

# Queer Liberation is Class Struggle

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*"Knowledge is the key to be free!"*





Footnotes:

1. Lisa Duggan, "The *Brandon Teena* Case and the Social Psychology of Working-Class Resentment," *New Labour Forum* 13(3)2004
2. *ibid*
3. Selma James, *Sex, Race and Class*, [libcom.org/library/sex-race-class-james-selma](http://libcom.org/library/sex-race-class-james-selma)
4. Combahee River Collective Statement, [circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html](http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html)

# Queer Liberation is Class Struggle

by Jomo

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We do well to learn from that history to build on our theory and practice on a queer liberation that weaves in anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, anti-ableist class struggle politics.

Power to queers, and therefore to the class.

**FRONT COVER FLAG:** My friend, Sarah Hopkins, made this flag after we watched “Flag Wars,” a film about middle class, white gay men gentrifying a black neighbourhood. The rainbow flag became a symbol of gentrification, so we realized we need to make our own flag which symbolizes working class, queer liberation.

Where class is racialised and oppression exacerbated along racial lines, then race was also another redefinition of class. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers was one such example. Based in Detroit in the late 1960s, the LRBW was a Black auto-workers organisation that was independent from the union bureaucracy. They saw that the union bureaucracy, in its collaboration with management, was unable and unwilling to fight against the racism that Black workers were facing. They were always the last ones hired and first ones fired, and subject to extremely dangerous working conditions because their lives didn't matter to the capitalists and the union bureaucracy. The LRBW took independent action on the shopfloor, such as wildcat strikes, to fight for their safety, through a message of Black workers struggle against racism. When the demands were achieved, it was a victory for all of the working class. The Black struggle is the class struggle.

How can we form organisations today that take up the struggles that queer workers, both employed and unemployed, face at the workplace and in doing so, further the struggle for all of the working class? So that our victories are also class victories?

The need for a working class queer liberation theory and practice is not just an academic foray. It is a necessity for us to reach out beyond the abstract lingo of queer theory, beyond the annals of academia, urban centres and progressive non-profit scenes. If we are to appeal to queers who are working class, are people of colour, are differently abled, and who may not even identify as queer but whose love lives, sex lives, gender expressions and family formations are all queerly out of heteronormativity, then we need to articulate a politics that reflects this diversity.

Drawing from the words of the Combahee River Collective, working class queers across race, ability and gender have to be responsible for our own liberation. We have to build power in such a way that those who accuse us of dividing their heterosexual labour movement, or their white, middle-class queer movements will have to realize that "they might not only lose valuable and hard-working allies in their struggles," but that they might also be forced to change their habitually heterosexual ways of interacting with and oppressing working class queers.

In 1978, the Black lesbian feminists of the Combahee River Collective said:

*We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.<sup>4</sup>*



In the past two years, the issue of gay marriage has dominated the scene of queer struggles. Some of us are actively supportive, others, grudgingly supportive, and more others who rail that yet again, queer struggles are being monopolized by assimilationist, middle class versions of normality and family: "We are the same as you, except for in bed."

Some supporters of gay marriage point to the economic benefits of marriage. Working class and poor queers need marriage to help alleviate their poverty; immigrant queers need marriage to get US citizenship. I agree. Yet, let's not forget that many queers will never get married because of their suspicions of state institutions. Granting gay marriage doesn't guarantee that immigrant spouses get visas or are free from ICE harassment. Also, around us we see families for whom marriage has not helped alleviate the race and class oppressions that they face everyday. While it may be true that gay marriage does benefit some immigrant couples, oftentimes this comes as an afterthought rather than a decisive theme of gay marriage struggles. It is undeniable that the struggle for gay marriage has been dominated by white, middle class queers who support the Democrats and are ashamed of those of us who don't fit in their status quo.

One may see gay marriage as a reform to be won to open up space for more gains for queer liberation. Indeed, if gay marriage was simply a tactic within a broader strategy that integrated class, race and queer struggles, perhaps it wouldn't cause so much anxiety among radical queer circles. In the absence of a broader strategy and vision however, all our hopes get pinned on this one struggle and the questions become stressful, burdensome and intense: Are we betraying our roots? Are we fighting for the society we envision through this struggle? Exactly what is this broader vision of queer liberation that gay marriage is a reform toward?

