

Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union

By Chris Riddiough and Margaret Schmid

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ABOUT THE MODULE

SUGGESTED USE

Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU) is a module for use with a course on lesbian/gay studies. It focuses on the historical period of the 'Second Wave' of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. It highlights the way in which the CWLU, the first and largest socialist feminist organization in the United States, worked with and embraced lesbianism. It places the organization's work in the context of the nascent gay and lesbian liberation movement. It also links CWLU's political perspective to its roots in the transformative anti-war and civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s.

The module presents a case study that explores the ways in which intersectionality - a term not yet developed at the time - played out in the CWLU, an organization that was based on the principles of opposition to sexism, racism, and capitalism in all their forms. Designed to complement general survey courses in women's and LGBT history, the module can also be used to enrich courses in sexuality studies, cultural studies, and a variety of social science programs.

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1 CLASS 1: THEORY AND EDUCATION ON LESBIANISM AND SOCIALIST FEMINISM

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The start of gay and lesbian liberation is generally accepted as 1969 when, in June, patrons at the Stonewall bar in New York fought back against a police raid on the gay bar. The protagonists sparked demonstrations in New York and instigated the modern LGBT movement. That same year, as a part of the nascent women's liberation movement, the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU) was formed. Both movements grew out of activism of 1960s radicals who fought for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam, movements in which women activists had come to see how sexism too often relegated them to secondary, "help-mate" roles. Because many members of CWLU had worked in these movements, the organization's political principles reflected the idea that the struggle for women's liberation was essential, but also necessarily intertwined with other struggles. As gay and lesbian activists built a movement following Stonewall, CWLU activists began to recognize that intersection as well.

The role of lesbians in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s was critical, but also often a source of controversy. Early on in its existence CWLU began intensive examinations of the relationship of the oppression of lesbians to sexism, the more general oppression of all women. Discussions took place in meetings, the membership newsletter, the outreach newspaper WOMANKIND, courses in the CWLU Liberation School and a variety of other forums. In 1970 shortly after CWLU was formed, the organization held a joint city-wide meeting cosponsored by the gay women's caucus of the Chicago Gay Alliance. Following this CWLU activists proposed a course in the Liberation School for Women (another CWLU project) called, "Women's Liberation is a Lesbian Plot." The course brought together lesbians, straight women and women who were questioning their sexual orientation. Out of this a work group was formed, first called the gay group, later the lesbian group, and finally Blazing Star. Initially focused on education and analysis within CWLU, Blazing Star wrote the CWLU position paper "Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism" which was adopted by CWLU. As the group developed it focused on organizing for gay and lesbian rights and on outreach within the lesbian and gay community.

1.2 READINGS

Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism, position paper of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union

CWLU Political Principles

Women's Liberation is a Lesbian Plot, Liberation School class syllabus

Excerpts from 'Theory and Strategy in CWLU,' Christine Riddiough and Margaret Schmid, <http://www.cwlu.org>, 2015, p1 and pp4-10

'Our Band of Sisters,' Christine Riddiough, <http://www.cwlu.org>, 2015, provides an overview of CWLU

Articles from Blazing Star:

- *'The Lavender and Red Book: A Review, Blazing Star,' V2N1, 1976*
- *'What is Socialism?,' Blazing Star, V5N2, 1979*

Articles from CWLU News, and WOMANKIND

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2 CLASS 2: ORGANIZING ON LESBIAN AND GAY RIGHTS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

After the adoption of the position papers on Socialist Feminism and Lesbianism by CWLU, Blazing Star and CWLU as a whole became involved in efforts to support gay and lesbian rights initiatives in the Chicago area. As documented in the membership CWLU Newsletter, work inside the CWLU involved a on-going classes in the CWLU Liberation school, articles in its outreach newspaper WOMANKIND (until it ceased publication in fall 1973), events such as the Lesbian Cultural Festival in September 1973 or the "Lesbianism and Racism" workshop in summer 1975, occasional special fund-raising for lesbian-specific program, as well as on-going additional outreach by Blazing Star. The group started publishing a newspaper called Blazing Star.

Additional attention was drawn to CWLU and Blazing Star work on lesbian rights issues when, in 1975, two women attempted to get a marriage license in Cook County (Chicago). The National Organization for Women held a press conference as did the Illinois Gay Rights Task Force (IGRTF). Both groups denounced this tactic because they felt it undercut the efforts to pass the ERA and local gay rights legislation. They, in turn, were themselves denounced by lesbian feminists. The episode was especially problematic in that one of the two women was already married to a man, so they could not have gotten a marriage license under any circumstances. In order to try to avoid such internecine disputes the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Metropolitan Chicago was established, led in part by CWLU/Blazing Star members. The coalition brought together representatives of many diverse community groups from feminists, to gay religious groups, to social clubs to bar owners.

