

"Externalizing" Proletarian Feminism: Against Ryan Costello of the Maoist Communist Union

Note: *Some details have been left intentionally vague to avoid sharing the personal information of Costello's victims.*

The following document was prepared by communist women in order to expose and denounce Ryan Costello, now of the Boston branch of the so-called Maoist Communist Union, as an abuser and a chauvinist. In order to do so, we detour through an account of his formation's split from the Maoist Communist Group and the opportunistic "proletarian feminism" which was developed in that process. To solely read the accusations against Costello, skip to below the horizontal line break on page 5.

In early 2014, the New Communist Party (Organizing Committee) [NCP (OC)] published its '[Self-Criticism and Summation on Patriarchy](#),' a document composed, primarily, by its New York section, and which was an attempt to reckon theoretically and practically with the struggle against male chauvinist elements which had lead to expulsions and a split in the NCP the previous year. The splitters and expelled members of the NCP (OC) regrouped as the New York section of the New Communist Party - Liaison Committee [NCP-LC] and by 2016 were again publicly criticized by broad sections of the anti-revisionist trend for the same pattern of male chauvinism which lead to their expulsions from the OC; this sequence is documented in the Red Guards - Austin polemic 'We Will Not Integrate into a Burning House' and we will not describe it in detail here.

The publication of the self-criticism on patriarchy occurred only slightly prior to the reconstitution of the NCP (OC) under its new name of the Maoist Communist Group, which at that time had formal branches in New York and Richmond, with a nascent branch developing in Boston. The document laid out the following axes of self-criticism:

- 1) that the organization was founded on the basis of a male chauvinist liberalism towards patriarchy in practice: a toothless anti-patriarchy position which offered rectification to abusers and chauvinists rather than drawing a hard line for expulsion, which was leveraged in defense of founding members to circumvent the implementation of proletarian feminist discipline;
- 2) the theoretical liquidation of women's oppression: theoretical retreat from grappling with the relative character of the [man - woman] contradiction in relation to the principal contradiction, and its reduction to a non-antagonism with the exception of the limited context of abuse'
- 3) undue emphasis on rectification of bad actors: a policy of keeping chauvinists in the organization, and "struggling" against their misogynist or anti-women behavior rather than expulsion;

We reaffirm that the line of criticism opened by the identification of these errors remains a key point of orientation for the development of a proletarian feminist practice today - quoting the NCP (OC) document at length,

"In the US, "Maoism" as the name of a *concrete* political tendency composed of real groups and individuals, is a patriarchal tendency. This has been made clear to us by our own experience. It is a tendency populated in substantial part by women-hating reactionaries, distinguished from the women-hating reactionaries of the broader society only by a semi-skilled usage of feminist discourse. Transformation is possible only through the deployment of Maoism as that which divides this situation.

As a beginning, there must be a refusal of the revisionist notion that communist organizations will inevitably serve as mirrors in which the objective contradictions of the existing class society are reflected. We have seen this take several forms:

-The notion that male chauvinism is dominant among the masses and will therefore be unleashed within the organization itself if the organization is truly integrated with the masses. The notion that expelling male chauvinists from a communist organization means that one is not properly "handling contradictions."

-The notion that the masses of women are dominated by male chauvinist ideas just like men, and therefore, it is implied, are oppressors themselves indistinguishable from men. While women also take up patriarchal ideology, there is no relationship of symmetry here.

-The notion that the masses of women are not interested in politics, as it is traditionally an enterprise for men, and therefore any political organization will be overwhelmingly composed of men at the outset, that this is not reflective of errors in theory and practice.

-The notion that the development of women as leaders and militants in a communist organization, and the implementation of policy towards this end, is not a political question, that it is a “personal” question or “identity politics.” Reactionary ideas emerge in communist organizations, but there must be a continuous process of struggle against them and their unapologetic representatives to impose the proletarian line."

