Solidarity comrade – That's what I would call real intersectionality

Ray Goodspeed, Gründungsmitglied der englischen Gruppe »Lesbians and Gay Men Support the Miners«, im Gespräch mit Inga Nüthen

Im Sommer 2014 lief auch in deutschen Kinos der Film »PRIDE« und wurde vielfach begeistert als beeindrucktes Zeugnis von Solidarität aufgenommen (vgl. feministische studien 2/2015). PRIDE erzählt die Geschichte der Londoner Gruppe »Lesbians and Gay Men Support the Miners« (LGSM), die während des einjährigen landesweiten Miner's Strikes (1984 / 85) eine streikende Waliser Bergbau-Gemeinde durch das Sammeln von Spenden unterstützte. Das Besondere des Engagements von LGSM war, dass sie sich als Lesbians and Gays solidarisch mit einem Milieu und einer Bewegung zeigten, von der sie selbst nicht umstandslos Unterstützung erwarten konnten. Die Streikenden verloren den Arbeitskampf gegen die Regierung von Margaret Thatcher, die erfahrene Solidarität blieb dennoch nicht unbeantwortet. Als Reaktion auf die Unterstützung durch LGSM während des Streiks marschierte die nationale Bergbaugewerkschaft (NUM) 1985 gemeinsam mit LGSM an der Spitze der Londoner Pride und votierte im gleichen Jahr innerhalb der Gewerkschaft und der Labour Party erfolgreich für die Gleichstellung von Schwulen und Lesben.*

*Die Geschichte von LGSM kann als bewegungspolitisches Beispiel für Solidarität zwischen zwei politischen Gruppierungen betrachtet werden, die das Verbindende in ihren Kämpfen entdecken. Die Geschichte dieser Entdeckung kann daher Diskussionsanstöße für queer_feministische Politiken liefern. Einerseits, weil die Frage nach der Möglichkeit von Solidarität zwischen unterschiedlich im gesellschaftlichen Machtgefüge positionierten Gruppen queer_feministische Auseinandersetzungen stets begleitet(e). Andererseits, weil aktuell in Reaktion auf ein rechtes Hegemonieprojekt wieder (innerlinke) Debatten über eine vermeintliche Konkurrrenz zwischen Anerkennungs- und Umverteilungspolitiken bzw. zwischen Interessen von Arbeiter*innen und queer_feministischen Gleichstellungsforderungen laut werden.*

* Ich verwende die englischen Begriffe »Lesbians and Gay Men«, wie sie die Gruppe in ihrem Namen verwendete. Bei LGSM waren durchaus Personen beteiligt, die aus heutiger Sicht als non-binary-, inter-, genderqueer- und trans*-Personen begrifflich gefasst würden – im Kontext von LGSM tauchen sie nicht mit diesen (Selbst)Bezeichnungen auf.

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Ray Goodspeed war Gründungsmitglied von LGSM. Heute arbeitet er als Lehrer an einer Londoner Sprachschule und ist immer noch gewerkschafts- und parteipolitisch aktiv. Ich habe Ray im November 2016 zu seiner Perspektive auf LGSM befragt. In unserem Gespräch ging es ebenso um die Geschichte von LGSM, wie um Fragen aktueller Klassen- und Bündnispolitiken.

Inga Nüthen: How did the group »Lesbians and Gay Men Support the Miners« start? Who brought up the idea and how did you get in contact with Dulais?

Ray Goodspeed: In the film we pick the valley out of an atlas – that never happened. All the events in the film about the unions not phoning back – that never happened. Before LGSM started, some money was sent to the miners from Lesbian and Gay Young Socialists (mainly Trotskyists working in the youth section of the Labour Party). We were collecting for the miners anyway, in our ordinary left political life. We had a friend of a friend in South Wales, that's why we collected for them.

