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PUBLICATION OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIST ORGANIZATION

READERS' VIEW

## TERFS HAVE NO PLACE ON THE LEFT

August 21, 2018

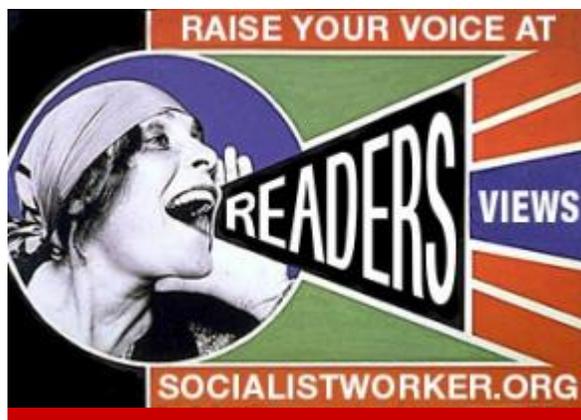
**Danelle Wylder** and **Corrie Westing** explain the roots of “trans-exclusionary radical feminism” — and why it is a danger to the trans community that must be confronted.

THIS YEAR, at the annual Socialism conference hosted by the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in Chicago, we were quite dismayed by the appearance and participation of a local Chicago socialist (not in the ISO) notorious for her outspoken support for trans-exclusive “feminist” (TERF) ideology.

For years, this person, who is a signer on an atrocious open letter advocating the rights of TERFs to express their bigotry in left spaces, has had opportunities to engage and learn that these “ideas” are not welcome in the ISO or our events. This person, however, did not limit herself to attendance.

We learned on the final day of the conference that she was there to organize, when she handed an old friend, previous political collaborator and out non-binary ISO member an anti-trans treatise colored in Marxism.

We do not know how many other conference attendees received this piece of garbage — one comrade receiving it was one too many. We celebrate that other than this infringement on our well-being, the remainder of the conference was an overwhelmingly safe and beautiful space for people of all genders and expressions.



This reinforces our pride as members of a socialist organization that demonstrates in practice a deep and thorough commitment to trans liberation, and against TERFism. Immediately after the conclusion of the conference, the organizers released an unequivocal statement on the conference Facebook page condemning the actions of this person and reporting the organizers have banned her from future ISO events.

Given that some confusion seems to exist about whether TERFism is just one among a “diversity of opinions” that are equally worthy of engaging on the left, we thought we would take some steps to review the absolute bankruptcy of these garbage ideas.

Despite being a very small minority in the left, TERFs — aka radfems — have caused havoc for trans folks for decades. Despite claiming to be part of the left of the feminist movement, TERFs’ politics on gender tend to align more with that of the far right.

So much so that TERFs have both collaborated with and have been heavily funded by far right groups in their quest to fight any legislation that betters the lives of trans people and in their push for legislation that makes life worse for trans folks.

If we do not rid the left of this toxic movement, it will continue to grow like a tumor and persist in making the lives of our trans and gender non-conforming comrades hell, while also serving as a significant barrier to winning broader gains for the feminist movement overall.

TERFISM IS a break off of radical feminism, a movement that came out of second wave feminism in the 1960s. Radical feminists believe that instead of the capitalist class and the working class being the two competing class interests in society, the two competing interests are that of (the immutable categories of) men and women.

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## READERS’ VIEWS

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They believe that men are innately the oppressors of women, and that all things masculine are the source of the problems in the world. The views of radical feminism are very much that of gender essentialism.

Valerie Solanas, in her 1968 book *SCUM Manifesto* — SCUM being an acronym for the Society for Cutting up Men — puts a call out for women to get rid of the male sex altogether. The more mainstream solution of the radical feminists was complete separatism from men as opposed to fighting the capitalist system.

One of their main projects was fighting against pornography. The radical feminists’ ideas began to wane in the mid-1970s as third wave feminism began to change the landscape

of feminists ideas as it added an intersectional approach to feminism and incorporated the ideas of Black feminism in a way mainstream second wave feminism did not.

One of the first known splits where trans-exclusive feminism began to become a full-fledged ideology among radical feminists was in 1973. Beth Elliot, a trans woman, was set to perform at the West Coast Lesbian Conference. In response, a group called the Gutter Dykes leafleted the conference calling for Beth to be removed from the bill.

After Robin Morgan, who was the keynote speaker, gave a horrendous speech defaming Beth, a group began to storm the stage in attempt to beat Beth when she went on stage to play her set. Comedy duo Harrison and Tyler, who were set to play the conference later, jumped on to the stage to defend Beth and were beaten as well.

Robin Tyler of the duo said in a later interview, “You know what’s interesting? Rather than fighting who’s oppressing us, TERFs go after the most oppressed people instead of building a coalition. It was all just shocking to me!”

In 1974, Janice G. Raymond published *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, a book that cemented TERF politics and attempted to curb gender reassignment surgeries. The book was accepted by mainstream psychiatrists and set back the transgender movement significantly.

The National Center for Healthcare Technology sought out Raymond to write its statement on trans medical care. Her statement allowed health insurances to reject claims for trans-related health care and made it impossible for working-class trans people to safely access the life-saving care they needed for decades.

IN THE summer of 1991, at Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (Michfest), the largest gathering of women each year in the U.S., lead organizers released a widely disseminated statement proclaiming a new policy that the festival was for “womyn-born-womyn” only.

When Nancy Burkholder went to the festival that year with her partner for the second time, she was escorted to the gates and kicked out of the festival in the middle of the night for being outed as a trans woman — sparking the “Where’s Nancy” movement.

