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Trans Politics, Social Change, and Justice

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On May 6 and 7, 2005, *Trans Politics, Social Change, and Justice* brought over four hundred trans people and allies into a single building. A feeling of electricity was everywhere. Not because this was the first trans conference – it was not. Nor was it the largest. What participants felt came from the fact that the real lives of trans people were being addressed by trans people. For a time, the ground had shifted; the complex webs of institutions and politics that surround the lives of people everywhere were being addressed *primarily* from the perspective of transgender peoples and their communities.

Across two days and 48 panels, workshops and plenary sessions, participants at *Trans Politics* explored not just the national, but also the international situations of trans people. Speaking to a packed room in *Policing and the Transgender Community: A Global Perspective*, Paty Betancourt from Mexico, Maria Belen Correa from Argentina, and Marina Talero Monroy from Colombia discussed the violence faced by trans people. It is a repressive violence at once deliberately targeting gender “deviance,” but also part of broader machineries of social control. Similar patterns can be seen in the US.

What alternatives exist? Current human rights mechanisms may offer one avenue of change. However, their reach remains limited, and the ways in which they conceive of gender can, at times, work *against* trans people, as UN *rappporteur* and Argentine activist Mauro Cabral and others noted the following day. Social and cultural changes within a nation, Cabral suggested in the final plenary session, rests heavily on changes within the nation itself. It might well be that, as panelists on *Trans Activisms Across Borders* suggested, a powerful avenue of social and cultural change rests with the connections created by activists with ties across nations and regions. The agency and actions of trans people and their allies might well be the fulcrum for change.

Across the US, activist energies have been poured into transforming all areas of life. Some arrived at *Trans Politics* with projects focusing on schools, workplaces, homeless shelters, and prisons. Others spoke of their experiences shaping public policy and legislation, changing health care provision, conducting research, and running for office. Represented alongside organizations seeking civil rights for trans people were advocates for youth, for training activists, for engaging in outreach across lines of race, class and country, and for creating radical economic transformations. National organizations— the ACLU, NGLTF, HRC, and NCLR, to name a few— stood next to regional organizations, such as the Southern Arizona Gender Alliance, the Center for Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights in Philadelphia, the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, and Equality California. Long-established organizations such as the Audre Lorde Project were present alongside newer organizations such as the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, the Transgender Law Center, and the National Center for Transgender Equality. A complete list of groups and activists represented by the conference would take up bulk of this newsletter. Put simply, by sheer breadth and numbers, *Trans Politics* participants shattered the myth that the trans movement reflects the narrow interests of a minority-within-a-minority.

What was absent was uniformity, not just of identities, but of political strategies. Many spoke of the lifeblood of transgender activism as laying in a radical expansion of the scope of our political work; our goal could well be a mass movement with our eyes on economic justice. For many others, it is vital that we defend rights that many have taken for granted in the past, such as privacy, against increased state encroachment and surveillance. At the same time, we need to continue expanding the purview of traditional civil rights law. The tools at hand range from organizing sex workers, to organizing youth, to changing institutions, whether they be homeless shelters, universities, or multinational corporations, and to lobbying Congress. In the present climate of conservative resentment and backlash, none of these directions and

Trans Politics, Social Change, and Justice

BY RICHARD
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Yasmeen Persad (left) and Monica Forrester (right) from the 519 Church Street Community Center in Toronto discuss trans community solidarity with trans sex workers.

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and activities seemed mutually exclusive to conference participants; indeed, perhaps the most vivid theme across the two days was the urgency and importance of all the strategies on the table.

The trans movement is a child of the traditional civil rights movement. No longer in its infancy, it is growing rapidly, following in many of the same footsteps and facing many of the same stresses. Rooms and halls were packed full to every corner, and one common activist context was visible: against a reality of razor-thin budgets for most organizations and a reliance almost entirely on volunteer labor, the movement survives and grows. It does so out of a deep sense of justice and raw willpower. In turn, the excitement of the conference lay, not only in the chance to create networks and to share resources, but in the recognition that we will survive and that we have a future. ♦

Richard M. Juang is Co-Chair on the Advisory Board of the National Center for Transgender Equality.

This conference was made possible through the generous support of the Gill Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and the Winslow Street Fund. To view and download the full program from Trans Politics, Social Change and Justice, visit <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/clags/program.htm>, or to request a printed copy of the conference program, call or email the CLAGS office.

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