

Thoughts on the March on Washington

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"Triage" by Valerie Jacobs

Inside Looking Out

by Laura Whitehorn

This article is dedicated to the memory of Mike Riegle, who might not have agreed with it, but definitely would have let me know.*

I HAD A WONDERFUL LESBIAN FANTASY THE OTHER day. In prison, you tend to fantasize a lot — about food, sex, the ocean, music, everything. But this one was slightly different. It was about the gay and lesbian March on Washington, being planned for this spring. In my fantasy, the organizers of the march are sitting around talking about the huge demos held in Italy, Germany, and France to protest fascism, anti-semitism and racism. They think we need that kind of thing here, given the unending flood of racist attacks in the past year. (Just last week, the local Panama City,

Florida, news carried the story of a Black man set on fire by three white men.) So they decide to make the march on DC a gay and lesbian march for human rights and against racism and white supremacy. They contact African American and New Afrikan organizations to invite them to participate; then they put out a unitary call for all progressive organizations to support and join the march.

Thinking about this fantasy, I smiled and felt light and joyful. For a minute — and then I said aloud, "Dream on, girl, it's not going to happen." Which is exactly what a few lesbian friends said on the phone when I told them about my fantasy. In fact, if I could be magically transported to a meeting of the march organizers, I'd probably have the same argument with the

very same people I argued with twenty years ago, over the strategy and direction of the women's liberation movement and lesbian/gay liberation, over what I saw as the critical, primary importance for white people to support national liberation and fight white supremacy.

I've lived in several cities where there have been large lesbian communities, but we anti-imperialist lesbians were always a small minority. For a lot of years, we didn't fight very much for gay and lesbian liberation, so our isolation was exacerbated by justified anger from a number of queers. And, of course, in those times, political differences were treated as battle lines that couldn't be crossed, and we were not very good listeners (to say the least).

But over the years our politics changed, and when some of us in the DC "Resistance Conspiracy Case" made a political point of being "out" lesbians, we received a tremendous amount of support from the lesbian and gay communities — support that extended not only to our co-defendant comrades, but to all political prisoners and Prisoners of War. Support that has continued long after the DC case itself was over.

Similarly, the support those of us inside doing AIDS support and education get from gay and lesbian AIDS activists is nourishing, invigorating, and an absolute necessity to our work. In the best moments, we're able to make the other women prisoners we work with feel that support, that community, too, and it makes the work effective in changing lives and saving lives.

The militant, courageous struggle of gay men and lesbians in the AIDS crisis has politicized the gay and lesbian community and built a movement. It even affected the outcome of the presidential election. At this point, I think it would be a grave mistake to limit our vision to one of acceptance and inclusion in the system. I'm opposed to discrimination against gays in the military, but I'm equally opposed to gays and lesbians struggling to *join* the U.S. military — the fighting arm of imperialism and intervention. We're at a juncture where more revolutionary, liberating goals are needed. I believe the goal of liberation has to start with building alliances with oppressed peoples fighting for justice and survival — fighting racism, colonialism and white supremacy in Amerikkka in 1993.

Why should lesbians and gay men do this? Why should we focus a national march on the demand for justice for "others"? First, some of those "others" — some of those African Americans oppressed by white supremacy — are in fact "us," lesbians and gay men. So if we fail to fight racism head on, then we end up defining gay liberation as a white-centered, white-dominated struggle. I see anti-racism as integral to gay liberation. The freedom I'm fighting for is not the "freedom" to be part of a racist class society. I believe that racism is the essence of the injustice and moral corruption that characterize our society. The oppression of the New Afrikan/Black Nation, from slavery on, is fundamental to the history and present reality of the U.S. So

I actually can't picture how this society could stop being homophobic and sexist *without* an end to racism. I don't believe it's possible to have *some* justice, *some* equality. That's what the U.S. has now, and it's nothing but a sham.

Homophobia and vicious attacks on queers are on the rise, and I believe we should continue to protest them. But there are times when the most revolutionary thing to do — the thing that most confronts the system, most threatens to change things at a fundamental level — is to step beyond ourselves, beyond our own situation, and "fight the power" on the broader basis of the cause of human justice for all oppressed people. Right now, because racism has been so blatant and prevalent, and because white progressives and leftists have not managed to raise an effective, lasting anti-racist response, it seems this show of unity would be particularly powerful.

The outrageous LA verdict was nearly a year ago. It exposed the continuing strength of racism in every aspect of U.S. society and law. I agree with Barbara Smith and other Black leaders who argued in the aftermath of the LA rebellions that white progressives should see fighting racism as an urgent priority. No "business as usual." In the time since LA, there hasn't been a sustained, clear anti-racist call or activism from white leftists or progressives. The gay and lesbian movement is one of the most organized, activated radical forces in the U.S. at the moment, and that seems to me to bring both the possibility and the responsibility of leadership — that is, to take up the critical need for anti-racist action.

Finally, I think we should adopt anti-racism as a primary demand because the lesbian and gay movement raises the vision, the potential, for a different concept of power from the white, ruling-class male power wielded at the core of U.S. society. Like the women's liberation movement, the gay and lesbian movement can promote an alternative source of power, in the collective strength and power of the powerless. That's part of why harnessing our rage about AIDS has been so liberating and life-affirming in the midst of sickness and dying. Power is not only an alternative to powerlessness. It also necessitates decisions and choices of value. My vision (it's more than a fantasy) is that this movement should choose *not* to be included in a white, male-defined capitalist power structure, but rather to put our view of life from the bottom to good use, and build on our critique of U.S. society by fighting for real justice and freedom for all oppressed people. ▼

Laura Whitehorn, revolutionary anti-imperialist political prisoner and lesbian. Marianna, Florida, January 10, 1993

**Mike Riegle was a gay activist who worked for years to make GCN (Gay Community News) responsive to gay and lesbian prisoners. He also worked in the Redbook prison book program. He died with AIDS on January 10, 1992.*