On the Gay Pride itself Marc Ashton – who was a member of the Communist Party – and his friends said: let's collect money on the Pride march. We were taking buckets and said: Well, let's see what we can collect. The idea was just to collect money on this demonstration and then after, when we got the money, we said: well hang on, we could do more than this.

At the first formal LGSM meeting there were eleven men, nearly all Trotskyists or Communists or their friends. We contacted Dulais, they said: yes fine, collect for us, that's fine. But, inviting us down was a huge thing for them. It was a huge thing for us.

And the scene where we met Dai Donovan [a local representative of the union] in the cafe was completely real. We invited him to a disco, put him on stage and he made a speech in the middle of the disco. The reaction was very good and we collected a lot of money. Then we did it again and again, and then the whole thing just grew. We never planned it to be a huge campaign.

IN: Then there were even some other groups like LGSM in the UK?

RG: Yeah, I mean we didn't have a sort of concept of it. It wasn't really organized. There was no network. We knew that groups in other cities had seen what we did and had read about it in the press, and then they started out on their own. Later they wrote to us and told us. But there was no facebook, there was no email. So we had to write letters to each other. We never met together, we just heard of people doing the same thing.

IN: What was the experience of coalition work before LGSM – in the times of Gay Liberation Front?

RG: One couple, Jonathan and Nigel, were original 1970s Gay Liberation Front (GLF) people. When there was a miners' strike in the early 70s, they tried to make links. When we started they came along and wanted to get involved again. But they were more ›gay first and labour movement second‹. They were kind of identity and gayness first, because they had this background in GLF. Many of us were probably gay first rather than labour movement first. I think we led them through the strike to identify more with the labour movement.

So we had a funny coming together of communists, Trotskyists – which is enough – plus lesbian feminists and identity gay liberationists. In addition, there were feminine guys, there were leather queens, there were all kinds of guys from the commercial scene and people who were not from the scene, perfectly ordinary guys. And dykes came along as well. All in one meeting, you can imagine what the meetings were like!

IN: How did you handle these differences? Did the group just work because of the one unifying aim?

RG: We couldn't spent too much time discussing all the philosophical things. We were there for the miners. If you supported the miners, you were welcome, if you didn't support the miners you weren't welcome. You weren't welcome if you didn't actually collect money. You had to do something. We didn't want people to come along and debate. If you come to support the miners, we don't care who you are, what you stand for – you can support the miners with us. That's it. We were a completely single issue campaign.

Our Solidarity was unconditional. We thought they could win.

IN: Solidarity was an important point of LGSM's history. How would you describe it?

RG: We just thought: we're collecting money for the miners. If they want it, they want it, if they don't, they don't. If they tell us to fuck off, we'll fuck off I guess. We didn't expect them to like us back. We just thought that it was a crucial battle for working class activity that we had to win against this government. So we just did our bit as gay people and the left to make them win. We didn't really expect them to say: »yes we love you gay people and we're gonna support you forever«. And the fact that they did was extremely moving for us. We didn't expect it.

We never said: we will support you, if you support us. We said we will support you even if you hate us. Because what you are doing is too important for you to lose. From the very beginning it was clear: we're unconditional. Absolutely. We are a lesbian and gay support group; we're absolutely unconditional supporting the miners. We are not gonna say, we will only support you if.

And lots of miners didn't support us. Some of the miners that we were in contact with did, and eventually lots of miners did. But, initially, that wasn't the case. They were macho guys. The trade union had a pin-up girl in their union paper every month. In 1984, the National Union of Mineworkers was not a hotbed of politically correct sexual politics. Remember women couldn't join the union, the union was all male. Because, in Britain it was, and still is, illegal for women to work down a mine. Women's part in the strike was as part of their community, and as wives, girlfriends, sisters, and mothers, and so on. Women were absolutely central, like in the film, but they weren't actually working in a coal mine.

IN: Some argue that the weakness of the labour movement, especially the union, helped LGSM to succeed. Was it the union's weakness that let them to accept LGSM's support? Do you think this is a convincing argument?

