

Queer Liberation – Then And Now

Public meeting talk by Vernon Tile Vamaua

International Socialist Organisation (ISO)
6.30pm Tuesday 28 June 2022

Sections Of The Talk

Reflections On The Struggles Of The 1970s Leading Up To The Homosexual Law Reform Bill Passing In 1986.

Introduction

Acknowledgements

1972 – Two Approaches For Removing Queer Community Discrimination in New Zealand/Aotearoa

Movements towards Gay Liberation Front - Worldwide & New Zealand/Aoteroa

1972 - Gay Liberation Front in New Zealand/Aotearoa

My involvement with Gay Liberation from 1973 through to 1986

The Role Of Socialists In The Ongoing Fight For Queer Liberation Today

50 Years Later - Legal progress and social progress in the last 50 years (Pink Shirt Day, Same-Sex Marriage, Recent Newspaper Articles last week)

The Left and The Queer Community – USA & NZ

Marxist Perspective On Gay/Queer Liberation for true equality, social justice, personal & sexual freedom, and freedom from discrimination (including the role of the family in our society)

Soviet Union

Conclusion

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Queer Liberation – Then And Now

Reflections On The Struggles Of The 1970s (leading up to the Homosexual Law Reform Bill passing in 1986)

Introduction

Cordially and comradely, I'd like to thank you – the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) – for inviting me to speak to you this evening. It was 50 years ago in 1972 that a number of extremely courageous and heroic forward-thinking and definitely ahead of their time members of the New Zealand/Aotearoa queer community joined together to actively and very publicly fight for political and social changes for the most despised community in this country. This collective of queer individuals began the fight for the absolute removal of all discrimination against the queer community; the fight for absolute equality for the queer community; but also, within the context of queer community history, society and culture for the sexual and personal freedoms of the queer community. At the same time, these brave individuals from the queer community were fully aware that this public and open political and social activism for the most despised community in this country could and in some cases would come at great personal and social risk to their lives. So, this year of 2022 is the 50th anniversary of the founding of Gay Liberation Front in New Zealand/Aotearoa back in 1972 - firstly in Auckland on 21 March 1972 and then followed by Christchurch in May 1972 and later on by Wellington on 16 July 1972.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, there are some acknowledgements that I would like to make at the very start of my talk.

Victoria University is appropriate and at the same time a poignant venue for this talk.

Victoria University was an important opportunity and venue used by Gay Liberation Front

Wellington from the year it started in 1972. For me personally, tomorrow will be 48 years to the day that I knew I had met my first gay people and I embarked on my first relationship that steadied my rocking gay boat for the decades ahead.

I will tend to use the term gay in my talk to apply to what is nowadays termed the queer community or rainbow community. Gay had been a common in-house word used in the USA from the start of the 20th century by the queer community to describe themselves, albeit ironically in one sense but with a kernel of truth in other ways. It became the term applied to gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, drag queens and transvestites.

I will also try and use New Zealand or Aotearoa alternatively rather than New Zealand/Aotearoa.

The next acknowledgement is to the organisers of this meeting tonight – the International Socialist Organisation (ISO). As humanity moves into this current unfolding crisis of capitalism across the world, it is significant that New Zealand/Aotearoa has Marxist organisations like the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), which have the potential to be working class vanguards that can chart a revolutionary course where working people put an end to the economic and social ills bred by capitalism. Your organisation's members as citizens of the world follow Marxist materialist dialectics – that is through understanding history you recognise that it is the material conditions of life that shape your ideas. As an organisation, I'm also sure that you follow the Leninist principle of democratic centralism – free and open debate within the party until a vote is taken and then the decision of the majority is accepted and that decision becomes the current party "line" and it is binding upon all members. With the deformed and corrupt Marxist current of Stalinism and the bureaucratic concept of "socialism in one country" hopefully being consigned to the dustbin of history, these are indeed exciting times and opportunities for working people globally and internationally for Marxists like us.

I would also like to acknowledge the brilliant work done by Brent Coutts on gay community history in New Zealand. He is the only person who has taken on the challenge of researching and fully covering 1972 and the establishment of Gay Liberation Front in New Zealand/Aotearoa. Brent has done an excellent and superb job with his book: 1972 - A Year In Focus, which he launched in April 2022 in Auckland. His book has been my reference for

covering in my talk the section that deals with what happened in relation to Gay Liberation Front in Aotearoa in 1972. Brent has a meticulous detail for the facts and the available written records for that time and so his book about 1972 displays considerable care and sensitivity in relaying that information to the reader in his account of that crucial year of 1972 in the queer community history of New Zealand/Aotearoa. Brent Coutts lets the facts and the personal memories of individuals involved in 1972 speak their history about 1972 for themselves.

1972 – Two Approaches For Removing Queer Community Discrimination In New Zealand/Aotearoa

Even though I am about to definitely generalise, it does come from an historical analysis. There are two approaches that are or have been taken globally to remove the political, social and economic discrimination against the queer community. One approach is the formation of sympathetic groups, which includes well intentioned individuals to then change laws through conventional MP lobbying. Sometimes the law change may not even gain equality but the perspective is - any change is better than no change. The reformist approach.

In 1972 in New Zealand that was the stance of the New Zealand Homosexual Law Reform Society. The Society had its initial beginnings as the law reform subgroup of the Dorian Society – a Wellington social club set up by gay men in 1962. At a public meeting of about 150 people in Wellington on 17 April 1967, the Wolfenden Association was formed which shortly later got renamed as the New Zealand Homosexual Law Reform Society (NZHLRS).

The other approach is to raise the consciousness of your community, mobilise your community, be very public about your demands, visibly challenge society as it exists and then push not only for law change but for a change in society. The revolutionary approach.

In NZ in 1972, that was the approach of the Gay Liberation groups that were set up in Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington.

