



Chelsea Manning: Whistleblower on San Francisco Pride

Queer Strike and Payday

The view “No Pride in the slaughter of others” has been a cutting edge in recent queer politics at least since the start of the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. LGBTQ people were visible for the first time in the occupation armies sent by the U.K. and the United States, a move welcomed by some—but certainly not all—as a victory for LGBTQ liberation. But as Queer Strike said at numerous anti-war protests, “how can we celebrate when women, children, and men are being bombed and murdered—just because it’s done by an integrated military!” It’s a cause for mourning, not celebration.

Chelsea Manning’s heroic acts of conscience confirmed this, saving countless lives. It’s no accident that first as an out gay man and later as a trans woman, Chelsea felt herself an “outsider” in the military. Because she was not prepared to ignore what she learned about the horror and the pain of all those considered “outsiders” as “collateral damage,” she refused to be complicit just because it was her job. As she said: “If the public, particularly the American public, had access to this information . . . it might cause society to reconsider the need to engage in counterterrorism while ignoring the human situation of the people we engaged with every day . . . I felt I accomplished something that would allow me to have a clear conscience.”

Leaking the truth as she did heightened the power of grassroots movements against war and devastation, starting with the movements of resistance in Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti, and other places under occupation. No one today can claim

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they “didn’t know” what was happening, thanks to her and WikiLeaks. Yet the LGBTQ movement was not quick to respond in support of her extraordinary courage and determination.

Over a year after Chelsea was arrested and despite the almost 10 months of torture in solitary confinement in Quantico—against which many, including grassroots LGBTQ individuals and groups, were furiously organizing—there was still a deafening silence among establishment/high profile LGBTQ and anti-war organizations. These organizations refused to speak out in her defense, and the mainstream LGBTQ media (at least in the United States and the U.K.) barely acknowledged that Chelsea existed. Yet at the grassroots, many LGBTQ individuals and groups were actively mobilizing in her support. Challenging this whiteout and hoping to mobilize more support, Queer Strike and Payday men’s network issued an open letter to the LGBTQ movement, urging people to take action:

That LGBTQ organizations and press have ignored [her] case is particularly outrageous in the US, where many such “representatives” of the LGBTQ community campaigned ardently for repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy against gay men and lesbian women serving openly in the US military, in effect championing our “equal right to kill.” Why are they not going all out to defend a gay brother’s right to refuse to kill? Why is [Chelsea] not being championed publicly as our gay hero, splashed all over the LGBTQ press to mobilize urgent support to get [her] released! (June 2011)

There was no response. But two years later, on April 8, 2013 (with Chelsea’s trial just two months away), everything changed when Chelsea Manning was nominated as grand marshal of San Francisco Pride by Joey Cain, former president of San Francisco Pride. Manning was one of four nominees, and won the election with the highest vote. The board of San Francisco Pride confirmed her appointment and the full slate of grand marshals, including Manning, was announced in the *Bay Area Reporter* (the major LGBTQ newspaper in San Francisco). But the president of the SF Pride Board, Lisa Williams, rejected the nomination. Whether Williams did it unilaterally or the whole board did it together has been kept secret. *Not a single member of the 10-member Board has been willing to disclose what happened.* A press release posted on San Francisco Pride’s website quoted Williams saying

. . . even the hint of support for actions which placed in harm’s way the lives of our men and women in uniform—and countless others, military and civilian alike—will not be tolerated by the leadership of San Francisco Pride. It is, and

would be, an insult to everyone, gay and straight, who has ever served in the military of this country.

In response the LGBTQ community exploded in rage and the Grand Marshal, Not Court Martial coalition (GMNCM) was formed to demand that Chelsea be reinstated. Many supported Chelsea Manning as an anti-war whistleblower and our queer hero; others were angry that San Francisco Pride was acting as a rogue board, overriding all policies and procedures. Some called for major changes in San Francisco Pride. Rather than have Pride be just a corporate-sponsored “party,” people wanted attention paid to more substantive LGBTQ issues, including low incomes/wages of the majority of LGBTQ people, lack of pensions and care for elders, homeless youth, the need for affordable healthcare, housing, welfare, and immigration rights. We decried the fact that Pride leaders invited military recruiters to Pride, while publicly criticizing Private Manning and taking away the nomination for which she had been democratically elected.

