



The Northeast Tennessee ORGANIZER

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From Stonewall to Solidarity: Why Queer Liberation Is Class Struggle

The current assault on queer people represents the most coordinated attack on civil rights in decades, with 844 anti-trans bills¹ passed or under consideration across 49 states in 2025 alone. But this moment of crisis also reveals why approaches focused solely on individual rights have failed—and why working-class solidarity through socialist organizing offers the only path to genuine queer liberation.

Trump's administration has unleashed an unprecedented federal campaign against transgender people, declaring the government recognizes only "two sexes determined at birth" while banning trans military service and threatening federal funding for programs supporting gender affirmation. Combined with 28 states prohibiting trans youth from sports² and 25 states banning gender-affirming healthcare, we're witnessing a systematic attempt to erase transgender people from public life.

These attacks aren't random culture war battles—they're part of a deliberate authoritarian strategy using queer people as scapegoats to normalize government overreach, build conservative coalitions, and distract from economic inequality. But transgender Marxist analysis reveals something deeper: capitalism structurally benefits from transgender oppression. By systematically excluding transgender people from legitimate employment, capitalism creates both a disciplinary threat for cisgender workers ("conform or face economic exile") and a criminalized workforce forced into shadow economies that capital exploits while officially condemning.

Yet corporate Pride flags and liberal equality organizations have proven inadequate to this moment. While companies display rainbow logos in June, they've donated millions to anti-queer politicians. This "rainbow capitalism" commodifies our symbols while leaving the economic structures that perpetuate inequality intact.

The Radical Roots We've Forgotten

The Stonewall Uprising of 1969 wasn't a corporate-sponsored celebration—it was a working-class rebellion against police violence led by marginalized queer people who understood their oppression as interconnected with broader systems of exploitation. The Gay Liberation Front explicitly connected queer struggles to "all the oppressed: the Vietnamese struggle, the third world, the blacks, the workers."

This class analysis remains urgently relevant, but transgender experience reveals capitalism's contradictions with particular clarity. Transgender people's authentic embodiment exposes how capitalism's supposedly "natural" gender categories actually serve economic functions—justifying who gets relegated to unwaged reproductive labor, who gets excluded from certain occupations, and who gets disciplined for gender non-conformity. These rigid categories aren't biological inevitabilities but historical products of capitalism's development.

Queer people face 22% poverty rates³ compared to 16% for straight cisgender people, with transgender people experiencing 29.4% poverty. We earn 89 cents for every dollar earned by het/cis workers, face 29% housing discrimination rates, and are 120% more likely to experience homelessness as youth⁴. Corporate rainbow capitalism has failed because it treats queer identities as marketing opportunities while maintaining and, in a way, masking the economic structures that create these disparities.

Real liberation requires universal healthcare to address our healthcare barriers, strong labor protections to combat workplace discrimination, affordable housing programs to address our homeownership gaps, and direct economic support for marginalized communities. But these demands point beyond reform toward

revolutionary transformation—because authentic transgender liberation ultimately requires dismantling the economic system that depends on rigid gender categories to organize exploitation.

Socialist Organizing Offers a Different Path

DSA's approach to queer liberation differs fundamentally from liberal equality organizations. Through the Trans Rights & Bodily Autonomy Campaign (trba.dsausa.org), now the largest hub for grassroots trans rights organizing in the U.S., DSA has driven local chapters across the country to win sanctuary city legislation, develop mutual aid groups, and start Bodily Autonomy Working Groups organizing campaigns for both trans and abortion rights.

NYC-DSA's Queer Caucus organized the 2019 Queer Liberation March, mobilizing 45,000 participants around the slogan "Pride, not profits." Metro DC DSA successfully passed Alexandria's sanctuary resolution protecting queer people fleeing anti-queer legislation⁵, followed by the same in Arlington just two months later⁶. These victories demonstrate how socialist organizing connects immediate community defense to broader working-class struggle.

This approach resonates with labor organizing successes where queer workers have connected their struggles to broader workplace issues. When Starbucks workers called their unionization campaign "one of the queerest union campaigns,"⁷ they highlighted how queer workers face both identity-based discrimination and economic exploitation. Historic figures like Harvey Milk understood this unity, coordinating with Teamsters in 1973 to challenge corporations that violated both labor rights and queer dignity⁸.

For Northeast Tennessee DSA, this means connecting Pride to workplace organizing, tenant rights, healthcare justice,

and mutual aid networks. It means understanding that the same politicians attacking trans healthcare also oppose minimum wage increases, that the same corporations displaying Pride logos also union-bust, and that the same economic system creating wealth inequality also marginalizes queer people.

Community Defense Beyond Electoral Politics

While corporate Pride relies on respectability politics, DSA chapters have built extensive mutual aid networks providing material support outside traditional charity models. Through TRBA's organizing, chapters have developed horizontal, community-controlled alternatives to liberal nonprofits that often prioritize fundraising over direct service.

