Trans Liberation and Feminism

Oppression is not a direct result of physiological features but the social role assigned in general to those who have those features, and while the gender binary oppresses us all, it particularly oppresses those for whom it is a daily prison and for whom their/our daily transgression leads to physical and mental violence in the family, in the workplace and on the streets. That's among the many arguments in this document on support for Trans Liberation recently agreed by the Socialist Resistance Editorial Board (and endorsed by ecosocialist.scot). It was originally published here

Back to basics

Our understanding of the term gender is that it is separate from the term sex, the latter refers to physiological features, the former to a socially constructed role. To quote Simone de Beauvoir: 'one is not born but rather becomes a woman'. This has always been the general position of Marxist feminists – oppression is not a direct result of physiological features but the social role assigned in general to those who have those features.

There is obviously a whole lot of nuance available in understanding HOW the fact that MOST people with the physiological features identified with female give birth and nurture children impacted the social role of people with those same physiological (or perceived to be) features. The Fourth international 1979 resolution on women's liberation does not pretend to lay out a complete picture. However it is clear that our analysis and strategic orientation is not that of what we call radical feminists, i.e. that men are the root cause of women's oppression and thus the enemy.

We think neither sex nor gender are determinant in how people perceive themselves, it is possible for people to reject one

or both of them and many people do to greater or lesser extent. Women's oppression does not derive from our sex or biology rather from the societies in which we live that require us to have a primary role in social reproduction which plays an important role both in paid and unpaid labour in 'socially necessary labour time', the labour time that is required to keep production going for profit in capitalist economies.

Social reproduction is the reproduction of the labour power of the working class to serve its role in the capitalist economic system. A part of the production of socially necessary labour is done outside of the labour market in the home where it is not directly covered by wages. It is not physical reproduction only but also basic education, nursing, caring, cooking and cleaning of the family home and care, not only for children but others in our households that need support and assistance. Moreover, when women enter into the capitalist labour market, they often wind up trapped in employment which is based on traditional women's labour which is then viewed as unskilled and of little value and therefore worse paid that traditionally 'male' jobs.

Marxist feminists do not usually use the term 'the patriarchy' and indeed argue against its use explaining that the term gives rise to a conception that there are two systems: patriarchy and 'class society' (or 'capitalism', depending on which Marxists from which tradition you are discussing this with). There are a number of works on the question of 'dual systems' theory and indeed Lise Vogel's seminal work provides one way forward, and is the root of the development of social reproduction theory, which is explicitly Marxist, and called 'Towards a unitary theory'.

This is not counterposed in any way to also adopting an intersectional approach also within a Marxist framework in which different forms of oppression coexist, reinforce and sometimes contradict each other, and in which we have a

political responsibility to stand with the oppressed, working with those differences and turning them from weakness into strength.

A general agreement with this analytical approach is important because it affects how we act politically. If women's oppression derives from social constructs we can organise to change them, but if they are derived from biology then our options are much more limited.

As we understand it, those who call themselves 'gender critical' reject these positions and link the definition of woman **directly** to the physiological features. Note that we have not used the term 'Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists' (TERF) in this document, though it is used by some trans people to describe those that organise against them. The term is confusing because there are radical feminists who are trans inclusive and other feminists who would define themselves as socialist feminists who organise on the basis of 'sex-based rights' and are therefore trans (and intersex) exclusive. It is not helpful to use a term that people see as an insult when attempting rational discussion with those who may be influenced by these ideas.

The 'gender critical' people also demand specific rights for those born with (or assigned as born with, if the 'gender critical' people even envisage that possibility that things are assigned rather than simply wired in) the physiological features judged as women's – what they call 'sex based rights'. Such a road is dangerous – for what it would imply for other physical differences e.g. for disabled people or intersex people as well as trans people – and also completely unnecessary as we can't think of a circumstance where we would argue that rights should be granted on such a physiological basis. Furthermore, there is a hidden political trajectory in the argument of these groups, that for trans people to gain rights means taking them away from cis (non trans) women – this is like arguing for crumbs not the whole bloody bakery.

