

‘Standing up for trans people is self-defense for every worker’

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Interview with Oct. 7 organizer



Melinda Butterfield at the International Trans Colloquium in Havana, Cuba, May 2023. Photo: Serena Sojic-Borne

Transgender activist Melinda Butterfield is one of the key organizers for the Oct. 7 National March to Protect Trans Youth and Speakout for Trans Lives in Orlando, Florida. She is also a co-editor of [Struggle-La Lucha](https://www.struggle-la-lucha.org/tag/1/).

In May, Butterfield led a [Women In Struggle/Mujeres en Lucha](#) LGBTQ2S delegation to Cuba to participate in the Days Against Homophobia and Transphobia. The trip allowed activists from around the U.S. and from a variety of groups to learn more about Cuba's new, expansive Families Code.

Sharon Black: How is the mobilization going? I know that you're encouraged about the involvement of trans activists around the country and especially in Florida. Could you let us know how Oct. 7 is building and why you think that is so?

Melinda Butterfield: We started organizing on Trans Day of Visibility, March 31. There was a lot of enthusiasm for the idea of a national march for trans rights from the beginning, but organizing was slow at first. We started with a diverse group of trans people from all parts of the U.S., most of whom had never worked together.

We thought it was important to hold the protest in Florida, which has been the epicenter of anti-trans attacks this year under governor and presidential candidate Ron DeSantis. It's crucial to show solidarity with the many trans youth there who have no opportunity of fleeing to another state. But trying to hold a national action in such a hostile environment presents special challenges.

Some folx dropped out pretty quickly because life stuff gets in the way. That's especially true for trans people, who shoulder a lot in their daily struggle to survive in an increasingly hostile society. But we kept pushing ahead. Organizing something like this on a national scale is never easy, especially when you have few resources to start with.

Over time, we got a solid core of activists, trans people and cisgender allies alike, who are committed to the idea behind the march - that there needs to be an independent mass movement, national in scope, to confront the far-right program of anti-trans genocide - in the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement and the Stonewall Rebellion. And who understand that this movement needs to be in solidarity with

other oppressed groups under attack from these white supremacists. With their help, we were able to broaden our reach, especially in Florida.

By the end of July, it started to feel like things were really coming together. And now we're in the final weeks and days, the most exciting part of the mobilization, when a lot of groups and individuals are getting the word out and making plans to attend!

A lot of people who support the march in theory are understandably worried about coming to Florida. I'm not just talking about trans people, but many cis progressives too, especially after laws came into effect this summer banning trans people from using public restrooms that correspond to their gender and giving the state legal cover to kidnap trans kids from their parents. And, of course, gender-affirming care for both youth and adults has been outlawed there.

We very carefully and deliberately chose Orlando as the site of the march, because it is where the contradictions between DeSantis and the tourism industry are sharpest, where the local authorities are not inclined to enforce measures like the restroom ban because they are not beneficial to local businesses. Orlando also has a large, organized queer community, and many of the city's low-wage service workers are queer.

Most importantly, we are working to provide the best possible people's security for the march and those who choose to attend because, as the slogan goes, "we keep us safe."

Divide and conquer

SB: I understand that trans and queer groups are in the leadership, but why should others join this mobilization? Is Oct. 7 connected to other struggles, both in Florida and nationally?

MB: Trans people are public enemy #1 in Florida and much of the U.S. right now.

And even in “safe” areas like New York City and Los Angeles, there is growing fascist street violence and emboldened acts of bigotry. It’s no exaggeration to say that every trans person, whether they are out or still in the closet, has been affected by this and feels a growing sense of dread.

But trans people aren’t the only ones being targeted. In Florida, DeSantis and his ilk are going after the broader LGBTQ2S community too. They are going after immigrant workers and the Black community, students and teachers, librarians, reproductive rights for women and other people who become pregnant, unions. It’s the same story in many, many other places.

Capitalism relies on divide and conquer. A fascist movement ramps that up to 11. In Florida, in Texas, in Ohio, in Montana, and in Washington, D.C., too, the far right has telegraphed very clearly that once the transgender “menace” is eliminated, they will turn their attention to the next group they find undesirable.

In a very concrete way, standing up for trans people at this moment is not just the right thing to do – it’s a necessary act of self-defense for every working-class person, every marginalized community, in this country.

Anti-fascism at home and abroad

SB: You have a long history of opposing the fascists in Ukraine. You’ve written about that and been involved in protests against Ukrainian fascists and in support of the people of the Donbass region. Can you explain why Oct. 7 is also on the cutting edge of fighting fascism.

MB: I’m glad you brought up Ukraine because the war there is not well understood by the queer community in the U.S., nor by the left generally. I’ve been organizing in solidarity with anti-fascists in the Donbass region and exiled Ukrainian anti-fascists since the U.S. supported a far-right coup in Ukraine nearly ten years ago.

The current military struggle by Donbass people, Ukrainian anti-fascists, and the Russian military against the Ukrainian regime and NATO is one of the most important struggles against fascism in the world. This is masked deliberately by the Biden administration, which poses as a friend of queer people but sends billions of dollars in weapons and aid to help Ukrainian fascists wipe out the people of Donbass and facilitate a U.S. takeover of Russia.

The growth of fascist movements in Ukraine like the Azov Battalion, promoted and supplied by the U.S., has inspired neo-Nazis and violent white supremacists from the U.S. to New Zealand. In fact, [speakers at a fascist gathering](#) waving Nazi flags in Orlando on Sept. 2 spoke approvingly of Biden arming Azov. As Dr. King said about the U.S. war in Vietnam, the bombs dropped abroad also explode at home.