That the issue of gay marriage has dominated and overshadowed other important discussions that should be had among queer radicals shows that there has been a lack of strategy and vision of queer liberation that integrates anti-racist, anti-patriarchy, class struggle and anti-ableist perspectives. While academics

have churned out thousands of books on queer theory, spinning our heads dizzy with abstract lingo, those of us on the ground have not similarly churned out our own theory and practice of queer struggles. This is not to say people have not led successful and important campaigns around queer liberation. However, the strategy and vision has not been clearly articulated and insufficiently theorized for it to be replicated and generalized in different places and conditions. The result is the domination of liberals, with their pro-capitalist, liberal racist, ableist, “tolerate us” ideologies.

## ► The Limits of Middle Class Ideology

One glaring question is: Where is the working class in our strategising and vision of queer liberation?

What kind of politics has defined queer liberation in such a way that has led to the erasure of the working class, which composes the majority of US society and the world?

Most queers are workers. That means the queer struggle is also a class struggle. Why hasn't it been seen as such?

How do we organise as workers to demand queer liberation? Who are our friends, and who are our enemies? Will the union bureaucracy or the rank and file lead the movement?

These questions lead us to examine how middle class politics have dominated queer organising. This domination has led to the erasure of working class and poor queers. This is not simply a coincidence.

Middle class academics have produced middle class theories to understand our oppression. In the post 1960s era, with the demise of class struggle politics, identity politics have taken reign. Similarly, the failure of revolutionary groups to take up gender and sexuality as decisive parts of the class struggle has meant that academics had the free reign to monopolize queer theory. As a result, middle class academics could get away with claiming that class struggle politics has nothing to do with queer politics because they confused the class-reductionist and often heterosexist politics of degenerate Leftist sects with the struggle of the working class itself, including its many queer members.

The result of all of this is that our movement is left with a shallow analysis of “intersectionality” rather than a full strategy by which the oppressed – people

social etiquette norms that rich folks are socialized into, our working class families are less inclined to hide what they believe. This doesn't mean we are more or less homophobic, simply more vocal about whatever it is. When the spotlights shine on the question of working class homophobia, what is instead left invisible, is the institutionalized heteronormativity, racism, ableism and class oppressions that have destroyed more queer lives than hate crimes ever have. The military, the abject healthcare system that increase our risk of HIV/AIDS, unemployment, and police brutality are only some examples. Let us not forget that the blood is on the hands of the capitalist ruling class and the middle class that create, support and enforce those policies.

Will we be degenerating into a class reductionism by situating queer struggles within class oppression?

Are we in danger of saying “Queers and Straight, Unite and Fight?” along the same lines that the Communist Party once envisioned for Black workers? The vision of “Black and White Unite and Fight” put black workers demands as secondary to white worker demands, claiming that black workers had to silence their struggles against racism for a façade of unity. Instead of demanding white workers overcome white supremacy, black workers were accused of dividing the class through their resistance against their racist co-workers. For our purposes, how do we avoid the same class reductionist strategies that call for an undemocratic popular front between queer workers and a by-far heteronormative labour movement?

There are some precious lessons to take from the Black Power movement. In her piece, James discusses how Malcolm X, a figure whom many would associate only with Black nationalist politics, was able to hit at the crux of working class struggle.

To quote her:

*Intellectuals in Harlem and Malcolm X, that great revolutionary, were both nationalists, both appeared to place colour above class when the white Left were still chanting variations of “Black and white unite and fight,” or “Negroes and Labour must join together.” **The Black working class were able through this nationalism to redefine class: overwhelmingly Black and Labour were synonymous (with no other group was Labour as synonymous-except perhaps with women), the demands of Blacks and the forms of struggle created by Blacks were the most comprehensive working class struggle.***<sup>3</sup> (emphasis mine)

Brandon Teena was a transman who was raped and murdered in cold blood in 1993, in Lincoln Nebraska after his transgender identity was revealed. His story was depicted in *Boys Don't Cry*, as well as the *Brandon Teena Story*. Lisa Duggan situates what happens to Teena in the context of the de-industrialising Lincoln, Nebraska. In the absence of jobs and presence of abject poverty, those who transgressed boundaries were subjected to violence. They threatened an existing order that could not deal with any trepidation.

