

A socialist response?

By Clive Bradley

The spectre haunting Britain today -- and haunting the dreams especially of the youth -- is AIDS. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome has sent panic throughout society. Caused by a -- so far -- indestructible virus, HIV, and transmitted through sexual intercourse (or from blood), AIDS is indeed a terrifying threat to us all.

Is it possible to have a distinctly socialist response to AIDS? After all, as the government ads say, the disease is not prejudiced -- it can kill anybody, of whatever class, colour, sex or sexuality. Stopping AIDS is a *medical*, not a political question. How can you bring politics into it?

Unfortunately it is not only possible but necessary to approach the AIDS issue politically. Unfortunately -- because in a sane society it *would* be a purely medical question, and the question would be: how can we cure it, or find a vaccine? But AIDS has become an issue in a distinctly political context.

It was launched on an unsuspecting public as 'the gay plague'. And central to media coverage has been an explicit attack on lesbian and gay rights. One Tory councillor even declared that "90% of homosexuals should be gassed" to put a stop to the spread of AIDS.

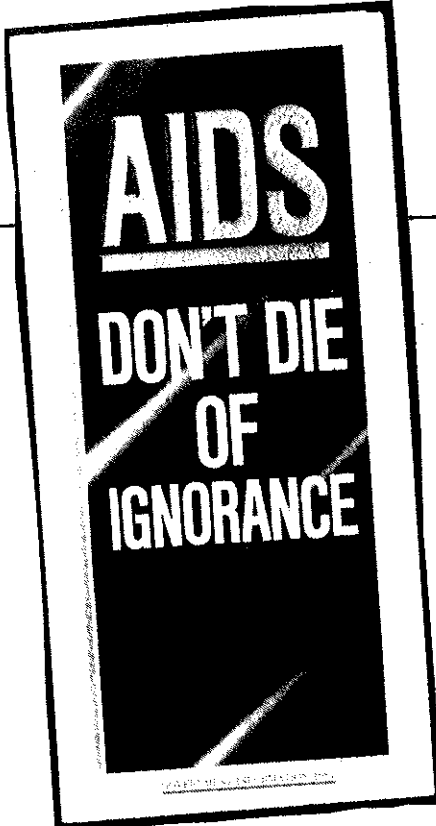
Much of the government's propaganda, stressing 'single partners' and low-level moralising has implied forthcoming problems not only for gay men in particular, but for the whole 'sixties-generation view of sexual liberation. Judging by recent murmurings in the Commons, worse is to come -- more explicitly anti-gay propaganda.

The BBC's youth-oriented extravaganza even proclaimed that uncontrollable sexual appetites are 'natural' for boys -- so girls had better take charge of the condom supply.

Moreover, government spending on AIDS research has remained low. Total spending, including on publicity, is a lot less than on advertising the sale of British Gas.

For socialists, therefore, there are a number of priorities. First we have to dispel myths about AIDS, while recognising that we cannot substitute for informed medical information.

Second, we have to counter the reactionary backlash accompanying the AIDS hysteria, and in particular defend gay rights. In this context we need to argue for more *explicit* information on 'safe' or 'safer' sex: homosexual visibility is one guarantee against further attacks, and explicit discussion of, for example, anal sex,



helps keep homosexuals visible.

Third, we need to formulate demands for campaigning on the issue. Opposition to health cuts and more spending on AIDS research is important; free and easily available condoms should be fought for -- and, perhaps, non-water soluble lubricants and spermicides (some of which can help in resisting HIV) should be available on the NHS.

How has the left measured up to this? The biggest would-be Trotskyist group, Militant, have kept a fairly low profile. They have carried a few factual articles and readers' letters. Militant-inspired resolutions to LPYS conference predictably propose that the drugs industry be nationalised in the fight against AIDS. They also propose: "nationalise...condom manufacturing companies under workers' control and management". In other words, AIDS is just one more problem of capitalist society and is a useful starting point on which to motivate Militant's perennial, all-purpose answer to everything: "nationalise".

Militant have said very little on the question of gay rights -- an issue that for many years they refused to discuss at LPYS conference. Though Militant now has a number of openly gay supporters, changes in 'the line' are not very visible in the pages of their paper. And it is an issue that really must not be -- and *cannot* be -- ducked in resisting the AIDS backlash. The call to nationalise the drugs industry won't help here, and at best it is an irrelevance; at worst it will be a cop-out for Militant which traditionally is more backward on this question than very large sectors of British society, including very many Tories, have been.

As one would expect, the Socialist Workers' Party has been more up-front in defending gay rights. Their pamphlet 'AIDS -- the socialist view' covers a wide range of issues, from gay rights to the argument that AIDS is a 'natural disaster.

But their answers are weak, and typify

the SWP's approach. Socialists "have to fight to defend any section of society used as scapegoats", and "explain the hypocrisy of the government's AIDS campaign". "We must also spell out how the government's cuts in health and social services can be fought."

But predictably, they go on: "the Labour Party can't be relied upon to do any of these things". So "socialists must challenge the very basis of capitalist society." "Ultimately, the answer to this...does not lie either with great scientific breakthroughs or with attempts at reform...It lies in the struggle of the working class."

A scientific breakthrough would be a help though, wouldn't it? And "class struggle" in the abstract is no answer to the questions posed *now*. The SWP provide no link between the here and now and 'socialism' in the future. They propose no specific demands to be fought for now. Their response is cut from the path of "Socialism the only road" argument which militant also use. Is there an urgent problem, a felt condition of, for example, racist oppression? Well, comrade, nothing can be done about it under capitalism. Socialism is the answer. If you want to fight your oppression or solve the problem fight for socialism. The problem is that it isn't necessarily true and this type of argument won't win many thinking people to the battle for socialism.

But by far the zaniest response has come from the grotesquely misnamed Revolutionary Communist Party, whose pamphlet explaining their 'Red Front' election stunt proclaims sagely: "The principal threat to homosexuals in Britain today is not from AIDS, but from the safe sex campaign".

What they presumably mean is that there are reactionary overtones to much discussion of 'safe sex', and that the government's campaign forms part of a reactionary 'moral majority' climate.

But their claim is mad. They say "By emphasising the virtues of heterosexuality and monogamy, it (the safe sex campaign) promotes the family values that help to atomise the working class and sap the will to collective action." But this simply ignores all the contradictions even in the government's campaign -- never mind contradictions in the family. And in any case, there is no *direct* relationship between 'promoting family values' and 'sapping the will to take action'.

Moreover, the government's campaign is *not* a safe sex campaign anyway. The sort of 'safe sex' promoted in the gay community by the Terence Higgins Trust, for example, carries with it the idea that you can have sex with more than one partner, depending on what you do. Surely we need to know about the options.

And an explicit campaign can help fight 'moral reaction'. What seems to motivate the RCP, in this as in everything else, is the desire to be as offensive and outrageous as possible, to build support. It is the opposite of working class politics