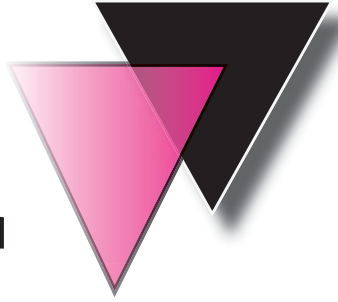


No Safe Haven



One year on since the highest court in the land declared that people fleeing homophobic and transphobic violence had a “fundamental right” to stay in the UK, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg claims the coalition has fulfilled its promise to stop the deportation of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) people to countries where they face persecution. The picture he paints is of the UK as a safe haven to those of us suffering oppression in other less ‘enlightened’ states around the world. But the experience of activists and asylum seekers over the last 12 months tell a very different story - far from providing a sanctuary for LGBTQ asylum seekers, the British state continues to actively persecute them.

Last year a study showed that the UK Border Agency (UKBA) rejects 98% of claims from asylum seekers trying to escape persecution for their sexuality in their country of origin, and, if you ignore the politicians and listen to people actively involved in fighting the deportation of queer asylum seekers, there’s little reason to hope things have gotten any better. LGBTQ migrants in this country still have to live in fear of deportation to one of the 80 countries around the world where not being straight is illegal.

The reality is that the UK has never been a safe destination for LGBTQ migrants. The government didn’t even acknowledge that people could be granted asylum on the grounds of gender or sexuality until 1999. Until recently the vast majority of asylum seekers were deported anyway, on the grounds that they could be ‘discreet’ in their country of origin. In effect, the British government was working with homophobic regimes in other countries to force asylum seekers to stay in the closet or risk arrest, imprisonment, torture and execution. This was the situation up until July 2010, when a landmark ruling by the Supreme Court granted two gay men, from Cameroon and Iran, leave to stay in the UK despite the Home Office rejecting their claim for asylum on the grounds they could escape persecution by hiding their sexuality.

Since then the UKBA, an organisation that stands accused of institutional racism and homophobia, has changed tactics: instead of demanding asylum seekers lead a closeted existence to escape persecution, they now simply deny that their sexual identity exists at all. One glaring example of this practice is in the case of Betty Tibakawa, who suffered vicious homophobic attacks in Uganda and was outed as a lesbian in a national newspaper, Red Pepper. The tabloid, which claims to be “committed to exposing



all lesbos”, has outed dozens of men and women in Uganda, resulting in several arrests. (Homosexuality is punishable by life in prison in Uganda, thanks to laws passed while the country was still a British colony. Ironically, many Ugandan homophobes today claim that being gay is ‘un-African’.)

There are countless other cases, and since no statistics were kept on LGBTQ asylum claims until July this year, there’s no way of knowing just how many people share Betty Tibakawa’s fate. But activists and charities say these problems are getting worse, not better, and with the recent closure of the Immigration Advisory Service (formerly the UK’s largest immigration advice charity) due to government cuts, it has now become much more difficult for migrants to appeal against the rulings of the UKBA. Combine this with other recent cutbacks, such as to the respected Poppy Project, a charity that helps victims of sex trafficking, and the recent intensification of anti-immigration propaganda from politicians and the media, from the left

and the right, and we can see all of this as a part of a political attack on migrants, with LGBTQ migrants faring even worse.

As if to add insult to injury, the Home Office was named the UK’s “most gay-friendly employer” of 2011 by Stonewall, who also invited the conservative home secretary Theresa May to speak at their annual workplace conference, this year sponsored by Barclays. Quite how an organisation responsible for deporting LGBTQ people to countries where they may be tortured or killed can qualify as ‘gay friendly’ is anyone’s guess.

If this continuing attack on LGBTQ migrants by the UKBA and the British state shows one thing, it is that proclamations from politicians and judges do very little to help people escape from government-sponsored brutality in other countries. Ultimately, only united self-organised action by migrants themselves, and their allies, can hope to change this pattern of victimisation, deportations and repression.

Queer?



Queer is a difficult word to define. Most simply, you could say it’s a catch all term for non-straight sexualities and genders - L, G, B, T, and all the spaces in between. But it’s more than that: queer implies a rejection of straight society, of the social rules and institutions that box people into limited sexual and gender identities. Most of all, it’s a refusal to accept what straight-society tells us is ‘normal’ (hetero-normativity). It’s a call to arms against both external oppressions and our own internalised repressions. It’s a refusal to be simply tolerated by this society, but instead demands complete freedom.

Race, Nationalism and Homophobia

Queers Against Cuts



English Defence League Rally, London. 24th October 2010

Everyone's aware of the increase in anti-Muslim sentiment in the mainstream media in the past decade. The newspapers are full of stories that imply that all Muslims would like to push values onto British culture which are contrary to progress. While racist groups like the English Defence League claim that they are the lone voices of reason bravely speaking out against the mainstream, the other political parties express what is at best a watered down, tamer version of the same fearmongering.