Movements towards Gay Liberation Front - USA & New Zealand/Aotearoa

It is worthwhile to consider the history of queer community activism in the United States because Gay Liberation Front and similar groupings in the US after June 1969 were the inspiration for Gay Liberation Front in New Zealand/Aotearoa,

There had been a slow growing move in the United States by various queer community groups and queer individuals to not only support the queer community but to remove the discrimination the queer community faced. Just looking at three key United States queer organisations before Gay Liberation Front in the US shows remarkable similarities in their purposes.

1. Society for Human Rights (SHR)

Established by Henry Gerber in Chicago between late 1924 – August 1925.

Henry Gerber was in Coblenz, Germany working for the **American Army Of Occupation** daily newspaper from 2 October 1919 through to July 1923, He saw how queer Germans were organising to overturn laws that had been established against them. He was aware of Magnus Hirschfield's Scientific Humanitarian Committee which began in 1897 and the Society for Human Rights. On his return to Chicago, USA he set up in late 1924 the Society for Human Rights (SHR). It lasted until August 1925.

Objectives (Purposes):

- Membership to gay men and to gain as large a membership as possible
- Educate gay men about their situation & a hands-off policy regarding sexual involvement with teenagers
- Publish a magazine called *Friendship and Freedom*
- Educate the legal authorities about gay men and get law changes

Multi-racial group & SHR President – Reverend John T. Graves (an African American)
10 December 1924 - Charter granted – first time in US history that an organisation dedicated to the rights of gay men established but also legally recognised by the government.

2. Mattachine Society

Established by Harry Hay and Rudi Gernreich (US Communist Party members) 1951 to 1961 establishes the Mattachine Society in the US. Collapsed in 1961,

1951 – set up by Harry Hay and Rudi Gernreich (US Communist Party members).
1952 - won a lewd conduct case for Dale Jennings in a case of entrapment. Dale Jennings quote: “Were heterosexuals to realise that these violations of our rights threaten theirs equally, a vast reform might even come within our lifetime.”

24 May 1953 – Harry Hay and 6 other founders resign due to opposition to the development of a new minority ethic and culture. New leadership for assimilation – encouraging behaviour “acceptable to society in general”

Purposes:

- Unify homosexuals “isolated from their own kind”
- Educate others about homosexuality
- Lead “the whole mass of social deviates” as they created a “highly ethical homosexual culture”
- Political action was “imperative”

3. Mattachine Society Of Washington

Established by Frank Kameny in Washington 1961 – early 1970s

Key Personnel: Frank Kameny, Barbara Gittings, Kay Lahusen, Jack Nichols, Randy Wicker, Craig Rodwell

Purposes:

- Secure for homosexuals the right to life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness
- Equalise homosexuals & heterosexuals by eliminating adverse prejudice, both private & official
- Secure for the homosexual the right, as a human being to develop & achieve his full potential & dignity
- Inform & enlighten the public about homosexuals
- Assist, protect & counsel the homosexual in need
- Be a civil liberties organisation with no interest in scientific research
- Not a social group, or an agency for personal introductions.
- Will cooperate with other minority organisations which are striving for the full realisation of full civil rights and liberties for all.

The purposes show three historical aspects:

1. That the US queer community activists knew their community’s culture, identity and even more remarkably their history on a global basis and what needed to be done for the queer community – The German queer community’s activism e.g., Magnus Hirschfeld’s Scientific Humanitarian Committee

2. Well before Stonewall, a broad cross section of the queer community across racial divides took advantage of their space from the 1920s through to the late 1940s on the margins of American society to throw themselves into leftist and working people’s campaigns

3. Lessons learnt from queer community involvement in the American civil rights movement. For example, there were many gay student volunteers from New York, who as Freedom Fighters participated in travelling on buses in the southern US for 7 months in 1961 to test the 1960 Supreme Court decision that said segregated facilities for interstate passengers was illegal.

The conventional wisdom is that the US Gay Liberation Front learnt from the American civil rights movement and the feminist movement as well as being inspired by the Vietnam War protests hence the name Gay Liberation Front being a provocative allusion to the Vietnamese National Liberation Front or more commonly known as the Viet Cong or going back earlier to 1954 – the Algerian National Liberation Front. The Gay Liberation Front was built on the consequences of the Stonewall Inn riots of June 1969 but also on a foundation of previous queer community organisations fighting for changes in the law and society. However more stridently, the Gay Liberation Front had a broad political platform, denouncing racism and declaring support for various Third World struggles and the Black Panther Party. They also remarkably took an anti-capitalist stance and attacked the nuclear family and traditional gender roles.

What was happening in New Zealand/Aotearoa leading up to the formation of Gay Liberation Front here in this country:

- Sexual and social liberation was definitely under discussion even in New Zealand. The psychedelic flower power generation free love philosophy from 1966 onwards in the US especially in San Francisco and California had even influenced the minds of my generation of young New Zealanders.
- Vietnam War protests
- Women's Liberation movement
- Anti-racist groups arose in 1971 like Nga Tamatoa concerned with Maori land confiscations and the declining use of Te Reo and the Polynesian Panthers concerned with racial discrimination, prejudice and social inequality experienced by Pacific Islanders and Maori
- HART had been formed in July 1969 and was campaigning to stop the 1973 Springbok tour of New Zealand/Aotearoa but also to stop all sporting contact with South Africa
- Save Lake Manapouri campaign

- Organisation to Halt Military Service (OHMS) - opposition to conscription and war. All males to register on their 20th birthday with the Department of Labour. Ballots based on dates of birth were conducted to decide who would undertake compulsory service. Those selected were required to complete three months initial full-time training, followed by an annual commitment of three weeks part-time training for three years. Campaign of civil disobedience and lobbying. OHMS, a pun on both resistance and "On Her Majesty's Service")
- Progressive Youth Movement (PYM)
- Little Red School Book
- “Hair” musical touring New Zealand – nudity and homosexuality

These queer Gay Liberation Front activists of 1972 did not arise from nowhere. Yes, many were inspired by international events such as the USA civil rights movement by African Americans, the anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, the anti-apartheid campaign of the African National Congress, the rise of feminism and equal rights for women plus the Stonewall queer riots of June 1969. But many were actually involved in New Zealand political struggles and activities such the opposition to New Zealand’s involvement in the Vietnam War, the campaign against racist rugby tours to and from South Africa, the campaign in the early 1970s opposing compulsory military conscription, the rise of feminism and the fight for equal rights for women and the burgeoning move by politically militant Maori and Pacific Islanders to form their own organisations – Nga Tamatoa and the Polynesian Panthers - to fight racism in New Zealand. This combination of being inspired and being involved forged the political awareness and intellectual understanding of these initial pioneers of the gay community in that they could then take on the responsibilities of doing something active socially and politically for their own sexual orientation and gender awareness concerns.

