

# Southerners On New Ground

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## **OUR PEOPLE ARE WORTH THE RISKS:**

### **A SOUTHERN QUEER AGENDA FROM THE MARGINS AND THE RED STATES**

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In the best parts of our tradition as LGBTQ people for liberation, we have resisted assimilation. We have held die-ins, we have risked our lives at Pride celebrations, we have been willing to be part of spectacle, and even to be hated, in hopes that our work would mean motion towards liberation. We have witnessed a mainstream LGBT movement that has moved away from these practices, and many of us have spent years in conference centers and hotel rooms all around this country pushing back on a mainstreaming of this movement. It is not enough to disagree with the mainstream agenda. We must be actively creating, resourcing, and organizing new strategies that move a politics of intersectionality into the fields, the small towns, the cities, the bedrooms, the televisions, and the visions of this country, and this world. These strategies must work tirelessly to build contagious power with those LGBTQ people who have been left behind by a mainstream gay rights agenda, and the unlikely allies who have been passed by. In the past two years, SONG has mobilized and transformed thousands of LGBTQ people in the South through two campaigns. In 2011, our campaign against anti-immigrant hate in Georgia unleashed the power of an unprecedented number of LGBTQ people in a fight for liberation that was not slanted “single-issue” towards the traditional definition of ‘gay rights’. In 2012, our fight (with coalition partners) against the anti-family amendment in North Carolina (denying the basic rights of all unmarried couples and our children) was named by the North Carolina News Service as one of the biggest grassroots efforts in the history of North Carolina. Both of these campaigns happened in the South: the part of the country that the media tells us is the most hateful and hostile to oppressed communities. We know without a doubt that all the successes in this work originate from the thousands of LGBTQ Southerners and allies who led these efforts. They are voting for a new queer agenda with their sweat, risk-taking, and voices. SONG listened to them, created an organizational container, and provided strategic direction: they did the rest. At every turn, when we re-framed messages away from a narrow, single-issue gay rights agenda, our people on the ground responded with vigorous affirmation, agitation and effort.

All over this country, our people grow tired of a defensive, apologetic LGBT strategy against the Right wing. Bullies do not stop when they are appeased. We have nothing to apologize for, and yet we watch as our own people and issues are publicly ‘de-gayed’, portrayed as middle class, and white—all in the name of eventual Equality. In the South, we watch tall grass grow up over the houses where our neighbors used to live, up over the businesses that used to populate our small towns. We watch as our family members are detained and deported, our comrades pushed involuntarily into sex work just to survive, and our children are incarcerated. We turn on the television and hear a conversation about

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LGBTQ people every day that names us as perverted, sinful, and worthy of pain, isolation and death. Yet, our mainstream movement, that claims it speaks for us, tells us to wait for policy wins. We are assured that these wins will trickle down to us as some form of victory on our behalf. **As people living in the South, as undocumented immigrants, as people of Color, as trans people, as rural people, and as people with disabilities: SONG says this is not good enough.** In the absence of stronger national leadership, we call on queer liberationists to build and amplify our power, and take our rightful leadership regardless of the scales of our organizations—be they local, statewide, regional, or national. This article seeks to lay out a little bit more about evolving thoughts on how to do just that from a Southern perspective on queer liberation. We hope that it inspires other groups who have not already done so to seize the moment, stop, listen, and respond to the conditions of today.

### **A Liberation Agenda for All People—with LGBTQ Leadership in its Rightful Place**

The following is an evolving definition of queer liberation, compiled out of a Queer People’s Movement Assembly in 2012:<sup>1</sup>

*Queer liberation seeks liberation for all peoples through working for the recognition of our whole selves; the integrity of the relationships and families we embrace; self determination in choices for our bodies in sexuality, gender, eroticism, disability, safety, and privacy; the dignity of our spiritual practices; fairness in our economic systems, our work and its compensation; full access to participating in and benefiting from society's institutions; human rights for all; and justice as a birthright for all.*

An on-going queer agenda in the South means we work for participation within our full humanity for LGBTQ people and all people to have dignity, safety, and liberation. We work always from a place of multiplicity, plurality, and transformation. Intersectionality does not mean that we work only with LGBTQ people with similar politics—it means we work within a larger movement for liberation for all people globally, within coordinated and useful roles. For SONG, this means a focus on restoring rightful leadership for LGBTQ people within that struggle for liberation from the origin point of our home in the South.

