GAY CONFERENCE IN CORK

by SEAN McGOURAN

CORK CITY IS FULL OF HANDSOME BUILDINGS AND BROAD, WELL KEPT STREETS. IT IS ALSO FULL OF UNATTRACTIVE BUILDINGS AND NARROW, BADLY PAVED STREETS. THESE REEK OF POVERTY. SO DOES THE RATHER NOTICEABLE PRESENCE OF FEMALE PROSTITUTES.

The Conference took place in Connolly Hall, donated by the ITGWU for the weekend. It is a very good looking new building across the river from the huge City Hall. The flag flew at half mast during the Conference.

The Friday evening session, the warm-up, was very pleasant, with films and a video show (not blue - more's the pity). That was when one first noticed an unusually large number of physically handcapped people. It might have been only two or three, but that is unusually large for any gay venue in this island- something we should think about?

EXTREMELY CAREFULLY PLANNED

On Saturday, the extremely carefully planned conference nearly came a cropper. The introductory speeches took up a vast amount of time, due mainly to David Norris over-running the allotted time by about thirty five (entertaining) minutes, and by the large number of guests who had to be fitted in.

Of the workshops, the one on partition was very revealing. Most gays from the South rejected the notion of coat-trailing the Provos by setting up a H-Block group. This was not just because it would have been disastrous for NIGRA. It was mainly on the grounds that they were unimpressed by the straightforward anti-partitionism offered by the speaker.

They realised that the Church would be the chief beneficiary to the detriment of the gay movement. The speaker later on told me that I was not one of the people who are being oppressed by the N. Irish state. An interesting thought for a working class, homosexual taig from the Lower Falls.

The workshop on structures was quite interesting too. Apparently, having two large gay organisations is a Bad Thing. While it is true that the National Gay Federation and the Irish Gay Rights Movement (the two gay organisations in the Republic) do duplicate efforts in their publications and, more seriously, in addressing the government and the heirarchy, it does seem to an outsider that NGF, heavily Dublin based, and IGRM, more widespread through the country, complement each other rather well.

Cork reacted to the very well attended conference with a commendably stiff upper lip. The younger people were subduedly supportive. At least we didn't get stoned. Of course, other things were happening. A conference on poverty in another part of the city. The Opera season was going on in, surprise surprise, the Opera House, a serviceable building, unfortunately *(? - Ed)* next door to the lovely Art Gallery.

SOLDIER'S SONG

I got a slight degree of culture shock when the orchestra opened the proceedings with the Soldier's Song. People sprang to their feet, and even stood rigidly to attention. When did you last hear the 'Queen' played at a public gathering in Ulster?

This section of the Conference ended with a disco in the main hall. All this and food too! Apart from a sliver of ham, it consisted mainly of vegetables, the main vegetable being spud, admittedly, but still, we vegetarians must be thankful for small mercies.

What I saw of the Conference was very worth while and hopefully will become a regular event. Certainly, the Cork Gay collective is quite astoundingly energetic. Possibly it could resolve demarcation disputes by running the general Gay movement in the Republic.

GAY CONFERENCE IN CORK

A WOMAN'S VIEW

by SHARON

AT THE NATIONAL GAY CONFERENCE IN CORK, MAY 15-17, 1981, WOMEN WERE IN THE MINORITY. AROUND FIFTY WOMEN ATTENDED, AND, OF THESE, A FEW WERE STRAIGHT FEMINIST WOMEN WHO CAME TO GIVE THE LESBIAN WOMEN SUPPORT. THROUGHOUT THE CONFERENCE, THE WOMEN HAD SEPARATE WORKSHOPS FROM THE MEN, THE REASONS BEING THE DIFFERENT NATURE OF THE OPPRESSION SUFFERED BY GAY WOMEN AND BY GAY MEN, AND THE FACT THAT MANY GAY MEN ARE EXTREMELY SEXIST AND IN SOME CASES MORE DISCRIMINATORY AGAINST WOMEN THAN SOME STRAIGHT MEN. HOWEVER, WE REALISED THAT THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE IRISH GAY MOVEMENT

IN THE EIGHTIES WAS TO CREATE MORE SOLIDARITY WITH THE GAY MEN, AS WE ALL SUFFER UNDER GAY OPPRESSION.

Our workshops were not structured as we wanted to get away from male, heirarchical ideas. We discussed issues such as the isolation and oppression we suffered from, the link with the Women's Movement, and the gay social scene. One straight woman made the criticism that we lesbians did not know what we wanted or where we were going. What she failed to realise was that, in a society which oppresses women lesbians do not exist. We do know what we want; we are fighting to have our existence recognised, both as lesbians and as women.

Some of us felt that we needed to fight through the women's movement, while some women did not have a political perspective on their lesbianism. This led to discussion on the personal being political and on the link with the Women's Movement. Some of us at the Conference were involved in feminist groups and felt we would rather be involved with politicised women, though this led to the problem that the issues we were fighting concerned 'straight' women, such as abortion and contraception campaigns, and in some cases, we were the only gay women in the groups.

NATIONAL LESBIAN NETWORK

This led to discussion on how lesbians could make contact with each other. Most women felt very lonely and isolated, and we felt that a national lesbian network should be established to help overcome our isolation and build a strong lesbian movement. We proposed a motion that was passed at the Conference: *"That all gay men's organisations in Ireland* (i.e. 32 counties) *make resources available to assist women to establish a national lesbian network, under the control of women, to be co-ordinated initially by L.I.L.'*

Some women felt that the gay social scene was the best way to make contact, but this put off women who felt that gey bars and discos represented a sexual threat. Many of us would rather meet each other in groups first; or in political and feminist groups. We agreed that lesbians did need a social scene and the issue was raised of our anger that gay men controlled the resources available. We felt it was essential that lesbians should have more control of these resources.

As well as discussing these issues, we talked about ourselves and got to know each other. We discussed the problems of being gay women in a male dominated society, with its bourgeois morality. As lesbians, we continually have to face disgust and insults; we are seen as perverts who should be locked away, and this made it extremely hard for many of us to face our gayness. When we did, as in my own case, we experienced mental illness and depression. We were angry that society makes gay women and men ill and self hating, and at how the medical profession views us as psychiatric cases who need to be cured.

Personally, the Conference was a great experience for me. It taught me a lot about the gay movement in Ireland, and how each of the different groups operate. It also showed the great potential the Irish gay movement has, and how it can build up a strong organisation. The way forward is clearly for the lesbian and gay men's movements - although they are separate and fighting for different things - to present a united front. But we lesbians feel that the movement should not be heirarchical, that we should have an equal say in decisions and should control moreof the resources. Above all, we must show that we exist, both as lesbians and as women, and the link with the Women's Movement is essential in doing this.

IDEAL ENVIRONMENT

The Conference also provided an opportunity to get away from oppressive straight society for a while, and to be completely natural. It was great to meet so many other lesbians, and to feel their support and solidarity; any last doubts I had about being 'perverted' vanished. However, a very ideal environment was created. Everyone had to go back to 'real' society again, and this usually means leading double lives - pretending to most people you're straight. It was particularly hard to come back to Belfast, with its rigid ideas, and face being isolated again, as it is really hard to meet other lesbians here. It is in this area that the national lesbian network, once it is set up, will help to create solidarity.

There was so much potential at the Conference, that once the 'aftermath' wears off, I hope the potential is not lost, and that the gay movement in the '80s will go forward.

