

SocialistWorker.org

PUBLICATION OF THE
INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIST ORGANIZATION

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MICHFEST IS DYING FROM BIGOTRY

September 10, 2014

Judy Heithmar explains how the anti-transgender bigotry of some radical feminists is being challenged by more and more trans women and their allies.

THE 39TH annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (Michfest) came to an end on August 10. But a bigoted policy of excluding transgender women from attendance threatens the future of the festival.

As she does every year, founder Lisa Vogel wrote a post-festival letter of gratitude and "next steps" to attendees. Her outpouring of love and admiration for festivalgoers was juxtaposed with clear and deep concerns about the future of the fest.

As the largest all-women's festival in the world moves towards its 40th year, organizers' defense of exclusionary policies have created a climate that is the opposition of Michfest's stated intention of creating a welcoming and healing space for people who desperately need it.

The festival has long held a policy that it is for "womyn-born-womyn"--or, as Vogel explains, "womyn who were born female, raised as girls and who continue to identify as womyn." This policy excludes transgender women from attending. Although organizers say they do not ask trans women to leave the festival, trans women and their allies say that the attendance policy alone is insulting and dehumanizing. This reactionary policy has led to protests and a drop in attendance, and has cast a spotlight on the history of rampant transphobia among a small section of the radical feminist movement.

In 2011, I attended Michfest with my partner, who was staffing a crafter's tent for work that year. Upon arriving, we were both blown away by the sheer beauty of what has been affectionately referred to as "The Land" and to be surrounded by thousands of self-identified feminists. Most astonishing, however, was observing the presence of women in control of everything taking place on the land, from transporting newcomers to their campsites on flatbed tractors, to cooking and serving food, to building and taking down stage set-ups.



Lisa Vogel (seated)

Surely this incredible space was something to cherish, but it didn't take long for our amazement to fade into righteous anger, as our argument against the exclusion of transgender women was met with vile, aggressive and sometimes violent responses by many of the festival's longtime attendees.

Almost immediately, we discovered the presence of the **Trans Womyn Belong Here** (TWBH) collective, and connected with other festivalgoers fighting to tackle the transphobic policy head-on. For the five days we spent on the land, we wore our TWBH T-shirts and handed out informational flyers, which were met with great hostility by many, leaving us with a feelings of rage and disappointment as we drove back home at the festival's end. The space that was supposedly representative of feminist values certainly did not align with my own.

As trans-rights activist Julia Serano wrote in her widely-read book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*:

Some of the women who travel from all over the country to attend Michigan think nothing of wearing their suspicion or hatred of trans women on their sleeves, and they will often make extraordinarily ignorant and insensitive comments about trans women in their attempts to justify our exclusion. I am sure these women believe that they are protecting the values of lesbian and women's space by opposing our inclusion at all cost, but in reality the specific points they make generally undermine feminist goals and beliefs rather than support them.

We already knew that it was going to take a whole lot more than simply wearing a T-shirt of support (though symbolic and thoughtful), and that if we were to successfully overcome transphobia and transphobic policies at Michfest, a broad grassroots movement of transgender and queer people and their allies fighting back will be essential.

MICHFEST HAS seen its attendance dwindle in size largely as a result of calls to boycott the festival over the discriminatory policy. A **2013 petition started by transgender stand-up comedian, writer and activist Red Durkin** urged a boycott of the festival by performers and attendees. Many prominent performers withdrew from their plans to play the festival and signed onto the boycott, including *Orange is the New Black* star Lea DeLaria, the Indigo Girls, and queer spoken-word artist Andrea Gibson, to name a few.

The boycott gained traction, as many people within transgender, queer and feminist circles spread the word online via social media and other outlets. It was eventually echoed by prominent mainstream groups like **Equality Michigan** and even Gay Inc.'s very own **Human Rights Campaign**, which was forced to make a statement in support of the inclusion of trans women just weeks before the start of the festival this year.

The "womyn-born-womyn" policy has been in place since the festival's founding in 1976, and Vogel has remained steadfast in defending it, holding to the notion among one section of radical feminists that denies trans women's identity as women due to their physical gender at birth. But as others have argued, **this is simply a 33-year-old policy of segregation.**

In her letter to attendees, Vogel writes in desperation about the fight to save the festival going forward: "I personally have the will and passion to step into this new horizon, but I don't have the desire to have my work be a struggle about the necessity for these changes. I cannot continue to assume greater and greater financial risk, and living from Kickstarter to donation campaign is not a long-term plan."

