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GAY ACTIVISM IN EARLY 1980S CORK 40 YEARS ON



By Kieran Rose

Early 1980s Cork was an exciting place to be for a young gay activist, there were so many groundbreaking projects and actions to be involved with, making a place for ourselves in the life of the city for the first time, coming out publicly, making friends, discovering ourselves and forging our identities in the process.

It was also a time of almost suffocating oppression, great discrimination and prejudice, enforced by powerful right wing groups, especially the Catholic Church. Various Governments had little respect for our human rights and upheld the laws that criminalized us. The High Court in 1980 and the Supreme Court in 1983 shockingly decided that gay men being threatened with jail for consenting sexual relationships was not contrary to the Constitution.

Given these pressures and lack of support, many gay people remained deep in the closet leading diminished and isolated lives. Not surprisingly many decided to emigrate, to escape.

In these circumstances we set up the Cork Gay Collective in 1980 and, after much debate, adopted our radical and ambitious Manifesto for gay liberation.

We went on to be the driving force for the First National Gay Conference held in Connolly Hall Cork 1981 and the motions adopted were to set the political agenda for the next decade and more.

We were involved in the first public lesbian and gay Pride event in the city when we leafleted in Prince's Street in 1981.

We began our engagement with the trade union movement by lobbying the Annual Delegate Conference of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in the City Hall. We were busy in 1981 and it's amazing to realise it was 40 years ago.

CORK GAY COLLECTIVE MANIFESTO

The... of... are... intrusion on personal freedom. They must... we emphasise our solidarity with the women's movement, recognising that our shared abuse of sexuality as a tool of exploitation which necessitated strict gender stereotyping and the denial of sexual fulfilment.

Further, we are internationalists: the oppression of gays is not solely an Irish problem nor a feature of one particular economic or political system. We pledge solidarity with our sisters and brothers everywhere who suffer oppression because of their sexual orientation and we make this solidarity part of our practical work. We are products of society's conditioning and are aware of the danger of oppressive relations among ourselves. We are attempting to overcome this danger by developing more open and responsive structures for communications.

Cork Gay Collective agreed statement 2001-2002

The following year I proposed a Motion at the AGM of the Cork Branch of the LGPSU (now Forsa) on equal rights for lesbians and gay men; this was later adopted overwhelmingly by the National Conference of the Union and got very good media coverage.

I am always amused by one delegate who opposed the Motion saying: "If Cork have problems with homosexuality then let them go away and solve them quietly without publicity".

In 1982 we travelled to Belfast to lobby the ICTU conference and a Motion supporting equal rights for lesbian and gay workers was passed, a historic victory.

The trade union movement was a huge support for the community at a time when we had few allies and many powerful opponents. The Unions played a key role in all subsequent milestones such as gay law reform, equality legislation, Civil Partnership and success in the Marriage Equality Referendum.

The Cork Gay Collective took the lead in the trade union work including setting up the trade union advocacy group 'Lesbian and Gay Rights at Work'. One of its achievements was the radical ICTU policy 'Lesbian and Gay Rights in the Workplace' published in 1987.

The Cork Gay Collective was also heavily involved in setting up the Quay Coop in 1982 which became a huge and nurturing resource for lesbians and gay men.

The Collective more or less disbanded to put all its energy into the Anti Amendment Campaign to stop the anti-abortion clause being put into the Constitution. Cork had a vigorous campaign and one of the highest No votes in the country, but the Amendment was passed in 1983 and caused huge damage until it was removed in the Constitutional Referendum of 2018.

We were involved in a range of other solidarity campaigns including supporting the Miners Strike in Britain, against the Criminal Justice Bill, and against the Apartheid regime in South Africa.

We seemed to travel to Dublin a lot for marches and meetings, most notably the 1983 Fairview March, a protest against the freeing of the killers of a gay man by the Courts, a pivotal moment in the development of the Irish lesbian and gay community, our 'Stonewall'.

We took part in the first Dublin Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade later in 1983 which was a wonderful, confident, joyous celebration as we took over the streets of the capital claiming our rights.

The Collective played a key role in setting up Gay Health Action in 1985 which did trojan work on HIV/AIDS issues. Many of us were later to be key activists in GLEN founded in 1988.

But it wasn't all marches and meetings, there were great parties, dinners, and pints in places like Loafers, or going off to West Cork for a few days. We had a lot of fun too.

It was a great time to be young and to be surrounded by so many dynamic and supportive lesbian and gay activists and friends.