1972 - Gay Liberation Front In New Zealand/Aotearoa

1. Auckland

In 1972, a significant group of the New Zealand/Aotearoa queer community organised themselves into Gay Liberation Front organisations in three cities in New Zealand. The spark for this occurring was on the 15 March 1972 (Wednesday) when Ngahuia Te Awekotuku (Volkerling) was denied a visa by the US Consulate on Queen Street, Auckland to undertake her scholarship in the USA because she was a sexual deviant – a lesbian. On her application form for the scholarship Ngahuia had stated that she was going to look at gay power including lesbian groups in the US. That day, Ngahuia then spoke at an Auckland University lunchtime open forum asking for support in setting up a Gay Liberation group after a more than 2 hour discussion on homosexuality before 50 people.

So, 6 days later (Tuesday 21 March 1972), about 10-20 people turned up for the first meeting of the Auckland Gay Liberation Front at Auckland University. At the second meeting of the Auckland Gay Liberation Front at a private house on 26 March 1972 (Sunday) about 70 people – 60 men and 10 women - turned up for it. The meeting decided that the group would concentrate on consciousness raising, where meetings would be held every Monday night and direct-action activism. A week later on 2 April 1972 (Sunday) at the third meeting of the Auckland Gay Liberation Front, seven cells were set up – political action, publications, street theatre, graphics, media, anti-psychiatry and counselling.

A small group of 6 people then met in Parnell on 8 April 1972 (Saturday) to write the first New Zealand version of the Gay Liberation Front manifesto. The basis for it was the London Gay Liberation Manifesto. A meeting the next day then discussed and ratified the manifesto (9 May 1972 (Sunday)). The demands of the manifesto were:

1. End all discrimination against gay people
2. All people have the right to sexual self-determination
3. We shall oppose all oppression against gay people and support full civil rights
4. We shall provide counselling services, legal services and medical services for gay people and raise their consciousness about their own identity.

Auckland Gay Liberation Front held a number of direct actions throughout 1972 in Auckland

On 11 April 1972 (Tuesday), a ‘Gay Day Happening’ was held at the Queen Victoria statue in Albert Park, Auckland for consciousness raising and visibility in order to promote the Auckland Gay Liberation Front’s political goals. Placards had been organized for the happening – Gay Is Good, Gay is Proud; Will Victorian Morality Ever Die; Camps and Gays Come out to Play. Caterina de Nave wore a sandwich board stating I am your best fantasy; I am your worst fears. This sandwich board slogan was based on the Donna Gottschalk placard she had at the 1970 New York Gay Liberation Parade on Christopher Street, New York, USA. The street theatre group did a skit about the police harassment. T-shirts with GAY LIBERATION FRONT on them were worn and a letter about the oppression of gay people was sent to the Mayor of Auckland Dove-Myer Robinson.

On 17 April 1972 (Monday), Auckland Gay Liberation did the first ‘zap’ action in New Zealand/Aotearoa. A ‘zap’ is a form of political direct action designed to embarrass a public figure or organisation. The Aids Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP) in New York, USA extensively used this type of action relating to the AIDS epidemic. John Demouth and Paul Kells and two women applied for marriage licenses for two men and two women at the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages Office in Auckland. The application was eventually refused. A pamphlet was produced that covered marriage supporting the nuclear family and so being a symbol of oppression to gays, as well as calling for equal rights on the issue of same-sex marriage.

On 26 April 1972 (Wednesday) Auckland Gay Liberation Front had the first protest march and picket by the gay community in New Zealand/Aotearoa. As Brent Coutts states in his book: “Fifteen people marched to the US Consulate (on Queen Street) in Auckland and picketed (the consulate) to draw public attention to the refusal to issue a visa to Ngahuia Te Awekotuku.”

A Queen’s Birthday Party or ‘Open Gay Day’ was held on 5 June 1972 (Monday) – appropriately during Queens Birthday Weekend at Albert Park, Auckland. It was a celebration of Gay Liberation with balloons, queen cakes and party hats.

2. Christchurch

Ngahua Te Awakotuku visits Christchurch in early May and Christchurch Gay Liberation Front formed by about 6 people. Initially met at the home of Tony Fomison and Paul Johns. Key members were Robin Duff, Lindsay Taylor, Chris Hignett, Paul Maling, John Wooles and Mike Waghorne.

3. Wellington

Kevin McKone, a first year Victoria University student placed an ad in the student magazine Salient about a meeting at his place in Berhampore, Wellington on 16 July 1972 (Sunday) to set up a Gay Liberation Front group in Wellington. The group got started over the course of two meetings involving about 20 to 30 people – overwhelmingly male and 2 women only. On 28 July 1972 (Friday) a larger meeting was held in the Student Union Building at Victoria University. David Russell and Nigel Baumber came down from Auckland to speak the meeting. No chairperson but an informal ‘troika’ selected to share the leadership of Gay Liberation Wellington. Cells established – social activities, publicity, consciousness raising, counselling. The first General Meeting was held on 13 August 1972 (Sunday). On 5 November 1972 (Sunday), a Special General Meeting was called by Laurie Marquet and held at St Peters Church Hall in Willis Street, Wellington. The meeting was to sort out the profit that had been made from the Thistle Hall dance that had been a success with about 200 people attending. Gay Liberation Wellington was restructured and a constitution sorted out at this meeting. The group established the roles of President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer and a committee of three and elections for these positions were held – President: David Raethel and Laurie Marquet: Vice-President. In June 1973 Gay Liberation Wellington split amicably into two groups - Gay Liberation (VUW) and Gay Liberation (Wellington). Gay Liberation (VUW) was the political wing of Gay Liberation (Wellington). Gay Liberation (VUW) was about 30 strong and had about 6 women involved. Many of its membership were members of both groups. The first Gay Liberation (VUW) President was Michael Ross. Rae Dellaca (24 years old) – key lesbian in the group.