THERE HAS been pushback against the transphobia within festival grounds for decades, particularly from the queer community, so why now is Vogel suddenly so deeply concerned about the continuation of her beloved event?

Perhaps it has something to do with the courage and downright fierceness of transgender visibility and the incredible fightback from the greater trans and queer community at large. Remarkable transgender advocates like actress Laverne Cox and author Janet Mock keep people informed in the media by consistently **shutting down transphobic media pundits, like the bigoted Piers Morgan**, and patiently communicate to people about the real issues faced by transgender people on a regular basis. Trans people have been forced onto the sidelines for far too long, and thanks to people like Cox, Mock and others willing to speak out, share their stories and educate, we may have reached what *Time* magazine recently coined "The transgender tipping point."

The fight for transgender liberation, however, takes more than media persuasion. The heightened attention towards trans-rights issues is also due to the bravery of people like CeCe McDonald, and her decision to fight back when she was brutally physically and verbally attacked in 2012. CeCe took a stand against racism and transphobia, propelling her case into national spotlight. As a result of the actions and the wave of support to free her from an unjust prison sentence, trans issues have been brought to the forefront of discussion and organizing in this country.

The courage of trans people fighting back against their own oppression, like the more recent case of Eisha Love--a Black trans woman **with a story eerily similar story to**

CeCe's--is directly impacting the way the rest of the world views trans people and trans issues.

Transgender people face heightened levels of discrimination at every turn, from housing and health care, to employment and education. Additionally, violence against trans people is much higher than the national average. A **National Transgender Discrimination Survey**, by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Center for Transgender Equality found that respondents lived in extreme poverty, due in large part to the exponentially high level of discrimination and abuse experienced at the work place.

A sample of 6,500 transgender respondents from across the U.S. found that nearly 50 percent experienced being fired, not hired or denied a promotion because of their trans status, and 90 percent reported being harassed or abused on the job. One-fifth of respondents reported homelessness, and 55 percent reported being harassed by staff or residents at homeless shelters.

When accessing medical treatment (though many transgender people, rightfully, have a strong apprehension about seeking out traditional medical support), 19 percent reported being denied treatment, and 50 percent reported having to teach their medical providers about transgender care. More than half of respondents reported being uncomfortable seeking police assistance, and 22 percent reported police harassment.

These numbers, in actuality, are probably much higher, as many transgender people live closeted or do not feel safe enough to report these issues.

DESPITE THE seemingly insurmountable number of obstacles, achievements have been made that are unprecedented in the trans community, like the addition of gender identity to the **reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act**, and the fact that Mills College in Oakland, Calif., recently **became the first all-women's college to welcome transgender and gender-nonconforming students to its campus**.

Likewise, Obamacare has now been forced to **add gender-reassignment surgery and medical care to its coverage**, along with a number of universities that have added it to student health care plans.

But Lisa Vogel and a section of the radical feminist movement known as "TERFs"--or "trans-exclusionary radical feminists"--continue to defend their anti-trans positions and are not simply keeping their transphobic ideas and actions within the grounds of Michfest. Longtime Michfest supporter Cathy Brennan, for example, **has actually worked to deny transgender people legal rights and protections**, and she and others have promoted transphobic ideas through venues like the RadFem conference. Vogel, Brennan and other TERFs, quite frankly, give feminism a bad name.

But Vogel and her Michfest supporters are losing this fight. Their blatant and consistent denial of transgender women as *women* has many left feminists running in the opposite direction and embracing the call for transgender inclusion and liberation. Vogel can beg for financial support from a few wealthy attendees to subsidize the cost of a festival otherwise lost to a boycott (as she has been forced to do in recent years), but that's not sustainable, and even she knows that.

As feminists who support a wide range of gender identities and expressions, as trans and gender-nonconforming activists, and as revolutionary Marxists, we must keep this momentum going and continue to struggle for not only the liberation of transgender people, but *all* of the oppressed in society.

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