RG: No, I wouldn't say that is a reliable case. It turned out that the unions were weak, but we didn't know that. There is a difference between what is objectively, historically true and what you believe when you a part of it. We thought the miners could win, if we hadn't thought the miners could win, we wouldn't have been involved in it. We supported them because we thought they were strong enough to win. We weren't supporting them from some kind of »martyrdom«. We weren't giving them money because we wanted just to help them and then they lose, and we feel good for helping these poor people. If one or two unions had gone on strike at the same time: victory, easily! But they didn't and that's the tragedy. The unions were weak afterwards. I mean, after that the Tories passed even more oppressive anti-trade-union laws. It's almost illegal by United Nations standards. Unions have very few rights at all in Britain.

We were labour movement and gay first.

IN: How was your work in LGSM related to the famous slogan »the personal is political« or identity politics?

RG: For me: not. We – the initial founders – saw ourselves as socialists who were also gay. And we were collecting in the streets, we were collect-

ing at work, so it was just another place to collect for us. We saw ourselves as part of the labour movement.

We were a gay only group. So in that sense we were part of identity politics. We hoped that because of what we did the labour movement would take our case more seriously. Because at that time almost no major trade unions had a gay policy, the Labour Party didn't have a gay policy. A victimized gay person at work could not rely on his own trade union to support him. In a few industries maybe, but not most. And so your homosexuality was barely spoken about, even in trade unions and labour party meetings. You couldn't assume the labour movement supported gay people at all. So, we had a gay only group and we hoped to be part of the labour movement – unconditionally supporting the miners. But we thought maybe this would help. We also wanted to get gay people involved in labour movement – it was like bridge building in both directions.

IN: Which role did lesbian women play within LGSM?

RG: Initially the L was just a fiction. Every organization in the middle of the 80's called themselves the LG-something, but the L was just put there to be politically correct. We knew that most people who'd come would be men and they always were. Within the first two or three weeks of LGSM, women did come along, always a small minority – 9:1, 6/7:1 at most meetings. There wasn't such a commercial social scene among lesbians; there was a kind of invisibility. Women tended not to define so clearly as lesbians. Also, both in sexuality in general and in terms of the women's movement, there was the question: were you female first or were you lesbian first? Are you campaigning for all women or are you campaigning specifically for lesbian women; are you part of a gay campaign or are you part of a women's campaign?

Women came along, and some of those women were Trotskyist women, they were sent to this organisation by their party. They articulated a very clear set of revolutionary policies and they wanted to be part of this interesting movement and that's fine. Some women had developed a kind of a specific lesbian-feminist-separatist ideology and so they split off in March 85. About a month before the strike ended they founded a group called »Lesbians Against Pit Closures«. The group's name was following the name of the general women support group for the miners: »Women Against Pit Closures«.

If you've got a meeting of 50 people and 40 of them are men, there is a certain amount of maleness going on. Looking back now, I think there was a need for a women's focus, like a sub-commitee or maybe a parallel

women's organization that could at the end just meet with us and do some joint work. But they felt that they wanted to organize as women. Now the men, like most gay men of that time, thought of ourselves as gay first, second and third and so we thought they were kind of splitting. We didn't see why they had to leave. And there was some animosity and bad feelings.

IN: Did you stay in contact with »Lesbians Against Pit Closures« or were you really separated?

RG: Some women attended both. But it was only a matter of a few weeks before the strike ended anyway. So, some of the women split of completely and some of them didn't. In the film we were still very close – this didn't really happen. »Women against pit closures« didn't support Dulais anymore. They went to another pit in another part of the country. They wanted to be lesbians as part of a women's campaign, specifically. We were labour movement and gay first. And they were probably women's first and then lesbian and labour movement. And so they went.

IN: In preparation for the film: Has there been any interviews with women who had been part of LGSM?