Binaries and determinism

Acceptance of the gender binary – by which we mean that throughout the natural and human world there are only ever two sexes and two genders – and that the sex assigned to everyone at birth is always in line with their physiology which is assumed in itself to be always uncomplicated – would also politically limit our options. There are many reputable articles which show that there is much evidence to the contrary in the biological sciences for example: https://www.nature.com/news/sex-redefined-1.16943 https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/stop-using-phony-science-to-justify-transphobia/

As comrades have pointed, out there are parallels between some of the discussion in this frame and that about race and biology. It's surely inconvertible on the left that biological determinism has long been used to justify imperialism and racism. Notions of 'women's brains' seem to us to have terrifying parallels with the deeply reactionary notions of 'negroid brains' and so on. The need to think outside the binary is not only based on an understanding of biological sciences but also on the complexities of different human societies. See for example: http://www.gendertrust.org.uk/gender-concepts-around-the-world/.

Feminism in its many forms has always questioned gender stereotypes, whether they are about the socialisation of children into pink and blue, into different types of playthings, of recreational activities or into training and work, or notions of which competences should be more valued etc.

The gender binary oppresses us all, but particularly oppresses those for whom it is a daily prison and for whom their/our daily transgression leads to physical and mental violence in

the family, in the workplace and on the streets. It also leads to exclusion from services or their provision only on the basis of conformity to rules which negate individual selfhood.

A partial history

Gender identities outside the binary have always existed. Gender identities don't necessarily have a relationship to sexuality. But the construction of sexual identities in a more fixed way under capitalism have also had an impact on trans identities. Michelle O'Brien explains it like this in *Abolish The Family: The Working-Class Family and Gender Liberation in Capitalist Development*: 'In the prostitution and sexual subcultures of the industrializing city, people seized on new forms of gender transgression. A lexicon of cross-dressing emerged, as alongside cis sex workers other new transfeminine gender deviants walked the streets of London, Amsterdam and Paris: Mollies, Mary-Anns, he-she ladies, queens. They sold sex to the bourgeoisie on the streets, ran from police, fought in riots, held regular drag balls, and worked in one of the estimated two thousand brothels specializing in male-assigned sex workers scattered across London'. Similar points have been made, perhaps in less detail, by many others.

There is a complex relationship between early theories of gay and lesbian identities and trans identities in some early theories eg those of Ulrichs a very influential German writer and activist in the 1860s who described gay men as being of a third sex – 'Uranian' (derived from Plato's ancient discussion of that possible third category of being). Ulrichs' theories influenced Magnus Hirschfield who in 1897 founded the groundbreaking Scientific-Humanitarian Committee which campaigned for the decriminalisation of homosexuality (and won only partial support from the German Socialist Party before the Nazis took control).