She insightfully says:

*A politics that cannot grasp the constraints, coercions, pressures and deprivations imposed through class hierarchies and economic exploitation, or that fails to imagine the realities of rural, agricultural and other non-metropolitan lives, cannot possibly speak to the Brandons in our midst. **Brandon needed a labour movement, a working class politics, a critique of economic cruelties.***<sup>2</sup> (emphasis mine)

Duggan's quote and its analysis are important because it discusses homophobia and transphobia not simply as an incomprehensible form of hate by straight folks, but rather situates it in the context of de-industrialisation, poverty, and pressures that such economic deprivation creates for all folks who live in that environment. This is important for us to understand, not to excuse the violence of the perpetrator's crimes, but rather to understand its origins so we can fight back and change the conditions that created it. An incomprehensible hate cannot be destroyed and neither can it be transformed, but through mass struggle, an economic condition and its pressures that lead to transphobia and homophobia can potentially be changed.

Yet, contrary to what middle class chauvinism would have us believe, homophobia and transphobia are not just the realms of de-industrialised cities and the working class. The recognition of the existence of homophobia and transphobia within working class communities is simply a sober assessment and recognition of the challenges we have to overcome in concreting organising toward a vision of a working class queer liberation. As Joanna Kadi says, the caricature of the homophobic worker is also a fantasy of elitist queers who have either had no meaningful contact, or simply outright disdain and class hatred for the working class. Middle class folks and their urban chauvinism would have us believe that queers outside of metropolitan areas are subject to even greater hate crime, or violence from their communities. These folks have no ways of understanding the myriad ways in which our families and communities have also expressed their love and support for our chosen lifestyles and partners. Bound by less rigid

of colour, women, queer folks, people with disabilities — can unite to fight our common enemies. Among progressive circles, the idea of “intersectionality” has been taken up by the non profit industrial complex (NPIC). In the absence of working class organisations like revolutionary organisations and thriving unions, academia and the NPIC have become the dominant progressive institutions today. The theories they espouse understandably have lasting impacts.

It is commonly explained, that “our oppressions intersect.” That race, class, disability oppression (the -isms) all come together to support one another. When activists reference these intersections, it is usually a call for different identity based groups to work together, to counter a divide and conquer. It is also an attempt to recognize the specific struggles of each identity-based oppression. The intentions are good, and serve initially as a useful lens for understanding various experiences, yet fall flat as an organising theory.

The erasure of class in the intersectionality theory is most clearly expressed through the replacement of class oppression with the defanged term, “classism.” Rather than advocating for class struggle of the working class and the poor taking over the means of production and the running of society, the “classism” analysis is an attempt to raise the consciousness of the rich, to be NICE, FRIENDLY, SENSITIVE to their poorer brethren. Under “classism” ideology, working and poor folks become the rich man's burden, not an agent for change in our own right. In fact, the organising that arises from such an ideology is as condescending and patronizing toward working class and poor folk as the snobbishness it aims to criticize.

At its worst, intersectionality theory compartmentalises our identities — we are a “class” compartment, lying next to a “woman” compartment, lying next to a “people of colour” compartment, and then a “person with disabilities” compartment, and the list goes on. In reality, we aren't neatly arranged compartments segregated and then intersected. That each of those individual compartments is further divided into those with more and less institutional power is also erased. In reality, we are a mesh of working class, queer, gendered, differently abled and coloured people. We don't naturally have more allegiance to the queer segment of ourselves than the coloured segment — we are all of it at once. We hate the white supremacist queers, as much as we disdain the ruling class people of colour or labour bureaucracy who will readily sacrifice us for their own self interest. We also don't naturally have more allegiance to the queer middle class than we do to the rank and file straight workers. Our self-conception is more complicated, and our liberations, more explosive.