15 Wesley Road flat sorted and signed off by Michael Ross. Four gay men and one lesbian started flatting together from 23 May 1973. Rae Dellaca moved into 15 Wesley Road from 14 November 1973 through to late 1974. The 15 Wesley Road flat was used for alternate meetings with Victoria University by Gay Liberation (VUW) from 1973.

4. 26 August 1972 (Saturday) – The First National Gay Liberation Conference In Auckland

On 26 August 1972 (Saturday), the first National Gay Liberation Conference was held in Auckland at the Library Building at the University of Auckland. It was attended by 30 people including 8 people from Wellington and Christchurch with these representatives - Don Raethel and Barry Neels from Gay Liberation Wellington and Robin Duff from Christchurch Gay Liberation Front.

Morning Session: 10am to 12noon – For Gay Liberation members only
Organisation, Action, Media and Publicity, Guerrilla Theatre

Afternoon Session: 1pm to 3pm
Graphics and Printing, Counselling, Communes, Social Function of Gay Liberation

Pink Triangle symbol adopted.

5. Key Individuals In Gay Liberation Front in New Zealand/Aotearoa

These are some of the known key individuals in Gay Liberation Front in New Zealand/Aotearoa that got involved with Ngahuia Te Awekotuku or because of her initial stand and propelled the movement for change for the gay community in New Zealand:

Auckland – Malcolm McAllister, Dick Morrison, Janet Roth, Caterina de Nave, Sharon Alston, David Russell, Paul Kells, John Demouth, Graeme Underhill, Ben van Prehn, Nigel Baumber

Wellington – David Raethel, Laurie Marquet, Michael Ross, Barry Neels, Robert Lansdown, Bill Evans, Rae Dellaca

Christchurch – Robin Duff, Lindsay Taylor, Chris Hignett, Paul Maling, John wooles, Mike Waghorne

Sarah Schulman, the American gay activist and AIDS historian has tried to identify the human quality or qualities that cause individuals to lead the way as the early pioneers of the gay community did in 1972 when they joined and worked in Gay Liberation for the future benefit of the gay community. She considers that there are individuals that have firstly the characteristic to not fear challenging authority and secondly their character is such that they are not bystanders. The pioneers of Gay Liberation in 1972 had those qualities in bucketloads and those that are still alive today continue to show those same qualities as human beings 50 years on from 1972. I knew and still know quite a few of them personally as friends, comrades, colleagues, flatmates and partners. I will always acknowledge how grateful I am for the solid foundation that they gave me on my journey as a gay man and that they have always been there at some stage of my life for me for the last 48 years since we first met – especially Michael Ross. Dick Morrison, Malcolm McAllister, Robin Duff, Lindsay Taylor, John Wooles and Janet Roth. My chosen family.

As Michael Ross put it in an email to me in June upon reading Brent Coutts' book: "It would have amazed me at the time that in 50 years, this would be written about. I think the most I and others thought about was bringing about law reform."

My Involvement With Gay Liberation

My Background

The gay black American writer James Baldwin was my idol and saviour as a teenager in 1970 when I discovered his books in the Palmerston North Library. I'd just like to relate this moment in a British television interview done by James Baldwin just before he died in 1987.

British Interviewer:

"Now, when you were starting out as a writer, you were black, impoverished, homosexual. You must have said to yourself, 'Gee, how disadvantaged can I get?'"

James Baldwin smiling wryly replied:

"Oh no. I thought I hit the jackpot. It was so outrageous you could not go any further you know, so you had to find a way to use it."

I think along exactly the same lines. My involvement in Gay Liberation has always been from that same perspective – I’m a human being involved in life as a person of colour, as a person of same-sex desire and as a member of the working class.

My family was quite new and putting it politely quite novel in New Zealand society. My parents were the first marriage in New Zealand of a Samoan and a European back in March 1954. I’m fairly sure as well that I beat Vincent Alo to be the first half caste Samoan to be born in New Zealand. My parents came back to live in Palmerston North with my European grandparents after they married – at the time a 19 year old European woman and 41 year old Samoan man. I had a solid base to begin with because of my Samoan father. My father’s extended family and village are extremely important in Samoa culture and history. I also knew that I was going to get the only hereditary matai title in Samoa. As well as being schooled in fa’asamoa, my father also taught me about the Samoan Mau independence movement and New Zealand colonialism. I quickly learnt that mixed marriages were not that acceptable in New Zealand and especially so in South Africa and the Southern USA.

I certainly was encouraged to read and follow the news and learn stuff especially history and current events. By the age of 6 my heroes were Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, Lenin and Trotsky but definitely not Stalin.

My home life was not conventional for a New Zealand family. My European grandfather died when I was 6 months old and my European grandmother became my third parent. Apart from her, my parents support base was only the other Samoans in Palmerston North. My parents operated as equals and did not worry about conventional gender roles of home life in my upbringing. My parents never hit my brother or I. “Spare the rod spoil the child” model of upbringing never operated in my home life with all 3 of my parents. I had “complete” freedom and the only expectations on me were to get an education and looking out/after my younger brother was my responsibility for life.

I dealt with being labelled a sissy and a pansy at primary school – I’m just not sporty – I’m a bookworm. It helped being Seventh Day Adventist as you couldn’t play sport on a Saturday.