These ideas had international impact, for example on English

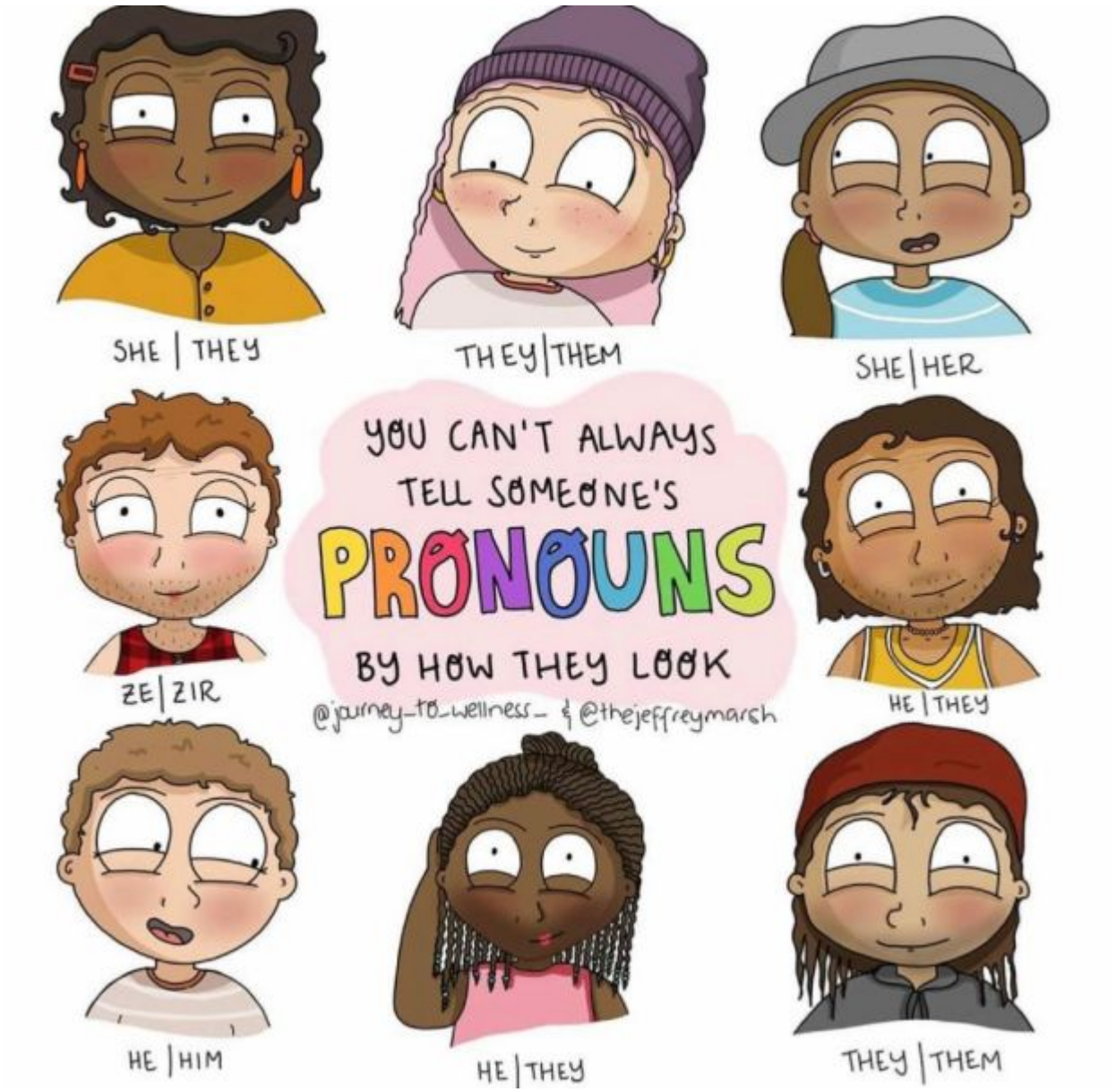
utopian socialist Edward Carpenter (1844 – 1929), who himself was a collaborator with the early socialist William Morris. And while these theories focused more on gay men, Radclyffe Hall's (1929) novel *The Well of Loneliness* also poses things in a similar framework.

The earliest recorded example of gender reassignment surgery is 1917. This kind of surgery became more frequent in the 1970s – with Jan Morris as a prominent example – but was hugely expensive and still pathologised. The Greek model, especially amongst men, i.e. the idea that young men were always passive and effeminate, was playing out in parts of the commercial gay scene as late as the 1970s in Britain.

O'Brien talks of the particular position of trans women of colour: 'Among queers in major US cities from the late 1950s on, trans women of color were the most starkly visible, leaving them the most vulnerable to street harassment and violence. They served as the consistent foil representing deviant queerness for police, mainstreaming gays, and gender radicals alike. Trans women of color were almost entirely excluded from formal wage labor, instead surviving through streetbased sex work and crime. These trans women of color likely numbered in the low hundreds in many American major cities, but acted as the central figures in a broader underworld of thousands of motley lumpenproletarian queers, including other non-passing gender deviants, homeless queer people, queer drug addicts, sex workers, and gay criminals'. While her account is based on the US it has much in common with developments in Britain and other advanced capitalist countries.