I have heard vague calls for queers to work with labour. Yet, broadly speaking, what is labour? By labour do we mean the labour bureaucracy or the rank and file? Also, what is queer? Is queer the assimilationist white, rich, patriarchal gay men or the transfolk denied jobs for their gender expression? When queer works with labour, who exactly are we talking about?

The majority of the world is the rank and file of the working class, not the union bureaucrats. The majority of queers are not middle class and white. In fact, union bureaucracies and queer middle classes have betrayed us in their grab for their own power, making shameless alliances with the very forces that exploit our labour and erase our identities. We are mostly working class, rank and file, queer people of colour and that's who most of us see when we look into the mirror everyday. Any attempt to build an "alliance" between labour and queers needs to begin from this starting point. An "alliance" or "intersection" should not even be necessary, it is only made necessary by the fact that the union bureaucracy dominates "labour" and the gay elites dominate "queerness." If we can break down these twin dominations then it will be much easier to build an "alliance" because most queers already are labour and many labourers are queer. This involves struggle and organising.

## ► Queer Struggle is Class Struggle

Selma James is a Marxist feminist who wrote the seminal piece, *Sex, Race and Class*, among other feminists texts that reclaim women's liberation from middle-class, racist ideology. She and others in the Global Women's Strike were pioneers in organising Wages for Housework, demanding that women who engage in the often invisible and devalued reproductive labour, be compensated for their work as labourers in capitalist society. I draw heavily from their perspectives toward women's liberation to understand queer struggles as also manifestations of class struggle, hoping to expand beyond the hetero-normative theories that nonetheless, were so groundbreaking at the time.

To adapt James: the queer struggle need not wander off into the class struggle. The queer struggle is the class struggle.

Rather than dissecting who we are and dividing ourselves into neat compartments that await token representatives to "intersect" our oppressions for us, is it possible for us to see that these oppressions are manifestations of class oppression? Our experiences and oppressions as women, as queers, as folks with disabilities, cannot be separated from the capitalist structure of society.

edge, and power relative to women workers. Women, the supposedly lesser sex, are cast with hysteria, emotions, instability, needing male supervision and control. Women of colour have been devalued in society, the targets of racism and sexism, and their labour, the most devalued. Our cheap and accessible labour has provided capitalism an unending pool of female workers who will accept low wages.

The fraternity of male supremacy also institutionalizes this division to prevent male workers from questioning their own oppressions - there is always someone worse off. Through the process of slavery and white supremacy, the U.S. ruling class realized that it could keep white workers under its thumb by giving them better wages and other benefits denied to Black workers. It encouraged them to reflect on the fact that, as miserable as they may be, at least they're not Black. Similarly, too many male workers congratulate themselves for not being sexualized, objectified and devalued as women workers under the capitalist system. There is always someone worse off. Under this binary, gender benders, trans workers cannot find a stable liberated place. To the male supremacists, the transwomen have betrayed their gender, and transmen desecrate the male gender. By their crossing, both render the division undesirable, indefensible and transgressible.

Our mere existence as queers do not imply naturally that we are anti-patriarchal or anti-capitalist, yet our existence threatens this binary under capitalism and it is up to us to bring forward a politics that utilizes this power. Through a queer politics that also draws from anti-patriarchal struggles, we challenge the notion that women workers need to be subservient, or that male workers need to cling on to the chains of their imprisonment. We can smash the gender binary everywhere we go, and through that, dismantle the systems that are premised on its existence.

As the capitalist system abandons previously thriving and unionised American cities to exploit cheaper labour elsewhere, de-industrialised cities are full of unemployed and poor people of all genders. Lisa Duggan's luminal essay **1** suggests that where white privilege and male privilege had once guaranteed white folks and men a sense of entitlement on the basis of their race, gender and citizenship, today's capitalist race to the bottom strip these benefits and present instead unemployment and welfare as the few viable options. In lieu of these losses, white male workers either acknowledge the need to stand side by side with other oppressed workers, or they resent their loss and seek to reinforce that sense of superiority and entitlement. One may argue that Vincent Chin and Brandon Teena were victims of a last grasp at masculinity and its privileges in de-industrialising cities.