At the age of 14. I likewise dealt with my attraction to other men in the same way I matter of fact dealt with being the product of an interracial marriage and I was also aware of the group of Samoans who were often selected to know the oral history of the village, community, locality or Samoa – fa’afafine.

My personal mantra was:

But once we are here, the onus is on us to make the most of the one life we have, without jeopardising another person’s life.

In 1972, my last year at Palmerston North Boys High School, I’d already joined the NZ Homosexual Law Reform Society under a pseudonym plus being under 21, joined OHMS the organisation opposing military conscription in New Zealand and war, seen the musical “Hair”, and supported anti-Vietnam War activities.

So in 1973, it would not be a problem joining Gay Liberation Wellington.

30 August 1973 letter: I wrote from Palmerston North to Gay Liberation Wellington and got this reply back from Michael Ross. It gave details of Gay Liberation membership and their goals. I also received my first newsletter – June/July 1973.

5 September 1973 letter from Michael Ross: It clearly shows the emphasis of the 2 groups in Wellington - Gay Liberation (Wellington) and Gay Liberation (VUW) and the 2 books who’s views were being closely followed. It also shows the care taken to write to people outside of Wellington by already busy people.

Marilyn Johnson – her perception of the relationships between gay men and lesbians in Gay Liberation Wellington

29 June 1974 (Saturday): I came down to Wellington for a Gay Pride Dance at Victoria University. I was met by Porleen Simmonds at the Wellington Railway Station, taken to the lesbian Club 41 in Vivian Street, fed and taken to the dance and with the intention to stay at her place in Evans Bay overnight. I met Michael Ross and got introduced to Gay Liberation Wellington Headquarters - a flat of gay men and lesbians where a number of Gay Liberation (VUW) meetings were held – the (in)famous flat of 15 Wesley Road in Kelburn, Wellington.

The flat began as a gay 5 bedroom flat in May 1973 and by the start of 1976 it was a combined Gay Liberation and Socialist Action League flat. I certainly parachuted into immediate close contact with the early leadership of Gay Liberation Front in Wellington but also that of Christchurch and Auckland and I became part of a radical gay commune at 15 Wesley Road. On hindsight, outside of my family I have only ever flatted with three straight men – all Socialist Action League members.

27 November 1974 Submission on the Venn Young Crimes Amendment Bill. This picture and the follow up TV interview with Michael Ross caused a problem for me at home.

I had been a member and helper with Gay Liberation (VUW) and Gay Liberation (Wellington), from mid-1973 onwards. However, by 1976, I was taking on a bit more active role in the gay movement in New Zealand. I would like to cover for the benefit of ISO - the organisation that has organised me to talk with you tonight - how you can simultaneously work in the gay movement and also be a member of a Marxist organisation. There was no Socialist Action League political line I had to follow in working in Gay Liberation. I had complete support and freedom to work as an individual in the gay movement while still being a comrade in the Socialist Action League and meeting my responsibilities with regard to that organisation. I could do as much as I wanted to do as a person in the gay movement but at all times that was fully approved of by the Socialist Action League (SAL) as also the work of a good Marxist comrade because SAL fully supported the Gay Liberation movement. My work as a gay activist and as a Socialist Action League member coincided and complemented each other – there was no clash or contradictions at all. This balance and symmetry of roles across both organisations set the scene for my gay activism in Gay Liberation in Aotearoa.

1976 – 1977 Start of NGRC and my involvement in NGRC as I was expected to set up a gay group in Palmerston North in my last year at Massey University.

1977 Setting up MAGRA. Consciously decided that setting up the group, getting it established and continuing after I finished my studies at the end of the year was the absolute priority. Therefore, so that no one could suggest that I had ulterior personal motives I abided by the rule I set for myself at the start of 1977 – no relationship(s) with anyone in Palmerston North. I had Wellington to fall back on. This rule was the correct thing to follow as there were suspicions about this possibility. Following this rule for myself meant there was trust

and confidence by others in me that I was serious about getting an organisation set up in Palmerston North and that they should be serious about being part of it. A tall order for any provincial city in New Zealand at that time.

1978 – 1981 Involved as a member of various Wellington gay activist groups but reporting for the Socialist Action League fortnightly newspaper ***Socialist Action*** on gay community matters

1982-1983 NGRC Rep for the Northern Central Region

1985 Manawatu campaign for the Homosexual Law Reform Bill

Linda Evans last year said to me that she was chasing up Tighe Instone and Malcolm McAllister to talk with them about the change in tactics for the Homosexual Law Reform Bill campaign from a convention lobbying/letter writing campaign of MPs to a broad coalition of support groups for the Bill outside of the existing gay groups and organisations – a mass action campaign.

I was back living in Palmerston North from 1982 onwards and I was on the Manawatu Gay Rights Association (MAGRA) committee. I was given the responsibility and trusted by MAGRA to be free rein on organising the Homosexual Law Reform Bill campaign in the Manawatu. So, Malcolm McAllister and I on behalf of MAGRA (and with MAGRA's full backing) and with the knowledge and support of likeminded people on the Wellington Gay Task Force organised a campaign in the Manawatu to show Fran Wilde how a mass action campaign could be launched and successfully be carried out. Malcolm and I got underway organising such an approach for MAGRA in the Manawatu in late March and we were ready to go before the end of April 1985. However, Fran Wilde was not able to do the initial public meeting date of 7 May 1985 in the Manawatu but was available for the big public meeting that was finally held on 17 June 1985 (Monday). At that huge public meeting for a place like Palmerston North, Fran Wilde heard speakers from a wide range of groups express their group and members support for the bill and why that was so. It was at that Palmerston North meeting where Fran Wilde saw the mass action and broad support for the bill being promoted publicly and actively by groups outside of the existing gay groups and organisations she had been previously only working with. This public meeting organised by MAGRA showed the potential of diversifying the campaign to involve other groups and organisations to not only

discuss the issues more broadly in society but to also help win over enough MP support to pass the bill in the end. This is what then subsequently happened. On 11 July 1985, Wellington held the launching meeting of the Coalition To Support The Bill at the Hotel Workers Union Hall.

