

Response to London Anarchist Bookfair 2017

October 2017

We write today as a broad collective of anarchist and activist groups, networks and individuals in London and across the UK. We are writing in response to events at the 2017 London Anarchist Bookfair (LABF).

We condemn transphobia of any form in the strongest terms, and we refuse to support any event that condones transphobic behaviour or language, or allows the distribution of transphobic materials and literature. We see this as complicity, and furthermore, we are disappointed in the actions (or lack thereof) on the part of LABF organisers following the events of Saturday. It is disappointing that, once again, LABF has let down and created an unsafe space for many comrades.

During the 2017 event various transphobic leaflets were shared and a number of people attending the LABF made transphobic, transmisogynistic and dehumanising comments in a very public manner.

This is unacceptable behaviour and a form of violence directed at trans people. The contents of the leaflets are not simply a “perspective” or a “viewpoint” but are a form of ignorance, violence and aggression directed specifically at trans women. They are intended to humiliate, harm and dehumanise trans people. The consequences of leaflets like these are not discussion and debate but psychological trauma, terror and death for women of trans experience. To allow these leaflets to spread unchecked creates an environment in which transphobia is not only allowed but encouraged and anyone who is affected by their contents can no longer safely or comfortably access the space.

This is not a question of freedom of speech, or freedom of expression. This is a question of feminist resistance. This is a question of refusing to let trans comrades be terrorised. It is not about playing an identity trump card, but granting the bare minimum conditions for trans and gender-variant comrades to take part in the event – conditions that many can simply take for granted. We are anarchists and activists and we seek to dismantle hierarchies of oppression. As such, we stand in full solidarity with those who resisted the spread of violent hate speech, and those who acted to challenge the violent hate speech of both the people distributing the leaflets and those defending the ideas contained within. The dignity and humanity of our trans comrades is neither debatable nor negotiable.

We understand the impulse to protect comrades who have earned our respect through their actions in the past. We believe in having each other’s backs and offering support and solidarity to those who we feel are being attacked, assaulted or harmed. We believe in offering support

and solidarity to those who have been targeted and harassed by the state and by the police. We believe that those who experience state violence for their political work must stand in solidarity with those who experience state violence for their existence.

We do not believe in allowing our trust and respect for those we have struggled alongside to blind us to the harm they are doing with their views and with their actions. We do not believe that ignoring racist, transphobic or misogynistic views or actions is an act of support, we believe it is an act of enabling harm.

Comrades we trust can have harmful views. Comrades we have organised with for decades can have harmful views. Our trust in each other as activists and as anarchists does not mean we can never be critical, never challenge each other's ideas. It does not mean we believe our comrades can never be wrong, and it does not mean we blindly protect each other from criticism.

Calling out harmful behaviour is about holding each other to the commitment that we can do and be better. It's important that if we are to call ourselves a movement we cannot shy away from being accountable to each other for the harms we can and do cause – this is the basis of our mutual liberation.

While previously Bookfair organisers have insisted that any disputes be decided amongst ourselves, this year, and for this issue, they chose to step in and offer protection and support to people promoting transphobic hate speech. This is part of a pattern of response from Bookfair organisers where incidents of transphobia, anti-semitism, islamophobia, racism and misogyny are ignored, or declared to be only resolvable by those directly affected. We have repeatedly seen situations escalate – sometimes to physical confrontation – because those being harmed and marginalised are not offered support.

Worse still, as we saw this weekend, organisers have stepped in to defend and support those who use oppressive, violent and dehumanising language to perpetuate racist, colonial and patriarchal systems of oppression. To be clear: this is not the first time this has happened and this is not the first time these and other issues have been raised directly with organisers and those involved with the Bookfair.

We write today as anarchists, kin and comrades; as people who have tabled and run workshops at the bookfair; as people who have attended, supported and felt an investment in the Bookfair over many, many years. It's valuable to us that there is a space where anarchists and their ilk can meet each year and celebrate our strengths, achievements, and ongoing struggles. To share knowledge, invest in friendships and build new ones.

We also write as people who have also been progressively alienated over the years by the culture of the Bookfair, who believe that a commitment to anti-capitalist struggle involves a responsibility to think about colonialism and imperialism, about patriarchy and gendered oppression, about racism and white supremacy. Resisting capitalism lies in resisting these forms of oppression, not in reproducing them.

When a space allows for transphobia and trans-misogyny to go unchecked, and furthermore, when it allows racist imperialism, anti-semitism, Islamophobia, misogyny and ableism to ingratiate themselves as part of the culture of the Bookfair, it no longer acts as that dreamed of utopian space, but rather as merely yet another space for enacting the same societal oppressions and aggressions. If the Bookfair cannot evolve beyond this, it is unfortunately no longer a space that we can be a part of.

With this in mind we lay out the following demands on the organisers of the Bookfair:

1. To change the date of the LABF in future years so it does not clash with the United Friends & Family Campaign Annual Demonstration and to actively promote attendance at the annual UFFC March.
2. A clear statement outlining the politics the LABF is committed to, what kinds of behaviour and views are unacceptable and unwelcome at the Bookfair, and what action will be taken by organisers if these boundaries of acceptable behaviour are ignored by attendees or speakers.
3. A clear statement of political values that reflect the above boundaries and that speakers, those hosting meetings, and those with stalls must clearly commit to in order to be able to participate.
4. A commitment to incorporating anti-racist and decolonial struggle into the program of the Bookfair by providing space for workshops and meetings and actively seeking out local black, brown and people of colour led groups to work with and run these meetings.
5. A commitment to incorporating queer and trans struggle into the program of the Bookfair by providing space for workshops and meetings and actively seeking out queer and trans lead groups to work with and run these meetings.
6. A commitment to physical accessibility in all its forms. Firstly, by making sure that workshops and meeting spaces are able to be physically entered by people using wheelchair or mobility devices and that movement through and around the buildings is not reliant on having to wait for an organiser to open a door or operate a lift. Secondly, by incorporating into the program workshops relating to accessibility and disability struggles led by those directly affected by these issues.
7. A commitment to continue the “no cameras” and “no filming” rule without exception given.

Meeting these demands will be a starting point for re-engagement and the possibility of rebuilding trust with organisers, it is not a guarantee. Until these demands are meaningfully engaged with we will no longer participate in or be associated with the London Anarchist Bookfair. This means we will not host a stall, have any meetings or workshops, take out advertising space in the program, or in any way promote the event. Further, we will encourage our members and associated groups to picket the LABF in the future and provide material to those attending about the problems we have identified and the demands we are making.

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