It is important to point out that while there have often, perhaps always, been a trans presence in the LGBTIQ movement, this has been differently described, and there are significant complexities about the relationship between concepts of gender and issues of sexuality. Both trans and other voices from the LGBT movement have pointed out that many of the tropes

directed against the LGBT movement as a whole are now directed primarily against trans people particularly in terms of the denial of the rights of young people.



Assessing trans oppression

Let us begin here by taking seriously key trans stats around mental health for trans people. Although this data is couched in terms of the mental health outcomes actually it contains information about how the actions of others are responsible for very negative impacts on trans lives.

- More than four in five (83 per cent) trans young people have experienced name-calling or verbal abuse, three in

five (60 per cent) have experienced threats and intimidation and more than a third (35 per cent) of trans young people have experienced physical assault. (Youth Chances 2014, sample size – 956)

- More than one in four (27 per cent) trans young people have attempted suicide and nine in 10 (89 per cent) have thought about it. 72 per cent have self-harmed at least once. (Youth Chances 2014, sample size – 956)
- Two in five (41 per cent) trans people have been attacked or threatened with violence in the last five years. (FRA LGBT Survey 2012, sample size – 813)
- In the last year alone, two thirds (65 per cent) of trans people have been discriminated against or harassed because of being perceived as trans. Over a third (35 per cent) avoid expressing their gender through physical appearance for fear of being assaulted, threatened or harassed. (FRA LGBT Survey 2012, sample size – 813)
- Almost three in four (70 per cent) trans people avoid certain places and situations for fear of being assaulted, threatened or harassed. (Trans Mental Health Survey 2012, sample size – 889)
- More than half (55 per cent) of trans people have experienced negative comments or behaviour at work because of being trans. (FRA LGBT Survey 2012, sample size – 813)
- One in four trans people report having been discriminated against at work. (FRA LGBT Survey 2012, sample size – 813)
- More than two in five (44 per cent) trans people have never disclosed to anyone at work that they are trans. (FRA LGBT Survey 2012, sample size – 813)
- Almost half (48 per cent) of trans people in Britain have attempted suicide at least once and 84 per cent have thought about it. More than half (55 per cent) have been diagnosed with depression at some point. (Trans Mental Health Survey 2012, sample size – 889)
- More than half (54 per cent) of trans people reported

> that they have been told by their GP that they don't know enough about trans-related care to provide it. (Trans Mental Health Survey 2012, sample size – 889)

We have less information on more precisely what leads to these figures: of how much is violence or coercion to gender conformity within the family, how much discrimination and isolation at work, how much lack of support from health professions, and how much harassment and violence on the streets. UK police statistics show that in 2018 hate crimes against trans people went up 81%.

In her chapter 'Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom' in the 2021 book Transgender Marxism, Michelle O'Brien talks in detail about the way that the rigid gendering of most work settings impacts on the limits the places accessible to trans people within the labour market. She notes that: 'The most systematic report on trans Americans available comes from a 2011 survey by the National Center for Transgender Equality, including 6500 respondents… The data on employment was dire: 28% of African-American trans respondents report being unemployed, and 12% of white trans people, compared to 7% of the general population; 15% of all trans respondents were living in extreme poverty, with incomes below $10,000 a year, four times the rate for the general population… 44% of African-American trans women reported experiences in sex work, and 28% of Latinx trans people'. (p.50)

The recent context in Britain

The debate in Britain, particularly the debate on the left, has been sharper for longer than anywhere else. The conflicts probably became sharper here because there was a push from trans organisations and individuals to reform the Gender Recognition Act. When the Act was passed in 2004 it was a step forward from what existed before though it was less radical

than what was being debated and in some cases passed elsewhere. (see: https://ilga.org/trans-legal-mapping-report)

Under the GRA, people have to prove to a doctor that they were living full time as 'the other' gender for years before they could access a gender recognition certificate (GRC) – and without a GRC all sorts of protections under the act are not there. The act was absolutely based on a (lack of) understanding that there was a single trans path determined by a medical and psychological model very similar to the debates around the 1967 sexual offences act for gay men.