This is an extremely little-known facet of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill campaign. MAGRA has turned over its records to the Palmerston North Library. I checked with the library in May of this year as to whether any of the MAGRA records have any bill campaign material. I was told by the librarian currently digitalising the MAGRA records that there is nothing. So, it is likely that I am the only person in New Zealand left holding any of this material (I have the lot) relating to the MAGRA campaign to turn the Homosexual Law Reform Bill campaign from a convention lobbying/letter writing campaign of MPs to a broad coalition of support groups for the Bill outside of the existing gay groups and organisations – a mass action campaign. MAGRA helped our colleagues thinking along the same lines already to achieve that campaign change. MAGRA certainly did its part on that journey to a successful passing of the bill in the end.

Another example of the political work being done by MAGRA during the Homosexual Law Reform Bill campaign is shown by the leaflet produced and distributed by MAGRA in Palmerston North connecting the Bill campaign to Stonewall and to the anti-apartheid and anti-Springbok tours campaigns. Again further work done on behalf of MAGRA by Malcolm McAllister and myself.

So, these are my reflections and memories on my involvement and work with Gay Liberation in the period from 1973 through to 1986. This involvement was not only because I believed in the cause for the gay community as gay man but also because of my political beliefs as a Marxist, Leninist and Trotskyist and the knowledge that as a person of colour, you cannot hide, you cannot be a bystander and that any struggle to improve the situation for a marginalised community like the gay community will help other communities improve their situation as well. I was just doing my bit as a human being. Anything else about you is just an adjective, a description in relation to the noun “human being”

The Left and the Gay/Queer Community – New Zealand/Aotearoa & USA

Gay Activism or Being Gay, Union Activism and Being Left Wing Is Not Uncommon

Being a gay activist, being a union activist and being left wing is not an uncommon experience for gay people. I'm hopeful that Malcolm McAllister won't mind but we have had very similar working lives – almost 9 years as freezing workers together at Gear Meat Company, Petone and at Borthwicks Freezing Works at Longburn, Palmerston North. In that time in the NZ Meatworkers Union as activist union members we went through a 7-week lockout in 1979; experienced a 9 day nationwide strike by freezing workers in late 1979 to get redundancy pay for us Gear Meat Company workers and the first right to jobs on the recently added 4th lamb chain at the Longburn Borthwicks Freezing Works; and then a 3 year lockout from 1987 to 1989 by Longburn Borthwicks Freezing Works until we got paid out redundancy and the works closed. As activist gay men in Gay Liberation, we have taken part in some recent major union battles in the history of workers struggles in Aotearoa before the Employment Contracts Act came in to play in 1991, eroding the power of workers and their unions.

These experiences certainly did not dampen our spirits regarding our union activism. In our last job as workers – secondary school teachers we are still activist union members of PPTA.

I'm just giving you two examples of gay activists from Gay Liberation one who was there at the very start in 1972 and one who got involved a year later in 1973, who have maintained their radicalism over the years and even transferred it into their role as workers within their unions.

As our lives have morphed into an old queen's phase, we have not become conservative but have maintained the radicalism of our younger selves – gay, working class and left wing politics.

So, being of a gay persuasion and being a union activist and being left wing is not an uncommon feature in the world for the gay community. This has been researched by a number of gay historians in the US already. Two recent excellent books are:

- *Love's Next Meeting* by Aaron Lecklider
- *Gay Men And The Sexual History Of The Political Left* edited by Gert Hekma, Harry Oosterhuis and James Steakley

An interesting US union is the National Union of Marine Cooks and Stewards (MCS) based in San Francisco from 1934. Its own members referred to their union as “Marine Cocksuckers and Fruits” – a campy play on the union’s name that highlighted the sexual behaviours and subcultural communities that were trademarks of the maritime workers. The MCS developed a reputation for attracting members whose transgressions crossed racial, political and sexual boundaries. One member recalled, “On the San Francisco waterfront in 1941, the word was that the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union was third red, a third black and a third queer. Revels Cayton, a radical Black straight labour activist and a major leader in the MCS was a vocal champion of gay MCS members, mobilising members to see racism as a singular obstacle to working-class revolution and opening up the union to articulate a broader platform of resistance to various forms of hatred and bigotry.

Much of the gay community, ethnicities that were discriminated against and working people lived alongside each other in many areas of cities in the US in the early 20th century. Many in the gay community were drawn to the left during the 1920s through to the 1960s in the US, as they felt there was a fair shake there. The idea that radical movements offered a “fair shake” was often enough to bring sexual dissidents into the orbit of the left and to Marxists parties.

As the blurb for the book “Love’s Next Meeting” says superbly about the relationship between the gay community and the Left in American culture between 1920 and 1960: “So well before Stonewall, a broad cross section of sexual dissidents took advantage of their space on the margins of American society to throw themselves into leftist campaigns. They participated in radical labour organising, sympathised with the Soviet Union, contributed to the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, opposed police and state harassment, fought racial discrimination and aligned themselves with the dispossessed.”

In 1974, the book *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement 1864-1935* by John Lauritsen & David Thorstad was published. Jonathan Ned Katz read a copy of this book that he found in Craig Rodwell's Oscar Wilde's Memorial Bookshop. This inspired Jonathan Ned Katz to write the first and very definitive book on US gay community history the 1976 book *Gay American History: Lesbians And Gay Men In The USA*.

How does this connect with the left in the 1970s. John Lauritsen and David Thorstad were prominent gay Trotskyists in the US Socialist Workers Party. For more than six years, David Thorstad was a member of the Upper West Side branch of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and a staff writer for its newspaper - The Militant.

In June 1973, David Thorstad and John Lauritsen published "The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)" in the SWP internal Discussion Bulletin, attempting to prove that the gay liberation movement had a long and substantial history, particularly in Germany. Their 14-page SWP internal party document was expanded in 1974 into a 92-page book of the same name - *"The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)"*.