The positions developed here and echoed in the policy document '[On Standards of Feminist Conduct](#)' (hereafter SFC) continue to accurately describe the relative dominance of male chauvinism in our trend, and the inability of revisionist theoretical equipment to respond adequately to the struggle to unseat it. Quoting now from 'On Standards of Feminist Conduct,'

Those who imagine that a communist organization with proletarian feminist politics at its core can be built, or that a revolutionary proletarian feminist movement can be developed today, from the ground up – without first confronting the pressing issue of male chauvinism in the existing organizations and circles, including determining the proper guiding principles and policies to do this – are thoroughly deluding themselves. This view amounts to the liquidation of the struggle for women’s emancipation and a kind of economism that refuses to address the real political question at hand of the involvement of women in organizations.

In the main, we maintain that the NCP (OC) summation on patriarchy presents a correct, if still germinal, position on the organizational aspect of the woman question; **the expulsion of credibly-accused male chauvinists and abusers, and the denunciation of those formations which continue to harbor them, is a basic proletarian feminist position which all serious communist organizations must take up.**

This document reflects our commitment to that position: it has become necessary to **publicly denounce Ryan Costello, of the former Boston section of the MCG, now the Maoist Communist Union,** for a pattern of patriarchal gender practice and abuse which began prior to 2016 split in the MCG. Before we outline the content of this accusation, however, we will examine the ways that the split document of the Boston and Richmond sections of the MCG reflect an opportunist response to the correct line of the NCP (OC) summation on patriarchy and show how this liquidation of proletarian feminist politics has been used to shield Costello from criticism.

It should be noted that in the wake of their split from the MCG, the Boston section regrouped as Mass Proletariat, then the so-called "Revolutionary United Front," and now as the revisionist and right-opportunist "Maoist Communist Union." This organization operates a handful of mass organizations concentrated in Boston, New York and San Francisco, including the "Revolutionary Marxist Students" (which we include by name because Costello's pattern of behavior includes **preying on younger,**

vulnerable women, particularly students); we are confident that the Boston section (of whom, we believe, Costello remains in leadership), and some elements of the San Francisco sections, are aware of the allegations against him, but we suspect it is unlikely that this has reached their New York section. Our decision to publicize this criticism at this time corresponds to a rapid intensification of the public work of the MCU; prior iterations of this grouping had been relatively isolated, particularly in Boston, **where Costello and his primary partner had been (and largely remain) blacklisted from movement organizing because of common knowledge of his behavior.**

It should *also* be noted that many of the political criticisms of the MCG levied in the split document (["The externalization of anti-revisionist struggle is the negation of proletarian politics"](#)) are legitimate; the authors of this document are not affiliated with the MCG nor do we uphold their particular brand of left-sectarian ideology. The focus of this polemic is on the splitters' opportunistic liquidation of proletarian feminism via political slight-of-hand: rendering an illusory link between the idealist party-building line of the MCG and their line on gender practice.

This is most obvious in the authors' lazy quotation of the Red Women's Committee Hamburg IWWD document from 2016:

The conception that the perpetuation of patriarchal relations internal to the communist movement is a matter of "personal behavior" which can be "resolved" by standards of conduct was aptly criticized by comrades from Germany and Austria [...]

"Those in the 'left-wing scene' who reduce the struggle against patriarchy to a fight against 'sexism' and who believe that it is sufficient to have codes of conduct, which say that as long as men do not watch pornography or beat women, everything is fine and women have 'equal rights' have understood nothing from the standpoint of Marxism and are in fact defenders of patriarchy, its apologists in the revolutionary movement." (RWC Hamburg)