Much of the focus of the new Coalition's work was on opposition to Anita Bryant, who in the late 1970s mounted several campaigns to repeal existing gay rights legislation. Demonstrations were held in opposition to initiatives designed to repeal gay rights laws in places, like Dade County, Florida, where they had been enacted. Boycotts of Florida orange juice – for which Bryant was the spokesperson – were organized in Chicago and around the country. In addition, Blazing Star members were active in the

Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force (formerly IGRTF) and in its efforts to pass gay rights legislation. CWLU members circulated petitions in support of the legislation at grocery stores in neighborhoods around the city.

Blazing Star, like other groups in CWLU, was involved in public education through the CWLU Speakers' Bureau. Blazing Star members gave talks at high schools, community groups, and at the Chicago police academy, work that it continued as a part of the New American Movement after CWLU disbanded.

2.2 READINGS

List of events in CWLU's membership newsletter related to lesbian liberation, 1970-1977

Selected articles from WOMANKIND (1970-1973)

'Gay Marriage Uproar not All Bad News,' Gay Crusader, November, 1975

'Coalition Formed,' Blazing Star, Vol2, N1, 1976

After Dade County: Turning Defeat into Victory, a Blazing Star pamphlet, ca 1978.

'Big Year for Gay Politics,' Blazing Star, Vol4, N1, 1978

GL Coalition: Can We all Get Along, Excerpt from Out and Proud in Chicago, page 111, 2008, Surrey Books

The Fruits of Hate Speech: Anita is Protested, Excerpt from Out and Proud in Chicago, page 120, 2008, Surrey Books

Examples of petitions and fliers. 1974-1980

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3 CLASS 3: OUTREACH TO THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

A central aspect of the work of Blazing Star was outreach to the lesbian community. This work was based in part on the ideas presented in 'Leading the CWLU into Outreach' written by Jenny Rohrer and Judy Sayad as well as CWLU work on Park District equity for women. Rohrer and Sayad's paper discussed the importance of outreach to women beyond those in CWLU:

Outreach means getting to know a lot of people; it means bringing women's consciousness and politics into the everyday lives of people.

It is the whole process of meeting women, talking to them about their lives, about women's liberation, and offering them programs - to use and to work on. It is how we initially mobilize and educate masses of women to begin to take control of their lives, to see their personal problems as political, and to use the tools of service, education, and direct action to make their lives better.

Outreach work aimed to get women outside the core group of CWLU involved in the organization and in the movement as a whole. It recognized that simply involving the same 100 or 1,000 women in activities would not result in the liberation of women. Blazing Star took this to heart and developed an ambitious program to reach out beyond the 'political' lesbian community to the 'ordinary' lesbian. The group wanted to encourage women in the broader lesbian community to become active in the women's movement and specifically in CWLU.

While Blazing Star members participated in activities of Chicago Lesbian Liberation and the Lesbian Feminist Center, the primary focus was on lesbians who were involved in the bar scene. Part of the outreach effort was publishing the CWLU's Blazing Star and distributing it in the bars. The paper included 'lesbian on the street' interviews and profiles of people in the community. It covered sports teams and other community activities. Blazing Star recruited members of the lesbian community to

write for the paper. The paper also included articles about feminism and socialism, reflecting the on-going connection with the CWLU. Outreach went beyond simply publishing and distributing the newspaper in the bars. Blazing Star members also became part of the community, participating in softball teams, going to social events, getting to know the women we wanted to get involved. In conjunction with CWLU Liberation School we sponsored a class on 'The Lesbian Experience' and recruited women who had not previously been involved in the women's movement.

3.2 READINGS

Selections from the newspaper Blazing Star:

- *'Looking at the News – Meeting with Augie's,' Blazing Star, Vol1, N4, 1975*
- *'Spotlight on the Bars: Augies,' Blazing Star, Vol4, N1, 1978*
- *'Spotlight on the Bars: Music Box' and 'Sports,' Blazing Star, Vol4, N3, 1978*
- *'Profile: Augie,' Blazing Star, Vol4, N4, 1978*

'Leading the CWLU into Outreach,' Rohrer, Jenny and Sayad, Judy. ca 1975