David Thorstad left the SWP in December 1973 over their lack of enthusiasm for the gay liberation movement and their failure to develop a "Marxist materialist analysis" of it. In 1976 he self-published a collection of internal party documents relating to its discussion of the gay liberation movement under the title *Gay Liberation and Socialism: Documents from the Discussions on Gay Liberation Inside the Socialist Workers Party (1970-1973)*. In the 1970s, David Thorstad was president of the Gay Activists Alliance, a leading gay liberation group in New York.

Now just an aside for a brief run down Craig Rodwell – he is quite pivotal and a major hero and activist of the queer community. Born in 1940, he was a radical gay man from very early on. His first serious romantic relationship was with Harvey Milk in 1962, who he politically influenced to move from being conservative to becoming more gay community involved. Craig Rodwell took part in the very first gay picket – the 19 September 1964 picket of the New York Whitehall Street Induction Centre to protest the military's practice of excluding gays from serving in the forces and when discovering them dishonourably discharging them.

April 21, 1966, Rodwell, along with others carried out a demonstration called a "Sip-In" at Julius, a bar in Greenwich Village, to protest the New York State Liquor Authority rule

against the congregation of gays in establishments that served alcohol. Craig Rodwell had at an earlier date been thrown out of Julius for wearing an "Equality for Homosexuals" button". Craig Rodwell and the others argued that the rule furthered bribery and corruption of the police. The resultant publicly led eventually to the end of this New York rule

He worked as a bar man in the famous gay haven – New York's Fire Island in the summer of 1967 to raise the deposit and finances to open the first US gay bookshop in November 1967 – the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in New York. He is credited along with Frank Kameny in formulating and promoting the slogan "Gay Is Good". He was at the Stonewall Inn riot on the night of 29 June 1969. By sheer luck, Rodwell was on his way home with his partner, Fred Sargeant when they were passing the Stonewall Inn as the police raid was getting underway. He led the chant of "Gay Power", the police retreated back into the Stonewall Inn and the riot really took off. Later that morning, Rodwell and Sargeant prepared a leaflet denouncing the relationship between the police and the Stonewall's Mafia management. They continued their organizing and leafletting throughout the nights of rioting, distributing 5,000 copies of their "Get the Mafia and Cops Out of Gay Bars" flyer throughout New York City.

He is also responsible for the first gay pride march in New York in June 1970. In November 1969 on behalf of a radical group of gays, Rodwell proposed the first gay pride parade to be held in New York City by way of a resolution at the Eastern Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations (ERCHO) meeting in Philadelphia,

"That the Annual Reminder, in order to be more relevant, reach a greater number of people, and encompass the ideas and ideals of the larger struggle in which we are engaged-that of our fundamental human rights-be moved both in time and location.

We propose that a demonstration be held annually on the last Saturday in June in New York City to commemorate the 1969 spontaneous demonstrations on Christopher Street and this demonstration be called CHRISTOPHER STREET LIBERATION DAY. No dress or age regulations shall be made for this demonstration.

We also propose that we contact Homophile organizations throughout the country and suggest that they hold parallel demonstrations on that day. We propose a nationwide show of support.”

This resolution was passed.

The first march in 1970 was organized from Craig Rodwell's apartment on Bleecker Street, New York.

50 Years Later In 2022

- Legal progress and social progress in the last 50 years

The touchstone is what was being put forward by Gay Liberation 50 years ago. This was publicly aired in the 6 August 1973 NZ Listener article: “Is Being Gay Reason To Be Glum” As Paul Kells says “The desired change goes down deeper than simply law or tolerance to the foundations of society, the nuclear family. To uphold the economic system and structure, society needs the isolated nuclear family, the consumer unit. If this was a community-based society there wouldn’t be these separate units – the economic structure, and hence the political structure, would be undermined.”

What has happened for this goal in the last 50 years. Where are we now?

So, in the last 50 years, there has been definite legal progress for the queer community due to the initial challenges made to NZ society by those brave queer community activists from 1972 onwards. These include:

- the 1986 Homosexual Law Reform Act removing penalties for sexual relations for men over the age 16;
- the 1993 Human Rights Act banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and (implicitly) gender identity;
- the 1994 Civil Union Act establishing the institution of civil unions for both same-sex and opposite-sex couples;
- the 2009 Crimes Act amendments to remove the provocation defence – the infamous homosexual or gay panic defence” - clauses;
- the 2013 Same-Sex Marriage Act and this also allowed eligible married same-sex parents to adopt children;
- the 2018 Criminal Records (Expungement of Convictions for Historical Homosexual Offences) Act whereby men with specific historical homosexual convictions prior to 1986 could have their convictions wiped if these offences are not an offence under today’s laws.
- the 2021 Births, Deaths, Marriages and Relationships Amendment Bill, which removed the requirement of medical treatment proof or the need to persuade a court to have the sex

on their birth certificate match the gender they know themselves to be in order to change the sex recorded on their birth certificate; and

- the 2022 prohibition of conversion therapy.

However, there has not been the corresponding social progress for the queer community in New Zealand. In terms of social progress, we seem to be at this point in 2022

- Some social progress based on queer community history, culture and identity
- Queer community prejudice and bigotry still evident
- Assimilation of the queer community into current society structures
- Concepts of respectable/not respectable queer lives.

Just looking at some matters that illustrate where we are today in 2022 compared with the Gay Liberation Manifesto demands of 1972.

Civil unions and same-sex marriage - a prominent US Gay Liberation Front leader, Charles P. Thorp stated this at the first National Students Gay Liberation Front Conference in San Francisco on 21 August 1970: “Gay marriage is the bastard child of straight respectability”. Being truly gay means my concept of gay respectability will never be considered respectable in our current society. Same-sex marriage and similar societal relationship concepts for the gay community means we get assimilated into the family concept needed by capitalism. Some questions are - should consenting adult relationships be of concern to the state and should the recording of relationships by the state be necessary in relation to the social welfare system?