Of course, the capitalist government of Russia has not helped to clarify the situation with its hateful anti-trans and anti-gay policies. The origins of this are complex, but an important thing for queers in the U.S. to understand is that “our” government – both Republicans and Democrats – promoted right-wing, homophobic, transphobic U.S. evangelical intervention in Russia and Eastern Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s to further U.S. interests, just as it did in Uganda. And today we’re seeing the logical outcome of that.

Just as Donbass is at the cutting edge of anti-fascist struggle internationally, the fight against trans genocide is the cutting edge of anti-fascist struggle in the U.S. right now, along with the fight against white supremacist violence, like the recent massacre of three Black people in Jacksonville, Florida.

Oct. 7 will not only be the first national protest for trans rights since the current wave of attacks began, it’s also the first national protest against the fascist movement, which has become more violent and aggressive since Jan. 6, 2021, from Congress to state houses to the streets.

If we unite to forcefully push back the violent attack on trans lives and Black lives, it will be a serious blow to the far-right politicians, fascist groups like the Proud Boys and Moms for Liberty, and the wealthy capitalists behind them.

Grassroots mobilization

SB: Women In Struggle and all of the groups and individuals who initiated the Oct. 7 march, while courageous, are relatively lacking in resources. Why haven't larger, more mainstream groups initiated such a call?

MB: Our call for a national march was very much based on frustration with the lack of a national response to the growing anti-trans attacks. And it quickly became apparent that others felt the same way! When I was giving out the first leaflet promoting the idea at the Trans Day of Visibility in Washington, D.C., so many people thanked me and said they couldn't understand why it hadn't already been done.

There have been lots of wonderful, heroic battles waged at the local and state level to defend trans rights. Why has no one tried to unite them into a powerful movement?

We know why. Like many progressive communities in the U.S., the LGBTQ2S community has been dominated for decades by nonprofits closely tied to capitalist foundations and the Democratic Party. Their orientation is entirely based on two-party electoral politics as the be-all and end-all of what queers should aspire to. And so they are completely unprepared to deal with a situation like this, which requires a militant fightback that doesn't meet the approval of their political and funding patrons.

As with so many people's movements – from Civil Rights to reproductive rights to queer liberation to anti-war – the initiative for this fight comes from the grassroots,

from the most revolutionary and radical forces. And we have to drag the groups with money into the struggle, kicking and screaming, while working diligently to preserve an independent, radical orientation that can actually achieve our goals – to not only push back the attacks on trans rights but to expand those rights.

It's disappointing that even on the radical left there is lack of initiative in defense of trans lives. There are left groups that, on paper, are in favor of trans rights and would have been much better positioned to initiate an event of this scope. Why they didn't – if it's out of fear of repression, sectarianism, or the pressure of reformism and so-called "patriotic socialism" in the movement – I can only speculate. We would welcome their involvement, but so far it hasn't happened.

Bravery of trans youth

SB: Is there anything else that you would like to add, including your own personal perspective as a trans woman?

MB: Like many trans people, I'm deeply motivated to protect trans and questioning young people. Because I was a trans child myself, and I don't want anyone to ever again have to go through the abuse, torture, and years of self-hatred and misery that came with being denied my true identity. No child should ever be subject to that – not by the state, not by the church, and not by their parents.

It was the bravery of young trans people coming forward that finally helped me to come out later in life.

In 1963, Gov. George Wallace of Alabama stood in the schoolhouse door to prevent desegregation. President John F. Kennedy ordered the National Guard to remove him and enforce integration.

Today, Ron DeSantis and many others are metaphorically standing in the door of the schoolhouse, the doctor's office, the restroom, and the library. President Joe Biden

has not lifted a finger to stop him, and shows no inclination to do so.

The difference has nothing to do with the character of the presidents in question. Kennedy and Biden are both reactionary Cold Warriors, and no friends of queers or Black people. The difference is that in 1963 there was a mass movement for Civil Rights – one that the capitalists and their politicians feared and were unable to control. This is the example we have to look to.

When the bosses fear the people, then we will see a roll-back of the anti-trans attacks and other reactionary measures. When the fascists who invade our streets know they will be met and confronted by a united people's movement, then they will scurry back into their holes.

Oct. 7 is about taking the first steps toward building that kind of movement – the kind that can win.

Join the struggle!

SB: Where and how can people get involved?

MB: Whether or not you can come to Orlando, there are lots of ways to get involved. But you should come if you can!

Go to our website, ProtectTransKidsMarch.org, and sign up. If you represent an organization, ask them to endorse. On the website, you can [make a donation](#) to help with expenses like transportation. You can also download flyers and posters to print and distribute in your area.



We have biweekly organizing meetings online, as well as committees organizing things like logistics, social media, and program. Sign up at the website, and we'll let you know how to participate in those meetings.

Also let us know if you're planning to come to Orlando on Oct. 7. We can help you find a hotel or alternative housing. If you live in the Orlando region and can provide sleeping space for a night or two, let us know.

A really easy way to help is by getting out the word on social media. Visit [Linktr.ee/transyouthmarch](https://linktr.ee/transyouthmarch) for links to our social media pages. Follow us on your preferred platforms and share our posts with your friends and contacts.

All out for Oct. 7!