The attack on queer expressions of gender and sexuality in the workplace under capitalism is an attempt to strip us of our agency, creativity, sexuality, intelligence. Yet these same traits are the ones that queer and straight workers alike utilize to get through the gruelling workday. We improvise our jobs with lessons learned from years of experience or stories exchanged by reliable co-workers; We hold ourselves to an integrity at the workplace that bosses keep pushing us to betray: we refuse to snitch on our co-workers, we help the slowest and newest workers get through so they get paid like all of us; We also know better than the next new manager where all the safety hazards in the workplace are, or how best to organise the work. All these aspects of labour cannot be found in the employers manuals, but are lessons transmitted through conversations in the break rooms or on the job, or during rants in the clock-in stations. Just as queer workers are seen as too outrageous for our transgressions of what is normal at the workplace, so are these invaluable conversations seen as too bold, too unruly by an inhumane capitalist system.

These demands for our freedom, from gender expression to workplace control, go beyond the contract, or our wages. At their best, these are demands that arise from our desire as workers to see the workplace not merely as sites of alienation, but also as extensions of who we are and our relationships. Currently, it is only the top echelon, the CEOs who get to put their own unique, personalized stamp at their workplace. These desires challenge the fundamental basis of capitalist control over our labour. For that reason, they are beyond the confines of trade union politics and cannot be successfully negotiated through the contract. It is the daily struggles of the rank and file workers where such tension is experienced and so it will be through our daily, independent, and militant action that this tension can be overcome.

## ► Patriarchy

Under capitalism, patriarchy serves the dual functions of devaluing female labour, particularly that of women of colour, as well as appeasing oppressed male labour. The gender binary, the patriarchal family and heterosexual marriage are key manifestations of patriarchy that affect the everyday lives of working people.

The gender binary limits and enforces the division between male and female genders, subjugating the latter under the former. Historically, male workers, particularly white men, have been attributed of rationality, scientific knowl-

The old, white, male revolutionary left would have us think that class struggle was only in the factories. In *Sex, Race and Class* Selma James decisively shows that the class struggle extends beyond the factory. Unwaged labour done by housewives in heterosexual families, provide the reproductive labour that is essential for the system to maintain itself. Whether it is bringing up the next generation of workers through nurturing children, or replenishing the labour of their partners through the maintenance of the home and the bare necessities, housewives conduct the work that is often invisible, but necessary for the continued and intensive looting of labour by the capitalist.

The emphasis and dogged maintenance of the heterosexual nuclear family is a product of capitalism. All who violate it are criminalized. To the extent that women and queers challenge the eternity of this heteronormative institution, we are not wanted.

## ► Queer Families

The heterosexual nuclear family ensures that the responsibility for reproductive labour can be contained within the household, stripping the state, or the capitalist bosses of any responsibility for maintaining their workers' health, sanity, desires. Besides being an institution that replaces society in meeting the material needs of workers, the heterosexual nuclear family also serves other emotive purposes.

As John d'Emilio describes, the nuclear family under capitalism is supposed to function as an affective site, a "personal space" that is an escape from the stresses of public work life, that helps workers to deal with the alienation they experience on a day to day basis. We are taught to believe that even though work sucks during the day, at least you have your cosy family to return to. The fact that many blood families are actually dysfunctional, patriarchal, homophobic, or damaging to our self esteems, in large part also a product of the stresses of daily living under capitalism, is besides the point. We are often told that it is something to be tolerated since it is the only imagined site of reliability and comfort that we can count on in a dog eat dog world. We are taught from young that aside from blood, other relations are tested and many don't survive. The reality is, **every** relationship is tested and stressed under capitalism and we cannot escape the alienation in a definitive manner, nuclear family or not, without struggle.

