

Leslie Feinberg, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and the radical legacy of LGBTQ+ communists

written by Gregory E. Williams
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Leslie Feinberg and Minnie Bruce Pratt were partners in life and in the struggle for a better world.

Following is part four of an interview with gay communist activist Bob McCubbin, who has organized and written political analyses since the 1960s. He is the author of the 2019 book, ["The Social Evolution of Humanity: Marx and Engels Were Right!"](#)

For Pride Month, Struggle-La Lucha writer Gregory E. Williams sat down with McCubbin to explore the revolutionary history of the LGBTQ+ struggle and what it means for today's fight back.

- Part 1: [Targeted by fascism, united by struggle: Bob McCubbin on defending trans rights and building class solidarity](#)
- Part 2: [Inside the Bay Area's Gay Liberation Front with Bob McCubbin](#)
- Part 3: [Bob McCubbin on LGBTQ+ liberation and Marxist organizing](#)
- Part 4: [Leslie Feinberg, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and the radical legacy of LGBTQ+ communists](#)

Gregory Williams: You've been describing the early LGBTQ+ movement and what it was like being in a revolutionary party. You were doing a lot of practical work, but always studying at the same time, always analyzing. You published a pamphlet in 1976, "The Roots of Lesbian and Gay Oppression, A Marxist View." Just as an aside, I was in a study group in New Orleans, and we were still using it around 2017, when we were doing interventions in the Pride march here, forming a radical contingent. You know, Stonewall means fight back, take back pride! And we felt that we needed to study what the roots of this are. What led you to write that?

Bob McCubbin: The need for a deeper understanding of that struggle, the struggle of - at that point - of lesbians and gays. Now, we were proud to say that we didn't need a theoretical background to understand that there was oppression going on, that it was oppression of members of our class, and we should fight that. And those are words, of course, but they really instituted the truth of the plan of the leading comrades to overthrow capitalism.

So, we were out on the streets even without theory, but it's good to have guidelines, and it's good to deepen your understanding of your own situation and the situation of your comrades.

I actually wrote something fairly early in the party's development, and I showed it to Comrade Dorothy Ballan. She didn't want to hurt my feelings, but it was terrible. It was unbelievably bad. So she didn't mince words. She said, "No, this is not Marx. This is not a dialectical analysis."

So I went back to the drawing board because I wasn't about to give up. She had actually given me some ideas on how to improve my thinking on this issue. But in terms of when I started writing - this sounds terrible. I did it secretly. I didn't want influences.

I wanted to break with the prevailing ideas that were floating around the progressive community. All idealistic, all having to do with ideas rather than struggle and social change and all that. There were some very good books about the oppression of homosexuality, but they all ended on that liberal, happy note: "Now we know more about these people and we want them to be part of the human family, and blah, blah, blah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah."

GE: But how are you going to do that?

BM: Right. Well-intentioned, there was a lot of well-intentioned stuff. I didn't want that to creep in because it was dominant, it was prevalent. I didn't want to do that. We had leading comrades - incredibly developed comrades - who hadn't given any thought to it and openly admitted that. They said, "We need your help, Bob." And then a lot of new comrades were bringing in these ideas.

You know, all of the great revolutionaries have talked about the cultural struggle, which usually follows the physical seizure of power. And it's absolutely necessary because just the physical seizure of political power in a particular country or a particular region or area - it doesn't do the job. For one thing, people think, "Oh, the revolution has succeeded, now where's the reward for it?"

Well, usually, following a revolutionary war, there is social exhaustion. It takes a while to recover from any kind of military struggle. And so, the issue of culture arises.

And in the late '60s and early '70s, there were a lot of – with all due respect – hippie-type ideas about who we were and all that. I didn't want that to creep in.

I wanted to develop it in a materialist fashion, to develop the idea, to develop the situation. And to really show the power of the Marxist method to deepen understanding of our situation and the struggle we face, what our goals should be.

So, yeah, I wrote it all, and I had some confidence, but not a lot of confidence. I'm not an anthropologist. I'm not a historian. I don't have training in any of those areas. So that was another reason I kept it secret. I wasn't sure it would be successful. I had another meeting with Dorothy, and she tried to be polite, telling me, "No, you're not on the right track yet."

And when I finally had something I felt I could show, I made three copies. I gave one to Dorothy and one to Sam Marcy. And then the third copy I gave to Fred Goldstein, who was a cis man, a heterosexual man, a wonderful communist.

I hope this doesn't sound prejudicial, but as a gay man, I really appreciate heterosexual men who aren't afraid of me, who are warm to me. And Fred was like that. And in terms of what he said at meetings, he struck me as the most politically developed among the youth. I thought, let's find out if he has anything to say about this text I've written. So anyway, those three. And I got good feedback.