In fact not all trans people want gender reassignment surgery. New terms were being created and increasingly used eg the notion of 'genderqueer' in the 1990s and, increasingly now, 'nonbinary'. According to official statistics, the proportion of the UK population who define as non-binary when given a choice between male, female and another option is 0.4%, which is 1 in 250 people (Titman, 2014). Around a quarter to a third of trans people identify in some way outside the gender binary: – see: *https://www.allabouttrans.org.uk/about/resources/*

Trans organisations and inclusive LGBTIQ organisations were growing in this period and many more trans people were arguing that the path of the GRA was humiliating, demeaning and determined by the gender binary.

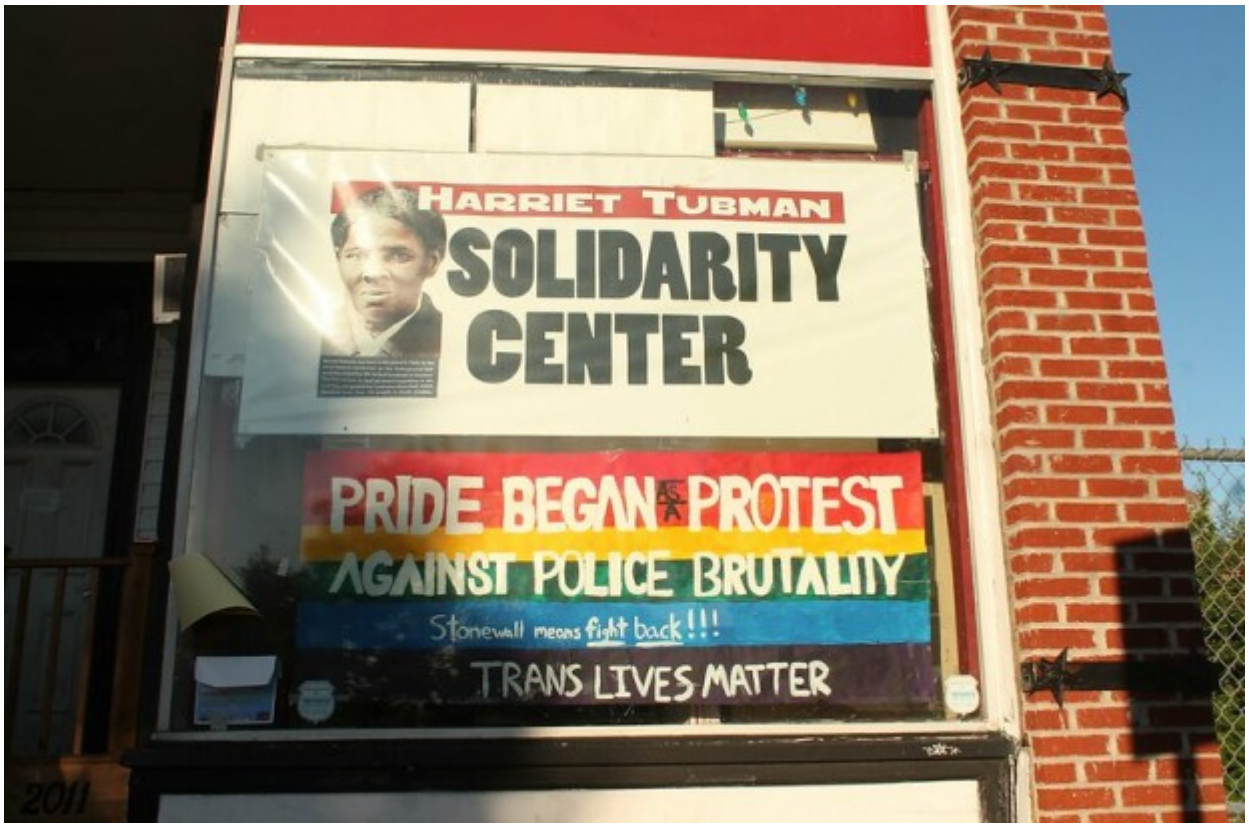
By the 2000s, there were far more vocal trans people speaking about the humiliating way that, for example, access to hormones was dependent on their convincing a doctor that they subscribed to traditional i.e. reactionary views of men and women's roles (even when they did not really subscribe to them at all, but had to pretend they did). There was also increasing knowledge of some of the work cited above in the scientific world that shows that a gender binary not only not universal but rare. There was also increasing work about the extent to which trans identities are embedded in many