In relation to the 2018 Criminal Records (Expungement of Convictions for Historical Homosexual Offences) Act whereby men with specific historical homosexual convictions prior to 1986 could have their convictions wiped if these offences are not an offence under today’s laws. This would only happen if there was evidence or proof that the activity was consensual and involved adults over the age of 16. If you were applying for a person who was deceased you are required to explain your connection to the person and the reasons why you think you should be permitted to be treated as the person’s representative. The supporting evidence required for this is a marriage or civil union certificate, birth certificate, or probate documentation. This is not as straightforward as it seems. This is a concession indeed, but

where does this stand in relation to queer community history, culture and identity. Whose values were the basis for these discussions with the queer community if this did happen and were those involved in these discussions basing their contribution on non-queer society values or based on a knowledge of .queer community history, culture and identity.

“Pink Shirt Day” should be a day against gay community (homophobic and transphobic) bigotry and prejudice given the original incident. But that would be too radical a move and too uncomfortable for our society to consider and also it seems to be too radical a move for some queer community organisations to agitate and advocate for. So, society widens the scope of Pink Shirt Day to anti-bullying generally and it becomes a nice little earner for the Mental Health Foundation in New Zealand

Debate by the queer community separating out queer culture, history and identity from Dilworth School type sexual abuse

The situation that we see in secondary schools in Aotearoa - school Rainbow Networks meeting behind closed doors and students sort themselves out with no queer adult guidance; state –integrated Christian schools - Bethlehem College; Pukekohe High School – rainbow flag flown for only one day during the school’s pride week because of bigotry concerns.

On 29 June 2022, Jan Tinetti, the Associate Minister of Education (School Operations) is going to ask education officials in the Ministry Of Education and the Education Review Office investigate anti-queer discrimination in schools – “school’s practices and policies on inclusivity to ensure every single student felt safe regardless of gender identity or sexuality” and come back with a range of options. The Minister goes on to say that her absolute top priority is to ensure all young people are safe in our schools. You can see that this may be subsumed for a bigger picture. So anti-queer discrimination in schools may go the “Pink Shirt Day” route. As well, this is the top-down approach to the issue. The way to really investigate anti-queer discrimination in schools is to talk to queer teachers and pupils in schools surely. They would tell you exactly what the problems are in their school to then build up a global school picture of the problem in Aotearoa.

A "suspicious" fire destroyed a support hub for rainbow and gender-diverse youth in Tauranga in June 2022

These are still queer community issues to be addressed communally in society and still situations that are here today despite the law changes. Social progress does seem to be lagging behind the legal progress. Now 50 years later in 2022, has the queer community in Aotearoa abandoned the queer revolutionary values of Gay Liberation and accepted the tolerance of the current society (straight) values and the tinkering around fixing up the issues of the queer community that do surface as and when they do?

Marxism and the Soviet Union

As Engels pointed out in *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, the family grew out of the needs of class society, as a pillar of the institution of private property and the class domination of human beings over other human beings. The family is an economic unit. This is still the fundamental character of the family. Marriage or civil ceremonies are supported by a sexual morality which demands humility and fidelity and also introduces the state into a consenting adult and human relationship.

The Russian Revolution in 1917 that overthrew capitalism and established the first workers and farmers government led to the only state that has ever changed the law against homosexual acts as it did in December 1917 but that also moved to change society regarding consensual human relationships. The removal of all laws against homosexual acts along with other moves to extend sexual freedom was an important part of the social revolution being conducted by the Bolsheviks in Russia. The sweeping reforms in sex-related matters brought in a new atmosphere of sexual freedom. The Russian Revolution cleared the ground for the building of a socialist society based on human rights. In the mid-1920s as a result of the extreme poverty of the new Soviet Union combined with the failure of socialist revolutions in more advanced countries that could have come to the aid of the Russian people, the revolution suffered a setback with the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Among its many repressive actions was the reintroduction of tsarist laws in the 1930s - prohibiting homosexuality in March 1934, prohibiting abortion in 1936 and the exaltation of heterosexuality and the family as ideals for the Soviet citizen.

Conclusion

Sexual and personal freedom cannot be achieved under capitalism. Marxists have always put forth analyses that have placed them squarely in the fight for gay liberation

For the queer community, identity politics has its place in consciousness raising and lighting the fires of rage and possible action but it is necessary to have an underlying policy, programme or wider understanding of how your particular issue links in with other struggles for equality and freedom from discrimination and bigotry to ignite the real changes in society that are eventually needed to address your issue or issues.

A recent extremely good model in the queer community for moving beyond identity politics was the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) especially ACT UP in New York. It was a grassroots political and social group set up on 12 March 1987 that worked to deal with the AIDS epidemic affecting gay men. ACT UP broadened its focus to an extension to all people with AIDS: women, drug (needle) users, blacks, latinos, babies & children. The group worked to improve the lives of [people with AIDS](#) through [direct action](#), medical research, treatment and advocacy, and working to change legislation and public policies. A significant number of ACT UP activists then realised that a universal publicly funded health system free for all citizens was needed across all of the US. This caused internal division within ACT UP over the direction of the group and of the AIDS crisis and so the fight for a universal health system in the US was never followed through in the end.

This is where Gay Liberation Front in New Zealand had it correctly mapped out. The fight for the queer community was not just for legal reforms to remove discrimination but for real social change in our society for the queer community but also recognising the inspiration of previous political groups and organisations leading struggles for real social change and working collaboratively with similar organisations struggling to remove bigotry and discrimination and advocating for a better society for everyone irrespective of their diversity - race, ethnicity, gender and orientation.

Summing, these early New Zealand gay community fighters in 1972 were able to combine together the political, social and legal needs of the gay community into an agenda for true

personal and sexual freedom that began the campaign to remove discrimination and bigotry against the queer community in New Zealand and to gain some measure of equal rights within New Zealand. The fight is still not over for the queer community. The battle continues by the queer community for societal change.