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# Fear of a Queer Planet

By **Salim Muwakkil**

**D**uring the first Black Radical Congress (BRC) last June in Chicago, a group of black nationalists professing Rastafarian beliefs temporarily disrupted events with an impromptu protest of a proposed BRC tenet that stated: "We want an end to homophobia and discrimination against lesbians and gay men."

The protest attracted little support, but it reflected an ongoing tension among black radicals. Some deny that gay rights are relevant to the well-being of the black community. And this is among black radicals, who are comfortable challenging other social traditions of capitalist America. Among more traditional African-Americans, gays are treated with undisguised hostility.

This conflict has long plagued progressive African-Americans. For example, gay rights was an extremely divisive issue at the 1986 founding of Jesse Jackson's National Rainbow Coalition. Jackson is one of the few black clergy who openly supports gay rights, but pro-gay language that appeared in his group's charter was vigorously opposed by other clergy and was significantly altered before it was approved.

There is little doubt that the black clergy's inordinate power reinforces widespread anti-gay biases. Since the black church historically was the only social institution relatively free of white control, it became the center of most community activity. Thus, many issues important to African-Americans are framed by the moralistic context of Judeo-Christian scripture.

While predominantly white denominations debate the inclusion of homosexuals, African-American churches refuse to talk about the issue. According to the Rev. Tim McDonald, head of Concerned Black Clergy in Atlanta, not one major black denomination has formally considered the inclusion of homosexuals. "The perception is that homosexuality is not a reality in our church," McDonald says. "Too many black churchgoers tell themselves that homosexuality is a problem white folks have, not black folks."

Other religions, like Islam, share Christianity's doctrinal aversion to homosexuality. Many conservative black nationalists, particularly members of the Nation of Islam, cite scriptural texts as a basis for their anti-gay prejudices.

Secular nationalists offer cultural reasons. "Homosexuality is a deviation from Afrocentric thought because it makes the person evaluate his own physical needs above the teachings of national consciousness," wrote Molefi Kete Asante in his landmark book *Afrocentricity*, the manifesto of the Afrocentric movement. Asante, and many of his ilk, argue that homosexuality is a product of "European decadence."

Some of the crudest expressions of homophobia emerge from black popular culture. The lyrics of many rap songs are

filled with gay-bashing. Softness is a sin for those ghetto-centric purveyors of hard-core rap, and in their minds, homosexuality is the embodiment of softness. Even those hip-hop artists who profess progressive values pepper their rhymes with occasional "faggots" and other expressions of homophobic bigotry.

At the heart of much of this antagonism to gay issues is the notion that sanctioning homosexual behavior threatens an already imperiled black family. "Our families already are falling apart and our debilitated communities are the results," says Harold Lucas, a prominent Chicago activist. "Adding another barrier to black family life is akin to genocide."

Cornel West, professor of religion and African-American Studies at Harvard University, notes the homophobic influence of the church and the nationalists. But beneath, he sees a larger cultural crisis that presents black men with limited options of self-image and resistance. African-American men historically have been denied access to the social establishment—and often have gained entrance based on physical demonstrations of strength or virility. Thus, machismo has always been a strong component of the black masculine mystique.

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Homophobia is an affliction that deeply permeates this culture and, because of their peculiar history, African-Americans are particularly vulnerable. African-Americans, more than anyone, should understand the perils of prejudice, but many remain loathe to compare the black freedom struggle to the gay rights movement. That's why the BRC's forthright expression of solidarity with the fight for gay and lesbian freedom was a breath of fresh air and a sign that the black freedom movement is truly following the logic of liberation.

But any serious challenge of homophobic attitudes must begin in the black church, where those notions are sanctified and faithfully reproduced. Perversely, the devastating march of HIV/AIDS through the black community has forced the black church to confront its hostility toward homosexuality and triggered some progressive movement within that venerable institution. There also is an incipient movement among younger and more educated clergy to bring an end to the hallowed tradition of gay bashing that for too long has demonized gay African-Americans even as it spoke of God's love. ■

# Gay Labor's Day

By Doug Ireland

**T**racy Cleverly worked at the Salt Lake City franchise of a national restaurant chain, where she received positive evaluations and a promotion. She got along well with her co-workers and manager, who knew she was lesbian. But when the restaurant hired a new manager, he announced that "I don't want those kind of people working here." Within weeks he fired Cleverly and other lesbian and gay employees.

Jesse Shaw worked as a social worker in a Whitfield, Miss., center for mentally disabled children. She brought to work photos of herself, her female partner and their two dogs to show a co-worker who had asked to see them—and left them on her desk. Ten days later she was fired. "Not because you're gay," she was told, "but because you brought in pictures of your lover."

Robert Lewis worked at a North Canton, Ohio, mail-order company. After learning he was gay, co-workers repeatedly verbally harassed him and slashed his tires. Lewis complained to management, but the harassment worsened. He quit after a co-worker told him, "We've driven out others like you, and we'll get rid of you too."

These incidents, just a few of dozens compiled by Georgetown Law Center professor Chai Feldblum for a report on workplace discrimination against gays, show why same-sexers need unions that are prepared to stand up and fight for them. For a long time, most of organized labor turned its back on gay people—until gay union activists began fighting for themselves.

**V**eteran union organizer Nancy Wohlforth recalls the first stirrings of gay people in the labor movement: "It was over 25 years ago when a handful of people met in a converted funeral parlor in San Francisco to discuss the idea of forming a gay/labor alliance. ... It seemed an impossible dream." Today, Wohlforth—the business manager and secretary-treasurer of Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 3 in the Bay Area—is the co-chairwoman of Pride at Work, the national organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender labor. Formed in 1994, Pride at Work celebrated its recognition by the AFL-CIO as an official constituency affiliate last February.

Today, in what Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union, calls a "sea-change" in the labor movement's attitudes toward gays in the last few years, Pride at Work has active chapters not only in San Francisco but in Los Angeles, Seattle, Philadelphia, Washington, Atlanta, New York and several states. And in just the past six months, new chapters have started pulling themselves together in Chicago; Louisville, Ky.; St. Petersburg and Orlando, Fla.; Dayton and Cincinnati, Ohio; Hartford, Conn.; Helena, Mont.; and Bloomington, Ind. That this was all accomplished entirely by volunteers, both union staffers and rank and file, makes it all the more noteworthy. And now the AFL-CIO has given Pride at Work enough



ARCHIVE PHOTOS

Protesters crack the Cracker Barrel.

money to hire a full-time executive director—who starts in July—and pay for travel and chapter development, as well as providing space for a national office in Washington.

There have, of course, always been lesbians and gays in the union movement—I was a UAW staffer myself in the '60s—but this newfound visibility is good not only for gays, but the labor movement as a whole. A few examples:

In Boston, where the Gay and Lesbian Labor Activists Network (GALLAN)—the local Pride at Work affiliate—has been in existence since 1986, a Teamsters local representing the drivers of Miller Beer trucks sought GALLAN's help in organizing a boycott of Miller in Boston area bars. GALLAN responded by leafletting gay bars about the boycott, challenging the attempt by conservative elements in the gay community to villainize Teamsters members as thugs, and publicizing labor's active support of pro-gay ballot initiatives. The Teamsters won their strike—and sent a large contingent to march in Boston's Gay Pride Parade.

In Atlanta, whose airport is a major hub, there was a drive to organize flight attendants at AirTran (formerly ValuJet). Bill Green, who is openly gay and heads both the