different cultures in the global south in Africa and Asia in particular.

Of course, there are trans people who do hold a stereotypical view of the gender binary and of male and female roles (as there are cis people who do) – but the voices of those who don't were becoming louder and arguing that the GRA should be amended to support self id – i.e. the right of trans people to define their gender identity in the same way that people define their sexuality.

As Jules Gleeson points out here, the proposed reform of the GRA still offers virtually nothing to the even less highlighted position of intersex people. But discussions about changes in the law that would improve the lives of many trans people were used, consciously or not, by forces who wanted to prevent this happening.

Their ability to gain exposure for their reactionary views was enhanced by the weakness of socialist feminist thinking and organising in Britain at the time. It's instructive for example to contrast the powerful response of Irish feminists to an attempt to export such backward notions there. It was also and continues to be enhanced by a heavy bias in their favour in key media outlets – most notably the Guardian and Radio 4s Woman's Hour. And of course the Morning Star has played a particularly pernicious role in stoking up hatred towards trans.



Gaslighting

This was the context in which Womans Place UK was set up in September 2017 as they themselves put it: 'to ensure women's voices would be heard in the consultation on proposals to change the Gender Recognition Act i.e. from the beginning denying that trans women are women. They organise/d around 5 demands – which again are premised on that exclusionary principle. While their focus is debating with women, they also have a not insignificant and loyal following amongst men on the left.

The LGB alliance came later but takes a similar approach though its focus is to argue for a movement based only on sexuality- denying the actual history of queer movements.

They both focus on trans women in public speech – trans men are generally ignored, although can sometimes be subject to particularly vile abuse as 'traitors'. They claim to support trans rights and take great exception to being told that any of their demands, writings or speeches are transphobic – but in practice they don't support any of the demands trans people

make – of which self id is clearly the pivotal one.

Much of their rhetoric focuses on body parts in an almost scatological way – particularly impactful in a culture which is generally uncomfortable with bodies.

Parts of their rhetoric instrumentalise women who have experienced violence including sexual violence. Not only do they assume that all of us are cis but that all of us agree with them.

Their focus on toilets is particularly extraordinary. Many people's privacy and indeed health is far more impacted by the lack of accessible and free public toilets than by anyone you might meet there. There is nothing to stop someone who wanted to physically and/or sexually attack women – including trans women – from entering a toilet block to do that – especially when they are badly lit and rarely staffed. The attacks on the rights of young trans people are deeply reminiscent of attacks on LGB people from previous eras.

The misuse of the term 'no platform' has become a favourite trope for these groups who make a huge amount of noise, get a massive amount of media exposure to claim they have been silenced! We need to keep in mind that there is a legitimate, nay necessary debate about when an actual tactic of no platform should be use ie to physically prevent an event taking place by the mass mobilisation of the labour movement. Such should in my view be reserved for fascists – though it does have important analogies with effective picketing. This is an important discussion not least because the National Union of Students has taken a much broader position on when to take a No platform position. But that is different from politically choosing who to invite as speakers to trade union, LP or campaign meetings etc.

In general these organisations and their primary advocates use bad faith arguments which are based on bad/non-existent

science and denial of diversity of contemporary and historical human culture

More recently this has also been an increasingly polarising topic of conversation including within Plaid Cymru, the SNP, around the formation of Alba and within the Scottish Greens.