David Cameron is just one of the many politicians who, with increasing regularity, uses gay rights as an excuse to attack anyone who is not considered British enough. While his personal voting record on LGBT issues leaves a lot to be desired, and he opposed scrapping Section 28 right until the end, he feigns concern for us when looking for reasons to criticise ethnic minorities. While he usually claims that Britain is a Christian country when opposing advancements for LGBT people, he will happily claim Britain's values are secular and argues for a "muscular liberalism" in his controversial speech criticising multiculturalism. He, of course, is not the only one. Many politicians, not to mention journalists, are quick to pay lip service to gay rights and women's rights when stirring up hatred for Muslims and other minorities when they normally wouldn't give us a second thought.

This cynical attempt to confuse the usual game of spot the bigot is typical of a divide and rule tactic. We are understandably scared of potential homophobia and quick to accept an easily recognisable enemy when a more nuanced understanding of people's identities could complicate our attempts to

try and feel safe on a day-to-day basis. Expressions, by those in power, that create an "us" and "them" are welcomed by many LGBT people relieved to be included in an "us" and not, as usual, considered a "them" as we already face social exclusion in so many ways. Portraying certain people as backwards and intolerant has the convenient affect for the ruling class of drumming up patriotism by implying that white British culture isn't homophobic. Straight British people can pat themselves on the back and British LGBT people can just assume that every white homophobe they've met was an exception and every non-white homophobe they've met must be representative. This oversimplification fails to take into account all the white, British homophobes we meet on a day-to-day basis. As usual it strengthens the misconception that there is only one version of British culture, that is apparently the dominant one, and which is apparently beyond reproach. It also renders gay Muslims, their cultures and their organisations invisible, as well as ignoring all the straight Muslims who are showing solidarity and fighting for LGBT acceptance.

If we are to create links between individuals facing different forms of oppression, not to mention facing multiple forms of oppression, we must speak out against the racism promoted on our behalf. Attempts to cosy up to those in power will ultimately fail as they can only act with their own interests in mind. The only thing that will bring about real change is solidarity between ordinary people. We have a responsibility to openly reject this attack on a section of our class as it doesn't further our interests in any way. We refuse to be used as a tool by the ruling class for aims that only benefit them.

Following a callout issued by Queer Resistance (a newly formed "collective of queers and allies across the UK coming together to fight the cuts") for the March 26th anti-cuts demonstration, a hundreds-strong pink-and-black bloc assembled on the TUC demo. This was a significant event - marking the first visible queer intervention in the anti-cuts movement. But what do public spending cuts have to do with queers? And what role does the queer and LGBT movement have in the anti-cuts struggle?

Part of the answer to this question is straightforward: many of the proposed cuts will disproportionately effect us. Tuition fee rises have the most impact on those students without support from their parents, including many queer people who may be estranged from their families. Cutbacks in healthcare spending will lead to us losing sexual health and HIV services. And the youth, counselling and support groups many of us depend on are also set to be axed. So of course queer people are up in arms.

But that's far from the only reason for a queer presence on an anti-austerity demonstration. The cuts are, fundamentally, an attack on working class people and communities. They will disproportionately hurt the most disenfranchised and economically vulnerable sections of society, while protecting and enriching the wealthy few on whose orders these cuts are being carried out. This kind of persecution is something every queer person has experience of on some level, even if they don't realise it.



So beating the cuts is more than just a queer issue. But as queer people we are used to our communities coming under attack, even in times of relative economic prosperity. In the 1980s, Lesbian and Gay Miners Support Groups raised thousands of pounds to support the miners strike - then, as now, working class people were fighting to defend themselves and their communities.

In 2011 the lines of attack are a shade more subtle than in 1984, but the fight is substantially the same. While LGBT communities are increasingly hollowed out by commercialism, so other communities are also being sold off piece by piece in the name of economic progress and the fabled big society. In both cases we, as members of those communities, end up more isolated, vulnerable, and disconnected from the bonds of solidarity that we rely on for support and for survival. It's the urgent need to defend ourselves against this process that leads us to march, as queers and as workers, against the cuts and against all forms of oppression.

About us: Anarchist Federation

The Anarchist Federation is a growing organisation of anarchist communists from across the British Isles who aim to abolish capitalism and all oppression to create a free and equal world, without leaders and bosses, and without wars or environmental destruction. Day to day, our individual members and local groups are politically active in many workplace and community struggles. We coordinate worldwide through the International of Anarchist Federations. As well as encouraging new members, we welcome ideas for joint activities with other groups.



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