Gay writer Glenn Greenwald (who also publicized the Edward Snowden leaks) called it when he said of San Francisco Pride:

First, while even a hint of support for Manning will not be tolerated, there is a long roster of large corporations serving as the event’s sponsors who are welcomed with open arms. The list is here. It includes AT&T and Verizon, the telecom giants that enabled the illegal warrantless eavesdropping on US citizens by the Bush administration and its NSA, only to get retroactively immunized from Congress and thus shielded from all criminal and civil liability (including a lawsuit brought in San Francisco against those corporations by their customers who were illegally spied on).¹

Chelsea’s daring act, which revealed the horrors of war, inspired veteran anti-war activists from the 60s and young people alienated by mainstream queer politics, and it brought together anti-war activists queer and straight. She became a catalyst for a rage felt by activists who saw “Lesbian Gay Freedom Day” being sold first to beer companies and later to major corporations. Like in many Western countries, pride committees have turned into businesses complete with Boards with employees; fees for contingents were required and requests for “sliding scale” fees were denied.

The protests that followed expressed outrage at the torture and homophobic abuse Manning had endured. At the same time, the truth about the reality of LGBTQ people’s lives burst the bubble of happily married affluent, professional gays and so-called “equal rights.” Far from the lifestyle seen on TV shows like “Ellen”—the facts about LGBTQ life—the poverty of the elders, the suicide of the young, and the homelessness of queer veterans all started to pour out.

Research and high profile media articles appeared in San Francisco and London (and no doubt elsewhere) echoing what protesters were raising.² Chelsea's courage began to regitalize the queer community in San Francisco and far beyond. Its collective power was taking shape and was about to show its strength.

The first in a series of vocal and angry protests and press conferences began outside the San Francisco Pride office when close to 200 people rallied to demand Chelsea's reinstatement as grand marshal. Heartfelt speeches were made recalling the spirit of the Stonewall rebellion and how it had gotten lost with the corporatization of Pride. The Stonewall rebellion were women and men, Black, Latino/a, working class, young and old street queers and drag queens fighting against police repression—not a Ltd. company!

The initiative attracted a wide age range of people. There was a group of young people who organized Flash mobs in neighborhoods, distributing massive amounts of information about Manning's case. Although the protests were mostly men, a lot of women also took part. Most were working class and there were veterans, survivors of AIDS, people with disabilities, including people from diverse backgrounds—Afro American, Latino/a, Filipino/a, immigrant and U.S. born. In contrast, coalition meetings, which were run by consensus, were mainly white and male though efforts were made to get more women and transgender people involved.

There were disagreements on, for example, whether or not to use civil disobedience as a tactic. The GMNCM coalition never called for firing Williams (board president) or Plante (CEO), but some continued to press for this demand. United in our anger about the attack on Chelsea and the politics of Pride, we mobilized and overcame as best we could these divisions, which threaten to weaken every movement. At the same time, international actions to support Chelsea were taking place in 17 countries, including Afghanistan and Korea.

The San Francisco Pride board was due to meet on May 7 and the LGBTQ community was pressing for Manning's reinstatement to be discussed. Though the board was told that hundreds wanted to attend, they insisted on a very small meeting room. Shortly before the meeting they released a new document claiming Manning could not be nominated as grand marshal because she is not local to the Bay Area! This was the first time this objection and this criterion was raised. Only 15 people were allowed into the room and more than 100 were excluded, no cameras were allowed, and the crowd and even the press got angry.

Daniel Ellsberg, former military analyst and whistleblower, who released the *Pentagon Papers* exposing the truth about the Vietnam War, had immediately stepped forward to support Chelsea. He was among the few permitted in and later complained to the many outside that speakers were only allowed

one-minute presentations. Meanwhile the San Francisco Pride board called the police on the community and went into a private session throwing out the few of us who remained.