Our position

The practice of the Fourth International is trans inclusive (most evidently and over a long period of time through our youth camp), that is, **trans women are welcomed in our women's spaces**, and our most recent resolution on the women's movement is clearly trans inclusive.

This does not at all mean that we retreat from our position that the autonomous women's movement is a necessary strategic subject in the class struggle. That would mean for example that we are not in favour of erasing the mention of women, for example, from discussion of pre-natal care but of being inclusive.

The founding conference of ACR (Anti Capitalist Resistance [1]) overwhelmingly agreed a constitution which talks about 'trans people currently experiencing the sharp end of a backlash against their right to existand to unconditionally self-define their genders' and explicitly mentions transphobia as one of the things that the organisation opposes. This was strongly supported by the then 'Women's caucus' which subsequently agreed unanimously to rebadge itself as a 'Women's and non-binary caucus'.

There are moves to set up an LGBT caucus within the ACR which will include at least one comrade who identifies as nonbinary. We support these developments. Our activity in ACR is in line with a trans-inclusive position, and we will argue for that as we build that organisation.

Notes

[1] Anti Capitalist Resistance is a new revolutionary marxist organisation in England and Wales within which supporters of Socialist Resistance, British Section of the Fourth International, are active.

Reading list

Left resources

https://www.vice.com/en/article/9k7mzv/intersex-experience-gender-recognition-act-reforms Jules Gleeson

https://newsocialist.org.uk/whats-debate/ Jules Gleeson

https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/notes-on-british-transphobia Rowan Fortune

https://redfightback.org/read/transphobia_in_the_left

To Abolish The Family: The Working-Class Family and Gender Liberation in Capitalist Development. *Endnotes* 5.. *Michelle O'Brien*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pIj9KTxKsg Transgender Marxism book launch as part of Red May

https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745341668/transgender-marxism/
https://www.rs21.org.uk/2020/07/21/i-was-born-a-baby-not-a-boy-sex-gender-and-trans-liberation-2/?fbclid=IwAR0s7T53-GOqbuDBb2E1oXdj7Xif0lYdtL-FcktJahDN3qm7hFFjv167KV8

https://www.socialistparty.org.uk/keyword/LGBT_Pride/Trans/30302/19-02-2020/labour-party-and-trans-rights

https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/49506/The+fight+for+trans+rights

https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/49414/Socialist+Workers+Party+conference+debates+where+next+for+the+left

https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/articles/intersectionality-and-marxism

Far right and trans people

https://qz.com/807743/conservatives-have-created-a-fake-ideology-to-combat-the-global-movement-for-lgbti-rights/

https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/10/23/christian-right-tips-fight-transgender-rights-separate-t-lgb

https://www.thedailybeast.com/southern-baptist-convention-trans-people-dont-exist

Wider resources

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cd20hNQWKrw Dr Adrian Harrop on puberty blockers

https://www.allabouttrans.org.uk/about/resources/

https://www.nyctransoralhistory.org/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TERF

http://bit.ly/SDtrans
https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2021/03/26/puberty-blockers-keira-bell-high-court-parent-consent-tavistock-portman-nhs-good-law-project/?fbclid=IwAR1OMCHWl2S826GufEm01yJIB4bO5S2IpTb6n-oYLidKVAaysSnxMxYyz0s
https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2021/03/27/adventures-in-time-and-gender-lgbt-trans-history-krishna-istha/?fbclid=IwAR1eWhVum49-isCjIaUA8CmTmD245cZ6hzJM0F4DSVQmyk1bcK4igTznQfU

https://www.stonewall.org.uk/truth-about-trans

https://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies and https://www.glaad.org/transgender/transfaq

https://transequality.org/issues/resources/frequently-asked-questions-about-transgender-people

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/09/transgender-people-equal-rights-self-identification-gender-recognition-act

https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-latest-form-of-transphobia-saying-lesbians-are-going-extinct/2021/03/18/072a95fc-8786-11eb-82bc-e58213caa38e_story.html https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/01/15/a-lost-piece-of-trans-history/