

Winnie Mandela, Queerbashing, and the Left

BAD Broadside #3

Several months ago a trial took place in south africa that might have been expected to be of great interest to the progressive lesbian/gay movement. Winnie Mandela was charged with and convicted of various charges connected with the kidnapping and beating of several young men, one of whom was later killed by her associates. What makes this trial relevant to the gay/lesbian movement is that at least part of the reason for this attack was that these men were believed to be engaging in sex with other men, an activity that Mandela apparently finds worthy of punishment by beatings, and even death. Over two years ago, when this incident occurred, Mandela was severely criticized by anti-apartheid activists in south africa. However, with the notable exception of the article, "Has Winnie Lost It?" in the May 1991 *BLK*, we have yet to see any criticism of Mandela by progressive lesbian/gay activists or publications in the united states, including radicals like *Queer Nation* or *Gay Community News*. A number of local lesbians even participated in the organization of a women's event in Boston in her honor last June. Apparently many radical lesbians and gay men feel that queer-bashing is okay, as long as it is perpetrated by other progressives like Mandela.

We concede that it is hard to know all the facts about what happened in this incident, but we have read nothing which leads us to doubt that anti-homosexual bias played an important role in the beatings and murder. Mandela herself admits that the presumed homosexual contact between her victims and a minister at a hostel in which they lived was the motivation for their abduction and beating. She claims, however that she was only trying to "protect" them from "sexual abuse," despite the fact the "victims" have never claimed that any abuse occurred. Like many parents who try to beat homosexual feelings out of their children, Mandela feels it is legitimate to torture those who prefer homosexual sex. If she were truly interested in protecting these men against alleged sexual abuse, why not deal with the supposed "abuser," instead of further abusing the "victims." The only abuse suffered by these young men was that inflicted by Mandela and her friends.

Such actions on the part of Mandela against her opponents should come as no surprise given her commitment to violence and bloodshed as the preferred method of dealing with problems. Mandela has been tied to three other kidnappings and assaults, as well as a disappearance, that took place within a few months of the events she was being tried for. She also has been quoted as saying, "With our matches and our necklaces, we will liberate South Africa," referring to the practice of placing gasoline-soaked tires around the necks of those some anti-apartheid activists consider "traitors", and lighting them on fire. Interestingly, just like Mandela's bullying of young queers, necklacing is used only against black people.

Unlike most of their counterparts in the united states, the progressive movement in south africa refused to keep silent in the face of Mandela's brutality. In fact, the first reports of the assaults and killing were published by an anti-apartheid newspaper, not the press controlled by or supportive of the government. Anti-apartheid organizations in south africa, such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), were quick to condemn such violence on the part of Mandela. The UDF/COSATU statement read, in part, "We are outraged at Mrs Mandela's obvious complicity in the recent abductions and assault of Stompie....We are outraged by the reign of terror that the team [Mandela's body guards, also known as the Mandela United Soccer Club or the Mandela Football Club] has been associated with. Not only is Mrs Mandela associated with the team, in fact, the team is her own creation. We are of the view that Mrs Mandela has abused the trust and confidence which she has enjoyed over the years.... The Mass Democratic Movement hereby distances itself from Mrs Mandela and her actions."

This rebuke from her former allies in the anti-apartheid movement came only five months after another challenge to her image as a well-liked opposition leader. In September 1988, Mandela's home in Soweto was burned down by local "comrades," apparently in retaliation for a sexual assault against a student leader by members of the "football club." (Apparently, real sexual abuse is acceptable to Mandela and her friends, as long as it is heterosexual.) The attack on Mandela's home appears to have been prompted as well by ill-feeling generated by Mandela's rather comfortable lifestyle, which includes ownership of a Mercedes, in the midst of the widespread poverty in Soweto. According to a source in the anti-apartheid labor movement, the public condemnation of Mandela by COSATU and UDF was prompted by pressure on the part of Soweto residents fed up with the activities of Mandela and her associates. Prior to the killing of Stompie Seipei, opposition among other anti-apartheid activists to Mandela's thugs had led both Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela to call on her to disband the club.

The left in the united states, hetero or homo, has never been very principled in its defense of individuals against the tyranny of progressive governments or movements. For instance, some gay/lesbian activists still defend the cuban politicians who imprisoned queers in the past and quarantine HIV-positive people today, practices these activists would find intolerable if engaged in by the united states government or its allies. Apparently, for many leftists, political leaders like Mandela and Castro who mouth the slogans of liberation do not need to live up to the same standards of behavior as mere mortals. In a column entitled "Leftist cheerleaders are often wrong, but never in doubt," Thomas Sowell discussed the mindset of Mandela's supporters: "Long before the present ugly episode, Winnie Mandela was justifying the hideous practice of burning political enemies alive. How could anyone have romanticized such a person? Like too many other issues, South Africa is not approached as a serious question about the fate of millions of flesh-and-blood human beings, but as a symbolic issue providing yet another backdrop for our own moral preening. Those who are preoccupied with showing that they are on the side of the angels are quick to find angels to side with. Winnie Mandela was just one of those angels."

Just as many american leftists once ignored credible evidence that progressive leaders like Lenin and Castro were brutalizing and killing dissidents, most leftists today, including many lesbian/gay activists, continue to fawn over Mandela, despite the fact that even many of her former allies have seen her for the bully she is and have spoken out against her. People who are serious about liberation, sexual and otherwise, need to have a consistent commitment to personal freedom and be willing to speak out whenever people are unjustly attacked, whoever the attacker may be. Hypocritically covering-up and apologizing for the excesses of progressives puts into serious doubt the left's stated commitment to a free society.

(A slightly different version of this broadside appeared in *Gay Community News*, July 7-13, 1991)

Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade (BAD Brigade), PO Box 1323, Cambridge, MA 02238, July, 1991