Riki Wilchins, a trans activist, created a place to protest the exclusionary and transphobic policy held at the same time of the festival nearby called “Camp Trans.” Camp Trans’ goal was to create a dialogue with the attendees of MichFest to advocate for the inclusion of trans women in the festival.

Leadership emerged from Leslie Feinberg and a group calling themselves the Lesbian Avengers [founders of the Dyke Marches that happen across the country as an

alternative to commercial Pride festivals, and now known as the more inclusively named Queer Avengers], a trans-inclusive group that formed in 1992 to fight for lesbian issues with direct action.

Members of Camp Trans successfully entered the grounds of Michfest in 1994 for a dialogue, which seemed at the moment to be relatively successful. However, in following years, the TERFs of Michfest, including founder Lisa Vogel, continued with their volatile exclusion of trans women from the land and spreading their hateful ideas under the guise of “creating a safe space for women.”

It is worth noting, however, the divisive and contradictory position they held, wherein trans men were allowed on the land because TERFs considered them “women-born” as part of their transmisgynist ideology.

TERF leadership promoted the ideology of sexualizing trans women’s bodies as inherently endangering other women’s safety, while at the same time celebrating other forms of gender non-conformity and queer sexuality on festival grounds. (See Julia Serano’s account of Camp Trans’s intervention into MichFest in her 2013 *Excluded* for more on this.)

IN 1999, the Lesbian Avengers attempted to enter the land as a group bringing a 16-year-old trans girl with them. They were all sold tickets after disclosing to festival organizers that there were members of their group that was trans. They were hosting a workshop the next day to have a dialogue.

As soon as they arrived on the land they were harassed by attendees shouting things like “Man on the Land.” The festival organizers escorted them to a tent where TERFs verbally attacked and threatened the life of the 16-year-old. Here is an excerpt from an interview with Cristan Williams about the groups experience.

“S. [Lesbian Avenger]: About 10 TERFs were waiting for us when we came in. The whole ‘MAN ON THE LAND!’ started as soon as we walked in. I mean, at the time, we’re kids, we’re teenagers and these are all adults. I mean, when I think about it now, it was just so fucked up. We were trying to give out T-shirts and stickers about being inclusive. But it was getting bad.

K. [trans girl in the group]: A huge crowd of yelling people formed around us, and I started crying at that point. It got so loud that Nomy Lamm, who was performing there as part of Sister Spit, came over and stood up for us...The crowd and me were walked over to a tent area. The way that it worked was that there was a queue of people who were going to get to say whatever they wanted to say. I remember, specifically, one woman looking right at me and telling me that I needed to leave the Land as soon as

possible because she had a knife and didn't know if she would be able to control herself if I was around her.

Cristan Williams: WHAT? How did people react to that death threat?

K: Because of the way they were queuing, as soon as one person stopped speaking, another would start, so nobody said or did anything about the death threat. At that point, I checked out. At first I was sobbing and [B] was holding my face close to hers, telling me that it would be over soon, but then I just checked out.

S: The moderator did nothing. It was just a mud-slinging, hatred pouring out. It was just like one by one by one being like, 'You're a rapist! You're raping the Land! You're destroying womanhood! I don't know what I'm going to do to you!' — it was just violent, hatred, and I know that most of it was geared at [K]. I was up there being attacked, but I wasn't getting the brunt of it. This went on for at least two hours.

At least 30 people were allowed to speak at us, but there were around 75 under the tent, and if you included the people around the tent who were watching and listening, well over 100.

IN 2011, trans women defied the “women-born-women” policy and bought tickets and attended the festival as part of a group called “Trans Women Belong Here.” They handed out T-shirts and buttons to be worn by allies throughout the weekend and passed out flyers and zines condemning the policy.

The next few years, a huge boycott was called of the festival. Petitions went out calling on the artist to pull out of the festival, and ticket sales plummeted. In 2015, Lisa Vogel decided that rather than change the policy and open up the festival, she would rather shutter its gates for good in the name of trans exclusion.

The TERFs now have a new leader. Cathy Brennan who runs the website Gender Identity Watch, where she doxxes (outs and publicly shames) not only trans adults, but also trans youth on her website [genderidentitywatch.com](http://genderidentitywatch.com). She has internet-bullied multiple trans youth to the point where they almost took their own lives.

She submitted a letter to the United Nations opposing legislation that would outlaw discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression. She is, quite plainly, a garbage person from garbage island.

In the UK, the left has experienced an infiltration of TERF ideology.

During Pride season of 2018, the TERFs used their internet platform to threaten violence against trans people who participate in Pride festivals. At London Pride, a small group of TERFs protested the front of the parade and were allowed by the London Pride to lead the parade.

In an age where trans and gender non-conforming folks are murdered at alarming rates, 23 in 2016, 28 in 2017 and 16 so far this year, the ideology promoted by TERFs is incredibly dangerous to our community.

While some on the left may dismiss TERFs as just having “bad ideas about gender,” their actions have very real material consequences for trans people every day. We need to be very clear that we stand in solidarity with all of our trans and gender non-conforming comrades and will stand up for them and with them against these bigots anywhere they try to spread their hate.

As socialists, we are fighting for a world where all are free to express their gender freely without fear. The solidarity among and between folks of all gender identities is not only needed to win trans liberation, but also essential to undermine all forms of gendered oppression, no matter who is impacted.

TERFism is not only transphobia dressed in leftist language — it is a dead end that will only hamper any anti-oppression movement or campaign. As socialist and feminist fighters committed to full liberation, we must remain steadfast to defeat the pull of hateful and deadly ideologies, whether found on the left or the right.

Solidarity is truly the only way to win.

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