DSA's Bodily Autonomy Working Groups operate as rapid response networks, coordinating community defense when far-right groups target queer events while building sustained organizing capacity for both trans rights and reproductive justice. These groups understand that the same authoritarian forces attacking transgender people also seek to control all bodily autonomy, making coalition building both strategic and necessary.

This organizing model emphasizes collective action over individual charity, building working-class power rather than depending on wealthy donors or corporate sponsors. When communities face immediate threats, DSA chapters mobilize not just solidarity protests but concrete material support—emergency funds, legal observers, and safety coordination that demonstrates how socialist organizing meets both immediate needs and long-term movement building.

Fighting Back in the South

In Tennessee, where anti-queer legislation has been particularly aggressive, socialist organizing connects queer liberation to broader struggles for economic justice. Northeast Tennessee faces unique challenges as a rural region where queer people often lack the urban resources and anonymity that provide some protection in larger cities.

This isolation makes building working-class solidarity even more essential. Rural queer people frequently depend on the same underfunded healthcare systems, face the same housing shortages, and work the same low-wage jobs as their neighbors. Building coalitions around shared economic interests creates opportunities for solidarity that transcend cultural differences.

Beyond Rainbow Capitalism

This moment reveals the bankruptcy of relying on corporate allies or electoral politics alone. Anti-queer discrimination costs up to 1% of GDP annually⁹, yet businesses continue supporting discriminatory politicians because profit ultimately trumps performative allyship. Legal rights without economic power remain hollow formalities—employment, housing, and healthcare discrimination persist despite formal protections.

Transgender oppression serves the same divide-and-conquer strategy used against all workers, creating scapegoats to distract from economic inequality while normalizing authoritarian control. Fighting these attacks requires the same working-class solidarity that built the labor movement, civil rights movement, and original gay liberation movement. As the old labor slogan reminds us: “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

Building the Movement We Need

As we face unprecedented attacks on queer rights, rainbow capitalism and liberal equality organizations have proven insufficient. The path forward requires returning to Pride's radical roots as a working-class rebellion against systemic oppression.

Northeast Tennessee DSA connects queer liberation to labor organizing, healthcare justice, housing rights, and anti-fascist community defense. We understand that true liberation requires not just legal equality but economic democracy—worker control over workplaces, community control over housing, and social control over healthcare. Transgender liberation ultimately points toward post-capitalist possibilities where rigid gender categories no longer serve economic exploitation, where people can express authentic embodiment without economic penalty, and where care and production are organized around human flourishing rather than profit extraction.

The corporate Pride float passes by, but revolution requires staying in the streets, organizing workplaces, defending communities, and building the socialist movement that can deliver genuine liberation for all working people. Here in Northeast Tennessee, we're building that movement through understanding queer liberation and working-class liberation as inseparable struggles against the same oppressive system.

Join us—because individual rights won't save us, but collective power can transform the world.

The *Northeast Tennessee Organizer* is a publication of the Northeast Tennessee Democratic Socialists of America. All labor is donated.

1. 2025 Anti-Trans Bills Tracker, as of 25 June 2025: translegislation.com
2. www.transathlete.com/take-action. In 2021, Governor Bill Lee signed into law Tennessee's own bill against trans athletes. View the text here: wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/Billinfo/default.aspx?BillNumber=SB0228&ga=112
3. williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-poverty-us/
4. www.chapinhall.org/research/lgbtq-young-adults-experience-homelessness-at-more-than-twice-the-rate-of-peers/
5. www.washingtonblade.com/2024/09/27/alexandria-city-council-trans-sanctuary-resolution-passes/
6. mcdcsa.org/chapterupdate/25-05-16/
7. jacobin.com/2024/06/lgbtq-rights-unions-labor
8. jacobin.com/2023/06/harvey-milk-lgbtq-history-te-mecula-california-school-board-curriculum
9. M. V. Lee Badgett's *The Economic Case for LGBT Equality: Why Fair and Equal Treatment Benefits Us All* (Beacon Press, 2020).

JOIN DSA TODAY

The ruling class fears nothing more than workers and regular people getting organized. Turn your anger into solidarity, action, and a socialist future worth fighting for.

Visit dsausa.org to learn more & join today, then get involved with our Northeast Tennessee chapter!

Learn more about our chapter at northeasttnds.org/about/.

GET INVOLVED

Northeast TN DSA

Meets the last Wednesday of every month at 6:30 pm at the Appalachian Liberation Library, 419 W Market St, Johnson City, or email northeasttnds@gmail.com for Zoom registration.

YDSA at ETSU

For meeting info, email ydsaetsu@gmail.com.

Meet Comrades, Find Great Reads: Visit the Appalachian Liberation Library

Open Fridays from 7-9 pm at 419 W Market St, Johnson City.