The noisy protests continued and got the attention of national and international news media. A mock San Francisco Pride board meeting outside the Pride office with 75 participants was followed by a community meeting at the Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club. A complaint about Pride mismanagement signed by a number of organizations, referencing the “rescinding [of] the Manning decision and discrimination,” was filed with the Human Rights Commission. Pressure was put on elected officials to call on the board to hold a public meeting before Pride, and by May 31, 2013, the Pride board gave in and a historic speak-out with 150–200 people took place at the Metropolitan Community Church. About 50 people spoke vehemently against the board’s action, demanding Manning’s reinstatement. The anger in the room forced the board to agree to reconsider reinstatement and give an answer within a week.

Within days of the start of Chelsea’s trial on June 3, the LGBTQ community held a press conference outside the Pride office, demanding Manning’s reinstatement as grand marshal, but the board refused to budge. Another protest and speak-out was held outside of a Pride membership meeting on June 11; grassroots LGBTQ people were unrelenting in their determination.

GMNCM kept on with visible community organizing, working with the then Bradley Manning Support Network (now the Private Manning Support Network) in building for a major contingent at the Pride march. Both the transgender and dyke official marches issued statements of support, a well-attended community Teach-in on Manning’s case was held, and an online petition was launched that collected signatures, from 14 U.S. cities and 12 countries in six days. News spread of contingents across the United States (including New York, Seattle, Chicago, and Philadelphia) as well as London, Manchester, and Brighton in the U.K. supporting Chelsea at Pride marches.

On Pride Sunday, there was a contingent of thousands, a cable car for elders and people with disabilities, a flash mob who danced to Michael Jackson’s song “You Don’t Care About Us,” a Brass Liberation Band, led by a massive banner that spanned the entire width of the street. There were many gorgeous banners, signs, and a myriad of expressions of support and love for Chelsea Manning. Not least of these was a plane flying overhead towing a banner praising our “LGBTQ Hero.”

The “creative action” committee of GMNCM did a direct action protest at the front of the march for about 20 minutes, waving signs and chanting for Manning, and got press coverage. Later the military recruiters’ booth was quickly



Chelsea Manning Contingent, SF Pride, June 30, 2013. ©Jeff Paterson/Pvt. Manning Support Network.

surrounded by such a hostile crowd that the booth was forced to close. Without reason or explanation local TV station Channel 20, which covered the march extensively, censored out the Manning contingent (the largest noncorporate contingent). They were immediately flooded with phone calls about this outrage. The Manning contingent subsequently won “Absolutely Fabulous Marching Contingent” and the “Absolutely Fabulous Overall Contingent” awards.

Thousands now know the Chelsea Manning story and although she faced sentencing of over 100 years in prison, the 35 years she got was a blow but also a victory. We must now step up our campaigning until she is released from prison (via presidential pardon or by whatever means necessary) and can rebuild her life within the queer community where she belongs.

From the beginning of the campaign for Chelsea, we have had to challenge homophobia from support organizations (including some that are queer), leaving out the fact that Chelsea was previously an out-gay man, which was an integral part of her struggle. One example of this was the proposed advert in the *New York Times* (25 July), which left this out. We wrote:

We pressed for the fact that Bradley is gay to not be hidden for another reason. There is a great struggle within the LGBTQ movement on whether queer people will stand for the state and military-industrial-prison complex or against them and for justice for everyone. The people who promote gays being in the military as a victory for “equality” expect that gay people will keep their mouths shut about the horrors of war. Hiding what Bradley made public hides that gay people are also refuseniks and strengthens the pro-military wing within the LGBTQ community.

At the same time we also raised the nationalism of the ad, which referred only to “American citizens” especially as much support for Chelsea has come from people around the world as well as immigrant people in the United States. After protests from ourselves and others, the published ad was changed to include the fact that Manning was gay, but the nationalism remained.

After Pride Sunday, San Francisco’s largest event, grassroots LGBTQ people continued their scrutiny of the policies, procedures, and financing of San Francisco Pride and its \$1.7 million dollar budget. Another committee of GMNCM was formed to run people for the Pride board elections. They formed a slate calling for Transparency, Accountability, and Democracy (TAD) and ran seven people. At every Pride meeting the board was challenged by new members (who signed up during the Manning controversy) who demanded to know everything about the organization and especially to know why military recruiters were welcomed at Pride. As with the Manning grand marshal vote, no explanation was ever given.