### **Southerners On New Ground (SONG) and the South: Who We Are**

In 1993, SONG was founded in the vision of 3 African-American and 3 white lesbians who dared to dream an organization that could build and sustain organizing across lines of race, class, culture, gender and sexuality. SONG challenged the notion that Justice is about “Just Us” and began the work of building an infrastructure of Southern LGBTQ organizers who could unite a region around our common good all the way to our core. SONG’s political work was born not just of out of a desire to do cross-issue work,

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<sup>1</sup> People’s Movement Assemblies (PMA) emerged at the US Social Forum in Detroit in 2010. Since then, PMAs organized around different issues have been convening in other places. The Queer People’s Movement Assembly met at the Creating Change conference in Baltimore in January 2012. See <http://peoplesmovementassembly.org/node/419#queer> for more information.

but out of the notion that any “movement” for LGBTQ people has to account for our racial and ethnic communities, our elders, our children, as well as our bodies and the land we live on. The idea of going beyond our ‘couple’ formations, and into our relationships with community by refusing to split people’s identities into boxes, was the only way to make our lives visible to other Southerners, and each other. For almost twenty years we have moved, built, and supported groups of LGBTQ people who live and work at the intersections of race, class, culture, gender and sexuality, especially in small towns and rural parts of the South.

SONG’s work in the South is grounded in history, a belief in redemption, and a belief in those who have been left behind by power structures. History--because this land is thick with what came before us-- Native Peoples, slavery, Civil Rights Movement, traditions of resilience, beauty, pain. Redemption--because we believe that while the South is a physical geography of white supremacy and poverty and how both form plantations, mountain top removal, and slave labor; it is also more than that. It is a place of redemption and hope for many--a place where folk reconcile with the past in an honest and painful way, a place where people can stay in lands riddled with pain, remember old traditions, and birth new ways. Belief in those left behind-- because while we have been under funded, lacking in infrastructure, brutalized by poverty, racism, homophobia, transphobia and all manners of oppression, movement people in the South have always been fighting (like oppressed people all over the world) to keep our heads up. We have found creative ways based on kin structures to push toward liberation. We have not turned our back on food, singing, culture, our elders, our youth, and our craftspeople and artisans. We find joy in such unlikely places. Being Southerners On New Ground to us means loving hard histories, giving thanks, making visionary space, pushing forward, being kin, seeking wholeness and realizing there is no liberation in isolation.

One place our work comes from is the great joy when you sit in a member’s kitchen, talking politics, enjoying the wonderful hospitality of cornbread and greens, while looking out the screen door at the creek behind their house. There is great joy when the work connects people who are isolated, gives voice to those who have been denied air time, and builds folks sense of home as a place where they can also be queer. Part of SONG’s work is supporting the unquestionable right to return of all Gulf Coast people, especially people of color and poor people; and it is also SONG’s work to support the right to return *and stay* of all LGBTQ and gender non-conforming Southerners. For many, it is a daily fight to stay home or a brutal process of trying to come home. We love our region and our work is to make it a place where Southern queers can come home and stay home to live with self-determination, dignity, and respect. Our work is also grounded in the fear and sadness that so many LGBTQ rural people and small town people feel after they have left these homes behind for cities and/or ‘the North’. *We call on our communities to recognize that turning privileged backs on other peoples suffering will never make the hurt go away, or make our communities whole.*

Violence, unemployment, and severe isolation have been huge deterrents for organizing LGBTQ people in many small Southern communities. This is also true in many other communities. In some communities that SONG works in, we are the only LGBTQ organization in that community, which has its benefits and

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challenges: positively, most of our new members are not jaded about organizing, and scarcity of resources means they will show up, and be deeply motivated to organize; negatively, many of them do not know what organizing or even "Gay pride" is when they first encounter SONG. It takes time to determine where we can go in some communities to connect with our base, because there are so few LGBTQ organizations in many Southern states. Less than fifteen Southern LGBTQ organizations have a staff of more than three people. The states that do have statewide LGBTQ organizations often have a staff of two to three people for the whole state (with the notable exception of Equality Florida). Most of the campaigns related to LGBTQ issues in the South in the past decade have been initiated by national organizations. SONG's constituency was recruited into campaigns that they did not choose, and told that the options were to lose big (80-20) or lose less (70-30) such as marriage amendment fights in Georgia, South Carolina, and Kentucky. These situations have left SONG with a Southern base that is largely turned off from national organizations, and their efforts.