That booklet was released in late winter or early spring of 1976. However, in January 1976, a very important national meeting took place. It was called the Hard Times Conference. And it was called by the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, which was the above-ground, open organization for the Weather Underground.

And this meeting in January 1976 was kind of like the last hurrah for the so-called New Left movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, but dominated by the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee.

Their political line was perhaps typical of the left dealing with a new political phenomenon, such as the gay liberation movement. They reacted defensively – forgive me – even stupidly. The Prairie Fire Organizing Committee probably had many LGBTQ+ people involved in it, but their theoretical position, basically, was that homosexuality is a secondary contradiction. What the hell is that?

My point is, they didn't have a good position. They had a homophobic position, right? The U.S. Communist Party had a homophobic position. And the Socialist Workers Party went back and forth on it. But basically, they would have preferred not to have to deal with it.

However, at the time of the conference, the book was ready for publication but had not yet been published. The comrades got on the Xerox machine and printed 300 pre-publication copies of "The Roots of Lesbian and Gay Oppression" – at that point called "The Gay Question." And Leslie Feinberg, who was pretty new – she/zie had joined the Buffalo branch a few years earlier, and zie'd just moved to New York City around that time, maybe '74, '75 – zie grabbed them up when we got to Chicago, and zie spent the whole time, the two or three-day conference, zie spent the whole conference selling them. And zie sold all 300.

That was the kind of incredibly dynamic revolutionary zie was. Full of energy, full of enthusiasm, full of great ideas. And you know, I saw a photo of her/hir recently and it reminded me: Hir eyes projected love. Zie loved hir class. Zie loved children. Zie loved the comrades. And lucky for hir, zie was also brilliant. And people paid attention to hir writings. And zie was invited all over the place.

I was thinking about it last night, and I'd actually forgotten. Zie spoke in Balboa

Park in San Diego. Pride March was on Saturdays, and on the night before, there was always a rally outside the center, with leaders in the struggle speaking. And one year, out of all the national figures who could have been picked, zie was picked to be the spokesperson.

I remember another time we drove up to Las Vegas. An ex-comrade, who still liked us, had organized a meeting for us in Las Vegas, where Leslie spoke. And zie spoke in San Francisco to an incredible crowd of young people who were just crazy about hir. And in L.A., too. My point is that zie spoke all over the U.S., as well as in Europe and Asia.

And zie loved our class, zie loved our class very much. And zie made a tremendous contribution. I didn't have great insight into the trans struggle, but hir friendship and comradeship meant everything. And any mention of Leslie should also include Minnie Bruce Pratt, who was hir life companion, who was also a great revolutionary. Minnie Bruce's children had been taken away from her by the state because she was a lesbian. That didn't stop her from a lifelong struggle for justice.

GW: They definitely contributed so much to our understanding of gender and the trans struggle, the way that it's come down to us today. Our orientation in the Struggle for Socialism Party, of which you and I are members, owes much to the foundation laid by pioneering comrades like Leslie Feinberg and Minnie Bruce Pratt, who were willing to go against the grain, even within the revolutionary movement.

Not everybody understood the importance of these struggles, as you described. It may be hard for young comrades to understand now, but all of these positions had to be fought for in the progressive and even revolutionary movements, just as opposing the war in Vietnam and supporting the Black Panthers had to be fought for.

There's a good quotation from Leslie Feinberg: "Remember me as a revolutionary

communist.” Zie was of Jewish background and deeply committed to the Palestinian liberation struggle — just an incredible example.

And zie left behind many writings that are still so valuable. Aside from your book, I was given copies of Leslie’s writings. That’s how I learned about the history of the gay and lesbian struggle and the trans struggle within the communist movement and the advances that the Bolsheviks made in ending the discrimination against homosexuality and guaranteeing abortion rights very early on, way before the capitalist countries.

And then you can trace the line through the developments that happened in socialist East Germany, the German Democratic Republic. They recovered a lot of the work that was being done in Germany before the Nazi takeover. Germany had a revolutionary situation before the Nazis came to power, they were going to be possibly the next socialist country. And they were making huge strides in the world of sexology. And the gay and lesbian and trans subcultures were very prominent – all this cultural experimentation that was happening, and the Nazis tried to destroy that totally.

And then, when socialist East Germany came into being after WWII, they revived what they could, but had to build a lot from scratch. They had to rebuild housing and everything, but also recover what was lost or what had been taken away in terms of gender and sexual struggle. And then, onward through the advances that have been made in Cuba, all the stuff I learned about through Leslie Feinberg’s writing. Just an incredible touchstone for anybody who wants to be a revolutionary today, anybody who’s in the LGBTQ+ struggle. There’s a lot to learn there.

To be continued