Queer liberation is deeply tied to the existence of non-heteronormative families as legitimate families with access to social services, jobs, education, shelter and

support. These families go beyond gay marriage even though the latter could arguably serve as a useful reform. Our need to encompass struggles for different families has to do with the fact that the possibility of total rejection and abandonment by our blood families and communities, a loss of financial and emotional support from them, has been a real fear for many of us. Some of us are pleasantly surprised by families that have accepted and loved us nonetheless, and yet more others have been brutally disappointed. Regardless, in light of theories that will continue to see our transgressions of heterosexual norms as a sign of individual mental instability, a community that affirms our desires and needs is all the more necessary. Chosen families, non-heteronormative families, are not merely luxuries, they are needed for our very real, daily survival.

Yet under capitalism, these families are illegitimate. Single mother households, or households with people with disabilities, or extended families with elderly and young dependents, or communities that take in non-blood relatives as their own, struggle to survive off of welfare checks or minimal pay checks. These families do not readily and predictably churn out the future, obedient disciplined workers that will deliver their bodies to capitalism, in exchange for a pittance of a wage. Our rejection of capitalist discipline is written off, as our cultural inadequacies. Perceiving our labour as unwanted and untrustworthy, capitalists reject us from the economy and ship us off to prisons, nursing homes, mental institutions or into the informal economy of the streets, still managing in the process, to extract some profit for themselves through our oppression.

Middle class ideology cannot liberate us because it reiterates capitalist attacks on our chosen, non-heteronormative families. It will teach us to reject the families we have, and to settle for the more nuclear, more hetero, the more “responsible” family. Yet another non profit will offer us job training programs for the worst, cheapest, most demeaning service sector jobs and expect us to be thankful. Clinton’s welfare act did just that and masqueraded itself as a well-meaning “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” program. This is couched in terms of us learning “life skills,” learning to be responsible citizens under a capitalist system, to unlearn our rebellion. Yet there is no understanding that many of us disdain these programs and these jobs, not because we are lazy, but because class oppression at the workplace, in the service sector is not a desirable alternative. That we would find a minimum wage job ruled by an increasingly heavy-handed managements, demeaning and undesirable, is then blamed on us: We are undeserving, lazy and untrustworthy.

It is not a surprise that Stonewall took place on the streets, in the dingiest bar that made its business serving queers ostracised from other parts of the city. Fierce queers, many whom were people of colour and sex workers, worked the

streets and came out in defence of it. Where jobs in the formal economy shut out queers, particularly transfolk, the streets and its informal economy was and still is, seen as the only place to find money, and family. Where hormones are too expensive and inaccessible because our needs are seen only as elective options by the insurance industries, then street versions make for sufficient transitions. However, the rise of AIDS among queer communities in the 1980s is a reflection of the challenges of street lives, of poverty, and of a lack of accessible comprehensive healthcare, lest we should over-romanticize its dangers. The complete neglect of the state, the rhetoric of blame that rained on queer communities as a result of the AIDS epidemic, shows how our survival cannot happen without a fight.

Recognizing that any struggle needs strategic allies, where do we turn to? Middle class ideology, through the state and the non profit industrial complex, advocates to save us from ourselves, and help us overcome our queerness, abandoning our chosen families in the process. Even the progressive non profits advocate for us through back room deals with the state or the Democrats, who have proven only to be the worst, two-faced betrayers of queer liberation. If we can agree that such resolutions are unsatisfying, who then can queers who engage in the informal economy, for whom the streets is home, turn to for our collective liberation? How can we make the struggle against discrimination of transfolk at workplaces, the struggle for better wages and more desirable jobs, a real struggle on the streets, and not mere legal reform negotiated in back room deals that too many of us are shut out from?

## ► Homophobia and Transphobia is also Class phobia

For all its talk of fostering creativity through competition, the capitalist system is the most repressive in stifling the creativity and motivation of its workers. It insists on seeing us merely as cogs in a system, devoid of thought, emotions, and desires. When queers are discriminated in the hiring process for being too gender deviant, too campy, too out, it is because we jarringly disrupt the capitalist fantasy of a brainless, emotionless, machine-like worker. We are punished for showing that there really isn’t a division between the public life in the workplace, and our private lives as sexual, emotional, gendered beings. We bring our private lives into our public lives, the workplace, either because we have no intention or no way to hide who we are.