The board continued to make the upcoming voting process difficult by refusing members the right of access to each other. TAD organized a candidates forum to have dialogue with the community. Though invited, none of the board members came. Since April, every tactic aimed at discrediting the efforts for change was used, people were called “rioters” and “unruly mobs,” agreements made in Pride meetings were blown off by the board.

Still, we won. Earl Plant (CEO) was fired by the board and about 150 people attended an Open General Meeting (OGM) to elect a new board. What had happened with Manning and how to change the corporate control of Pride were the key issues. Despite attempts to annul the election, they were eventually defeated and the vote was ratified. As one young man said at a meeting, “Chelsea Manning was a whistleblower on San Francisco Pride as well.” This battle against corporate Pride showed that it is possible to move against establishment corruption and win.

At the time of writing, six people from the TAD slate were elected to the 11-member Board. The next period will be a testing time, and the issues about the direction and focus of Pride will be fought out. The new board is committed to

a Town Hall meeting in the fall on why “military recruiters” were at Pride. Many are asking how Pride will clean up their act and support Chelsea Manning. A Pride committee is investigating an alternative bank to Wells Fargo, due to their role in foreclosure evictions in the Bay Area. TAD is dissolving back into GMNCM coalition, which will focus on Chelsea Manning, keeping up our demands on the new board to represent the community, and furthering a queer agenda that is about the 99 percent who are facing many harsh realities, not the 1 percent. No one knows what will come from these efforts, but we all have experienced moments of grassroots community power and possibilities we could not have imagined before. We have new friends and working relationships, and we experienced the power of collectively figuring out how to press for and win change. As an elder man who worked with Pride Safety committee for over 30 years said at a coalition meeting “it was completely absurd that Pride treated Chelsea as they did as Pride was founded by a movement of outsiders and rabble rousers,” like all of us in that room.

NOTES

1. “Pride and Corporate Sleaze,” *The Guardian*, April 27, 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/27/bradley-manning-sf-gay-pride>.
2. Research produced by the Human Services Agency of San Francisco (SF-HSA) has revealed “that 29 per cent of the city’s homeless population are from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.” It went on to say “Others are elderly survivors of the worst ravages of the AIDS epidemic who now find themselves unable to cope financially in a city where rents have been driven sky high by gentrification and the booming economy of nearby Silicon Valley. They end up living in doorways and parking lots. Ian Burrell, “Rise in gay homeless people threatens San Francisco’s name as gay-friendly mecca,” *The Independent*, July 1, 2013. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/rise-in-gay-homeless-people-threatens-san-franciscos-name-as-gayfriendly-mecca-8682304.html>.

Another report showed that 15 percent of the city’s LGBTQ residents aged 60–92 had “seriously considered” committing suicide within the last 12 months. Matthew S. Bajko, “LGBT Seniors Struggle with Suicide,” *Bay Area Reporter*, June 11, 2013. <http://www.ebar.com/news/article.php?sec=news&article=68908>.

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Queer Strike (formerly Wages Due Lesbians) is an international multiracial grassroots network of lesbian/bi/trans/queer women. Founded in 1975, we campaign for economic, legal, and human rights so that women everywhere

can afford to make the sexual and other choices we want. We make visible the caring and survival work we do for families and communities, as the basis for our entitlement to payment and other resources. Support for Chelsea Manning has been a vital focus of our work since she was arrested, and QS San Francisco is a member of the Grand Marshal, Not Court Martial Coalition (www.globalwomenstrike.net).

Founded in 1976, **Payday** is an international multiracial network of men working with the Global Women's Strike. We demand that governments and societies Invest in Caring not Killing so that the money from military budgets goes instead to communities—first of all to women who do most of the world's caring work. We organize with women and men from different countries who are refusing to kill, torture, and rape and with those who blow the whistle on the killers, whether in the military, government, or corporations. We work with prisoners and their families against the death penalty and prison regimes that torture and kill (www.refusingtokill.net).