The [reactionary position of the German "Maoists" on the transgender question](#) aside, it is clear that the position advanced by the RWC in the quoted paper is not that patriarchal relations are **not** matters of "personal behavior," but that their reduction thereto is *insufficient*. In this, we agree, as does the NCP (OC) document: that the struggle against patriarchy is *irreducible* to matters of personal behavior which could be resolved through the application of policy documents like the SFC, that the stakes of the women's struggle are ultimately to be found in the resolution of the principal contradiction via the seizure of state power by the proletariat through a protracted people's war, does not mean that the struggle against male chauvinism in our organizations today - that is, the struggle against the personal behavior of male comrades - is insignificant. Indeed, **until we have developed our capacity to continuously combat male chauvinism within our organizations we will be unequipped to advance from the current stage of small-group left organizing towards the reconstitution of a Maoist communist party capable of leading the struggle for power.**

Thus the position of the Boston and Richmond splitters, that a policy of expulsion would "negate the imperative of continual ideological revolutionization internal to political organizations in favor of the sanctification of the organization as an indivisible source of truth," in fact represents a negation of its own, the negation of proletarian feminist politics, in favor of a vacuous commitment to "revolutionization" detached from **the immediate practical demand placed on the communist trend**

by the women's movement: to smash male chauvinism. That the document pays lip service to the SFC changes nothing when the practical line of the Boston section was, and remains, to **shield an abuser, who, along with his primary sexual-romantic partner, used his political organization as tool for the sexual conquest of young communist women.** This polemic against the gender politics of the MCG reflects, then, an externalization of proletarian feminist politics, liquidating the immediate question of struggle within our organizations and emphasizing an all-too-abstract concept of patriarchy as the true target of the struggle.

The deliberate operationalization of this "critique" of the MCG line on patriarchy in order to advance a polemic against their party-building line reflects an endemic opportunism on the part of the Boston section, one which - intentionally or not - would later be mobilized to shield Costello once the reality of his chauvinism came to light.

Ryan Costello is a white cisgender man; he is about 6 feet tall, with blue eyes and dirty blond hair, often worn long. We include these details because we assume that his organization continues to rely on the basic security practice of employing cadre names, so it is unlikely that others are aware of his legal name. **He has been named by at least one former partner as an abuser,** and as a **harmful/manipulative sexual partner** by other former partners and a large number of Boston-area community members.

In addition, he has engaged in the (unfortunately common) practice of **insisting the person he abused was actually the aggressor** in the situation. This tactic, often referred to as DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim & Offender) is a consistently documented behavior through which abusers smear their victims while prolonging the abuser's control over their lives. It is a practice which is itself thus deeply abusive, and also serves to obfuscate Costello's own history of chauvinistic and misogynistic patterns of behavior. His predatory and abusive behavior represents a danger to women, and **we call on our comrades to denounce and isolate him from the movement, expel him from community spaces, and refuse to in any way platform him.**

Costello's male chauvinism and misogyny are clear not only in the context of his work in the communist movement but overlap with a pattern of inappropriate romantic engagements, including deliberate manipulation of "power imbalances" (here meaning differentials in social capital, often but not always involving organizational / political relationships).

He has shown a documented tendency to **practice "lovebombing" in both romantic and political relationships** and has used political spaces (for example, the Lucy Parsons Center, an infoshop in Boston from which he has been banned since 2014-15 for this behavior) as places to target and intensely pursue comrades romantically in ways that made them express discomfort (after which he did not cease his pursuit). **This involved his using positions of relative social capital and institutional power within an organization to serially pursue newer, and thus often younger and more vulnerable comrades within these spaces.**

Costello self-identifies as queer, and has practiced polyamory in a long-term hierarchical polyamorous relationship (meaning that his relationship is structured around a primary partner and then 'secondary'

and 'tertiary' partners, and so on). While his primary partner is not named here, she has been complicit in his pattern of abusive and predatory behaviors. Their relationship, in addition to his radical-chic intellectualism and 'Maoist' politics, gave Costello access to considerable social capital and credibility within LGBTQ and 'left' spaces. **He has consistently demonstrated a willingness to engage in identity opportunism, leveraging his identity to evade allegations regarding his behavior.** It has also allowed him proximity to those he has preyed on, many of whom are gender oppressed (women/trans/nonbinary), younger, queer, and/or of oppressed nationalities.