RG: No, not really, I mean there weren't that many even then and we lost contact with them all over the years. The main women who stayed involved, Steph – who is nothing at all like the Steph character in the film – was interviewed. The separatist women weren't part of the project. They weren't in contact with us. We couldn't find them. It was a partial account. If you want to see their side of the story, you can find it in the film called »Dancing in Dulais«, in an interview with a woman called Nicola Fields. Nicola came back once the film was made and played a very strong role in the support group. When »Pride« was made – because the film was so famous – people started to emerge again and we reformed LGSM. And oddly enough, Nicola, who had split, came back to LGSM 30 years later.

The gay movement is shattered mostly on class lines.

IN: Regarding class relations: How was the structure within LGSM? Were a lot of people from the working class part of LGSM?

RG: I mean, any of these movements tend to have more intellectuals than average. It depends what you call intellectuals. I had a degree but my parents are certainly working class. I had been to university, but I did the lowest possible job in a local government office. So lots of us were working class; we identified as working class; some of us were activists in the labour movement. But of course lots of people came to us who were more

middle class gays. On the one hand the question is: Does being gay lead you to be left wing? Or is it a question of just class?

Generally, I think that middle class or rich gay people, once they get their own legal rights, support capitalism. On the other hand, I think, when you're gay – especially in the 70 / 80s – the feeling of being an outsider makes you think the world is not fair. And once you start thinking the world is not fair you tend to think: It's not just unfair to me, it's unfair to a lots of people. If I want to fight for my rights than it's just logical to fight for other people's rights as well. Now, of course you can be a Conservative cabinet minister and be gay and no one cares. But at the same time you'd probably hear people talking to a homeless gay person saying: »I don't want you to die in the street because you're gay, I want you to die in the street because you're homeless«. It basically means: you're my brother while we're talking about sex, but you're my enemy when I am trying to cut your wages, destroy your jobs, close your hospital down and double your student tuition fees. So for me, the gay movement is shattered mostly on class lines but of course some people what you might call ›join the dots‹.

IN: Was there a fight for more working class visibility within the movement?

RG: Compared to most gay organizations at that time, we were much more working class than the others were. We had street queens, boys who had been homeless, boys who would have been rent-boys before. We had boys who had nothing, who were runaways from working class homes in Glasgow, Northern Ireland or Manchester. Their way to the gay world in London was to sell themselves to the middle class men. We had queens, men who had lived in women's clothing all the time and been prostitutes.

Actually, in Britain in the 70's / 80's there was an association of male homosexuality with a kind of effeminacy, and working class men thought of upper class men as effeminate. Conversely a lot of women who come out tend to be regarded as tough and toughness tends to be regarded as a working class thing. So you have working class looking lesbians that might not be and working class gay men who look rich – this cliché of the working class dyke and the effeminate middle class gay men. They are both wrong and they are beginning to change now.

Of course, in the past you had this tradition: Upper-class gay men could travel, they could move around, they could move to London, they could disappear and establish this kind of gay subculture, which you couldn't do when you were working in a factory in some Northern town. You couldn't just leave the factory, leave your family. You didn't have that

freedom to move. If working class people did run away to London, they joined an existing middle class subculture, which had all to do with ballet and opera and interior decor, nice furniture and all that sort of gay world that we have.

There was complete ignorance – on both sides.

IN: The homophobia within the union was highlighted in the film. How did you experience the miners' reactions to LGSM?

RG: I don't for a second think that only working class people are homophobic. That's not true and it certainly wasn't true then. I don't think that the miners were as homophobic as the film says. When we turned up that first day there was no walkout, nobody walked out. We got standing ovations when we first went in. That amount of hostility has been exaggerated to make the film more exciting. That's a shame because it's bad for the reputation of the miners. But they don't mind. What they say is: ›okay, nobody walked out of the hall, but the anti-gay people weren't in the hall to start with. We kept them away, we didn't want any scene, we didn't want any trouble.‹ So anybody who had those opinions was not welcome. They protected us from the people in the community who didn't like us – which is lovely, I'm glad they did.

