealing with relative freedom and necessity, and their dialectical relation, at any given time, knowing how to set strategic objectives and priorities, and unfolding work that is undertaken along the many different tracks as much as possible in line with those priorities and always with an eye to how it all fits in with overall strategic objectives.

All this is not easy to do. And as the overall work and responsibilities of revolutionary leadership continue to expand, a revolutionary party needs ever more hands, more minds, more resources of all sorts to meet the new challenges and demands.

The point here is that it is important to keep all this in mind and to understand that, even if a given question (such as homosexuality) is objectively important, there are always many other questions which are objectively at least as pressing and important to overall revolutionary advance.

Finally, in terms of sharpening up our methodology in approaching this question, and in terms of correctly handling contradictions among the people around it, it is important to remember that discussions and differences in relation to this question will no doubt continue, and we will no doubt continue to learn new things in the course of that process. Our Party's Chair, over the recent years, has written extensively on the strategic importance of working to continually improve the way all these kinds of contradictions are handled--not only now, but after the seizure of power and throughout the socialist period. These same writings have also emphasized the crucial importance of the party cultivating a genuine and ongoing openness to new ideas and a certain non-dogmatic flexibility in dealing with dissent or other forms of disagreement among the masses.⁽²⁰⁾ All this is very relevant to the search for the truth in general and including in relation to the issue at hand. In fact, the application of just such a methodological approach has been important in allowing us to critically re-examine our past work on the question of homosexuality and to be willing and able to recognize some important mistakes, while at the same time recognizing some core aspects of truth to be preserved and some essential aspects of correct methodology that are crucial to grasp and apply even more fully.

The full text of this document is available at :
<http://revcom.us/margorp/homosexuality>

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