Many of Ryan's abusive relationships involved incorporating one (or more) secondary partner(s) into a larger polycule, where they are at a relative social imbalance, and where they are then pressured into engaging in intense romantic and sexual entanglements such as quickly moving in with him (a well-established isolating tactic).

Three of these relationships are documented below:

1: Comrade X, a former cadre of the Boston section of the MCG / Mass Proletariat, and who has named Costello as an **abuser**, began dating him within a hierarchical triad model (meaning that she was a secondary partner to Costello and his primary partner). Comrade X met the two of them while she was an undergraduate student and is considerably younger than both; her recruitment into their political formation was concurrent with their bringing her into a sexual relationship. Over the course of that relationship, Costello consistently engaged in a pattern of emotional abuse and manipulation.

Costello eventually pressured X to move into his apartment (where she was not listed on the lease). After this point, Costello engaged in a series of increasingly isolating and possessive behaviors which distanced her from friends, family and community. **He and his primary partner also engaged in major financial abuse.** X is a working class, oppressed nationality woman, and was at the time a financially unstable recent graduate; Costello pressured her to decline more hours at her job, offering to support her financially as his and his partner's economic situation was somewhat more comfortable due to their petit-bourgeois class backgrounds. **This was couched in political and ideological terms involving her participation in the work of their organization: working less regularly at her job meant more time for organizing.** He then encouraged X enter into a joint bank account, into which she deposited her wages as well as all of her previously accrued savings. After X left the relationship, she was cut off from the funds in the account, despite having paid a large amount of her own earnings into it, forcing her to couch-surf for months. Costello continued to contact X, using further emotional manipulation (even involving an attempt to withhold her pets), for some time after their relationship ended.

He and his partner have since repeatedly told others that X was the real abuser in this situation, framing a much younger and physically smaller woman of color as a violent offender against two financially and personally established white "communists." **We hope that comrades see through this chauvinistic, victim-blaming tactic, by examining the material circumstances and imbalances that enabled this abuse.**

2: Another victim, Y, recounted how Costello engaged in a pattern of **pressure to engage in romantic intimacy**, during a period when Y was broke and did not have the cash to cover move-in costs at high Boston prices.

He and their mutual-friend roommates had invited Y to crash, and said Y could become a rent-paying housemate once they found a job. Ryan pushed Y for romantic intimacy, and when Y pushed back and criticized the situation, the offer to crash and get settled was retracted. Y felt they were shut off from mutual friends and community in Boston as a result, and returned to living with family out of state.

Again, he displayed a pattern of lovebombing, and leveraging his access to resources in order to pressure potential partners into sexual relationships.

Costello later attempted to contact Y with offers of reconciliation, again using manipulation tactics involving Y's relationships with their mutual friends to pressure them into communication.

3: As noted above, Costello has **used organizing spaces** in which he had relative social capital **to pressure other comrades into relationships**. In 2014-2015, he and his partner had been established collective members in the Lucy Parsons Center for roughly a year. Comrade Z, a collective member of the LPC, felt he was pressuring them into engaging in a romantic relationship, repeatedly, despite them clearly stating their refusal. After that comrade brought this matter to the collective, **Costello was criticized** but before he could be expelled, he quit rather than face discipline.

And more: We know of **at least two other former partners** (no longer in the Boston area) who found their relationships with Ryan (and his partner) to be **deeply manipulative and harmful**. We are similarly aware of their consistent pattern of pursuing members of their formation as sexual partners, and of leveraging sexual relationships for organizational recruitment and vice-versa.

We therefore call on our comrades to isolate Ryan Costello from the movement and denounce any formations which continue to harbor - and thus enable - his predation.

We say:

No tolerance for abuse!

Combat and resist male chauvinism!

Proletarian feminism is the weapon to smash patriarchy!