Then, they never voted not to take our money, ever. That was a scene that was just invented. The whole character of Maureen, the horrible women with her two sons, didn't exist. But I suppose, people like her existed. And there were discussions before we were invited down, when some people said we shouldn't be invited and some people said we should. And there was all this debate about: Oh God, who are these people, what are they like, what do they eat, what should we do with them. That kind of complete ignorance of what we were like – on both sides! I'd never been to a coal-mining village. They spoke a different language to us. That was another level of difference. About two third of the miners we worked with were first language Welsh-speaking. And you know, it is not closely related to English, it's almost completely different!

I see no evidence for the collocation »white racist working class«.

IN: Recently, one can observe a debate on working class people voting for right wing parties like UKIP and Front National or AfD. There is a tendency to see the working class as opposed to LGBTI-rights. What do you think about that?

RG: Nonsense. I really don't believe that. A lot of parties want diversity, so they have these various kind of candidates. But no one ever thought to

make sure you have working class people. So you had lots of middle class men replaced by lots of middle class women. And you have a middle class white man replaced by a middle class black man. What you haven't got are people of the original support base of socialist parties. So working class people have been shut out. In the northern cities that voted for Brexit, there was an amount of racism, and so on. But, okay: if you have trouble in the working class community because you're gay, someone might attack you or you might be shouted at in the street. If you have a middle class community and you're gay: they are subtler. They don't tell you're a queer, they just say it behind your back and you still don't get the job.

What I love best is the accusation that working class people are racist, that's the best one. The vast majority of mixed marriages, black-white marriages, are working class families. Working class families in Britain are very increasingly multicolored anyway. So, this idea that the working class is racist, it goes along with the idea that working class is poor because they are stupid. And you get this idea of white trash, it's almost like a collocation now: the white racist working class. Excuse me, that's not true. This is my family you're talking about. I see no evidence for this. Of course, if you went to the miners in 1984, they were tough masculine communities and you'd expect to get some problem. But, I wouldn't have gone to a conservative association then either. The golf club in Britain for example, it's like a certain kind of middle class businessmen's club and lot of them were men only golf clubs. These are the clubs that kept women out, these are the clubs that kept Jewish people out, and these were the places that wouldn't allow gay people. Look at the »Daily Mail«, the paper which is the paper of this kind of middle class people in Britain: Racism every page, racism, racism. So, I don't think, that working class communities are more homophobic, racist or sexist than anybody else. On all these programs on TV, you have sensational programs about poor working class communities or battered wives but you don't see programs about the crime that goes on inside rich people houses. It drives me crazy. Intellectuals are just clever at hiding it. Owen Jones talks about the demonization: he says, the bourgeoisie has destroyed working class jobs, and now they have either no job at all or they have to work in low-paying supermarket jobs, minimum wage jobs. But that's not enough – now the middle class has started making fun of working class people: look how stupid they are, look how poor they are, look how ignorant they are.

I think the gay working class movement is the way to link it.

IN: So, it would be a good time for solidarity and coalition work … Do you think LGSM was a unique moment? What is different today?

RG: It is unique. Now we could have a long discussion on liberation or equality. I don't think we have got liberation, but we've certainly got equality, now. We've got complete legal equality. It is very hard for any boss in Britain to discriminate against a gay employee – directly, openly. We can get married; we can join the army. There are about three gay people in the government. Maybe in some small towns there is still some trouble. People in the big cities can help people in some small town who still have trouble.

I think what we need to do now, is to make sure gay people join the movement. I think the gay working class movement is the way to link it. I think the value of PRIDE is that it shows that you can just do it.

IN: Do you think that this progress we see now (in the EU) is more associated with cultural politics? So that all the labour related issues, the class issues, economic issues have been left behind?