### **The South as a testing ground: the usage of LGBTQ communities by the Right wing**

In order to understand what this work means, we must understand not only who our communities are and what they need, but also the role that we have been cast in a Right wing agenda. The Right works as a cover for the interests of global capitalism, and they are in an extremely effective stage in their history right now. The Right, especially the theocratic Right, has been extremely successful in organizing the South to vote a conservative "family values" agenda and in taking over public institutions from school boards to legislatures. To build their voting base, they have created a beast with several arms: opposition to women's equality, homosexuality and gay rights, sex education, family structures that don't reflect marriage between a man and woman and children with official legitimacy, --and ultimately, underlying everything, all the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Every strategy of the Right in the South builds on resentment of the Civil Rights Movement, and even when homophobia appears the focus, racial discrimination is always a goal. The Right drives towards an authoritarianism that is deeply patriarchal and fundamentalist. In particular, the Right has used homosexuality as a wedge issue to mobilize voters, to raise millions of dollars, and to paint LGBTQ people as sick, sinful, anti-family sexual perverts. The strategy has been to separate LGBTQ people from their communities, their families, and in particular, all children. It has been a classic effort to dehumanize and destroy us. It is no surprise that the Right would use the South as its first terrain for these strategies. The stereotypes of the South are primarily of conservative, religious, and poor white people in rural communities. This is only a partial truth. The South is ever-growing into a region that has one of the highest concentrations of African-Americans and Latinos in the US, huge communities of poor and working class people, and the largest US rural population. To ignore the South is to ignore these communities, and our needs. The South is more than just one region among many in the US, it is a place that epitomizes and symbolizes the fight for power happening in the US around cultural issues and racial demographics. The Right has been successful in convincing progressive communities in the US to abandon the South. This needs to change if we want to unlock the keystones of the Right's core strategies.

## **Bold Action in the name of Queer Liberation**

As people in the South, we know that we hold only part of the strategy puzzle that can move us towards the next level of our work for global queer liberation. In dialogue and commitment to common cause, we can find ways forward together with many of you reading this. We offer this evolving list as a set of places to start (or continue) key conversations about next steps in our collective queer agenda:

- Given our losses at the polls around even the most-watered down versions of questions that matter to us (for example, marriage ballots, etc.); we must unleash our creativity around a wider range of strategies that could bring our messages, communities, and work to scale
- Recognize the importance of combining conversations and writing on LGBTQ intersectionality with symbolic media action, direct action, base building and amplification of intersectionality through grassroots organizing. When this synergistic work is happening, we must document, amplify, and replicate it well
- Build our capacity for resiliency and problem solving until it is as strong as our capacity to be critical. Twenty years of bringing righteous critique to a mainstream LGBT agenda has left us weak in the areas of transforming beyond conflict, towards united action. When a leader makes a mistake, we often eat that person alive. This has to stop if we are to make bold steps towards queer liberation
- Try out new ideas and move faster on opportunities. Given that there is so much we can work on as queer liberationists, we can easily get stuck in the stage of considering our choices for strategies and tactics. We need to take responsibility for, and transform, our tendency in the 'queer left' to get so caught up in process that we do not lead work that can affect hundreds of thousands (in some way, space or form) versus groups of twenty or less at a time. There is no perfect choice when our people are suffering this much. Our pride and perfectionism must come second to our needs to try new strategies and make mistakes in order to win concrete gains and learn lessons
- Strengthen our ability to message to each other and media in an intersectional and accessible way. There is so much public conversation about LGBTQ people, but too little amplification of our own voices about our own lives. Those who do speak for us are usually bringing a mainstream agenda
- Build real relationships and trust with new coalitions and alliances that may seem to be unlikely partners, particularly those that represent large bases of marginalized communities. As we work on fronts of struggle that unite us with broad groups of marginalized people, we must take risks together. Of course, risks in movement building look vastly different for people based on individual privilege and power. At the same time, our people (in the South, and elsewhere) are showing all the time that they are ready to take risks and those of us who are strategists need to be dreaming up plans worthy of their courage

- Recognize that for many queer liberationists this is political *and* spiritual work. In SONG's campaign in North Carolina, 35% of our 16,000 signed-up volunteers were people of faith. We must transform our organizations to meet the needs of our bases—and name this work for all it is, and all it means to people, while still holding firm to our politics and our fight against religious supremacy and fundamentalism
- Organize in line with visions worthy of our history, our legacy, and people. We have to be able to draw a direct line from our current strategies to our long-term liberation dreams—no matter how long that line is in terms of time, or how beset the landscape is with massive challenges. Wins must be defined within that long-term vision, with an eye for concrete needs of our people now
- Be good to each other by supporting, challenging, and transforming our own leadership. We must constantly be asking each other and ourselves if we are willing to be transformed in the service of this work. If we are still in this work, someone has been patient with our leadership, and in turn, we are called upon to be patient with other leaders.

### **In Conclusion**

Because our survival depends on the process towards queer liberation, this agenda (crafted by thousands) will go forward whether large national organizations adopt it or not. However, we call on them to do so. We call on mainstream national organizations to use their resources to respectfully listen to, support, strategize with, network, and convene grassroots groups on the front lines. We move forward in this work with the support of many long-term relationships: particularly the support of the groups in the ROOTS coalition, Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, Project South, the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights [GLAHR], the National Day Laborers Organizing Network [NDLON], and many others. Our work is made possible because of this bigger legacy and fabric of work. We hope that some part of the work we have done here is helpful to you. For more information visit SONG's website at: [www.southernersonnewground.org](http://www.southernersonnewground.org)