RG: Yes, because neoliberalism happened. And all of the leaders of the labour movement were convinced that there was no alternative to it. This idea of neoliberalism, that everything should be run by private industry, that the market is good for you. Everything has to make profit and if it doesn't make profit it's not good. Those ideas were accepted by the socialist party in France, the socialist party in Greece – all these normal labour movement parties, they accepted completely that there is no alternative to austerity and neoliberalism. When the crash happened all they could do was to crush working class people's living standards. They reduced money, reduced benefits, reduced spending, made people's lives miserable. When they accepted that there was no economic alternative, they still saw themselves as progressive, radical parties. So what could they be radical about?

Feminism and LGBT rights and anti-racism are cheap. Giving somebody equal legal rights costs nothing. They didn't have the money for issues of class, because to solve class questions costs money. Gay people can get married; it's really cheap. What they can't do is give every gay person a house, or a job. If gay people are good, the Tory party loves them. I'm sure even Angela Merkel loves gay people provided they are rich. If a gay person says to the government: I want a house, I want a job, I want free education etc., the answer is: Sorry you can't have that. So, I am only a good person all the while I am having sex, if I stop having sex and get out of bed I become a working class person and the enemy.

Gay people are working class people; we are the same people. Black people are gay and working class. Black women are gay and black and working class – all together, all at the same time, all day, 24h a day. Okay now I have rights. I can sleep with a man without losing my job but I might not have a job … So, who is liberated? It has to be everyone. If you fight for yourself, you have to fight for everyone and the film says that three or four times. It makes it really clear – maybe too clear! It's a bit too heavy. If you miss it the first time, it repeats it three or four times: Solidarity comrade! Two hands shaking!!

We have to build a wider movement.

IN: The alliance between lesbian and gay activists and the miners worked then. What would be such an alliance for today?

RG: I think, what we need to focus on now is the labour movement revival. The lefties coming together a bit. All those years when you we talked about nothing except Gay Liberation and Women's Liberation and black and antiracism. That's established now – you can't have a labour movement meeting now without all those things. So that's kind of there – you can't really go back on that. And now they are fighting for jobs and rights and benefits and stuff – so it's kind of linking it together. Now women and gay people and black people have got this right to have a place in the labour movement. No one challenges their right to be there now. Women are now part of the movement much more than they used to be, so are gay people.

The problem is race now. In my own left movement (Momentum in the Labour Party), in my part of London, there are lots of Muslim people involved. That's good, but they're still not leading it. That's good but not enough. Black people – there is still work to do on that. Even black people who have lived here for generations aren't really part of the labour movement nor are all the new people coming over, the Polish, the Russians, the Rumanians.

IN: So that's a coalition we should work on?

RG: We reformed LGSM in 2014 but we have stopped ourselves now, because you can't live your life based on something you did when you were 26. But when we were campaigning we got a lot of periphery – lots of young students and workers and young trade unionists. They loved us and they saw the film, and they came to our events. And many of those went off as soon as we stopped. So they formed a group called »Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants«. And that is relevant because a lot of the

migrants will not be pro-gay. So you're defending people from Africa, and Syria who will not be pro-gay, so it's a similar thing to the miners. You are saying well, I am supporting you even if you hate gay people. And I am still supporting you. They are going to Calais, to take food and medicine down to Calais. They are saying we are openly gay people supporting you. But that's the LGBT people and the migrants. What we really need to do is to get those people into the labour movement – later. For me that's solidarity.

I love it when people link up. There are links between the Palestinian people and the people in the black cities in America. There was a gay demonstration in San Francisco about the Black people in these cities being shot by the police. You've got Native Americans now standing in front of this pipeline in Dakota, »Standing Rock«, trying to stop the oil pipeline. I just love these links. That's what I would call real intersectionality. The problem with intersectionality is: it's easy for people who like to focus on their differences, and you need to do that, but then just after that or almost at the same time you need to say: okay, we are different, but what we need to do is help other people. We have to help each other; we have to build a wider movement.