

LESBIANS AND GAYS AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN REVOLUTION:

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In 1985 the ANC stated its support for Gay and Lesbian rights in the context of its overall commitment to human rights. This is a great achievement but only a stepping stone towards the emancipation of South African lesbians and gay men. The emergence of visible gay people, such as Simon Nkoli and Ivan Toms in the anti-apartheid struggle shows us that the historical moment for action towards lesbian and gay liberation has arrived. As with the issue of feminism it is important that this new struggle be part of the overall struggle for a democratic and non-racial South Africa. It is also important to stop this issue from being bypassed by the Mass Democratic Movement, or used as a tool against the unity of the struggling forces. Lesbian and gay cadres inside the ANC and progressive activists within in the country must link up to create a revolutionary strategy for the emancipation of lesbians and gay men in the overall struggle for democracy and non-racialism.

To understand what is meant by liberation or emancipation in the context of lesbian and gay South Africans we need to have some background as to the cause and context of the oppression from which the liberation is emerging. There are no accurate statistics on the number of South Africans who consider themselves to be lesbian or gay, nor studies on the number of same-sex sexual partners South Africans are likely to have during their lifetimes. Using figures that emerged from Alfred Kinsey's studies in the United States and subsequent research carried out by the Kinsey Institute it can be conjectured that between five percent and ten percent of South Africans have the majority of their sexual experiences with the same sex. Using the lower figure that would suggest a ballpark figure of 1,5 million people. Of that figure probably less than ten percent consider themselves to be lesbian or gay and interact with other lesbian and gay people, that would be about one hundred and fifty thousand South Africans. These figures must be used cautiously as they have no empirical basis and may be too high or too low.

^{EXIT, an independent gay South African newspaper lists over 50 gay and lesbian organizations in all of the provinces.}
The whole notion of homosexuality and lesbian and gay identity is also ~~completely~~ culture bound. Although it appears that homosexuality is a natural variation in human behaviour occurring in all societies, how the cultures explain and limit the expression of sexual orientations varies widely. As with most things in South Africa we must accept at least four different cultural traditions, namely: African, Asian, European and Coloured. From a materialist point of view all these societies experienced greater or lesser degrees of feudalism and later were all drawn together, unequally, with the transformation of the world economy into a capitalist mode of production and its extension, colonialism. Despite variations in the class natures of these societies we can safely say that all of them were patriarchal and depended on a sexual division of labour and labour reproduction which, to varying degrees disenfranchised women from political and economic decision making. Violation of the ideology of patriarchy and heterosexuality were often severely punished. In both European and African societies male and female homosexuality became associated with witch craft and the penalty

was often death. The conflict intensified when the contradiction between urbanization and the decreasing need for large families on the one hand, and orthodox religious and cultural beliefs which made homosexual contact taboo started surfacing in the late nineteenth century. With the increasing emergence of a homosexual consciousness and counter ideology, particularly in Europe, new lines were drawn demarcating the "them" and the "us". With the declining power of the church in Europe, patriarchalist turned to science as a justification of their violent repression of sexual minorities. The Nazi's took this to an extreme by exterminating as many as 200 000 homosexuals in their concentration camps.

With this battle raging between patriarchalists and sexual minorities in Europe it was not long before the antagonisms spread to the colonies. On the one hand Christian missionaries increased their vitriol against so-called crimes against nature, and on the other hand many covert homosexuals went to the colonies to live a lifestyle that was unacceptable and dangerous in Europe, of course this included some members of the clergy. For many African societies the first contact with a culturally recognized form of homosexuality came with highly exploitative sexual relations imposed by white European men. For many, homosexuality became associated with rape or pederasty committed by European settlers, priests, soldiers and administrators. This is not to say that all African people who came into contact with Europeans of the same sex did not appreciate the experience but rather to say that, over all, the combination of colonialism and homosexuality soon attached a new negative connotation to same-sex sexual relations.

This negative view of homosexuality as it related to colonialism was made even worse in South Africa with the emergence of the brutal system of apartheid. For many black South Africans homosexuality is still associated with workers' hostels and the prisons of the racist state. One of the overt goals of the post-1950's apartheid regime was to destroy the African family. Black African women were either used as domestic servants, thus separated from their own families or were forced into the bantustans. Black African men were recruited into the mines and the agricultural sectors where they would often be away from their families for a year or more at a time. As the white bosses controlled the movements of black labour they could successfully force them to live in single sex dormitories where the only chance for sexual and emotional contact was with other men. The prisons were an extension of the same structure with the boere permitting and sometimes encouraging homosexual rapes, again of course in the context of patriarchal aggression.

Despite this aspect of the apartheid system the government remained staunchly homophobic (ie. with an irrational fear and hatred of alternative sexual ideologies). Following the Afrikaner nationalist coming to power in 1948 male homosexuality remained illegal and, due a quirk of Victorian legislation, lesbianism remained outside the legal realm, and hence, invisible. Any creative or positive moves towards liberating homosexuality have been dealt with severely by the South African Police (SAP). In Johannesburg, gay men's bars are only barely

or the censorship boards.

tolerated so long as they are mainly white and remain apolitical. This seemingly unusual tolerance is presumably associated with the interests of certain homosexual men within the apartheid power structure, that is, government officials, police, and military. The tacit, even subconscious, agreement is that these men are allowed a certain indulgence on the understanding that they remain loyal to the cause of fascism and white supremacy, which obviously includes keeping up a false image of heterosexuality in the work place and the community, at least, and often, actively contributing to the persecution of other homosexual men and women.

Reactionary white male homosexuals have clung to this humiliating space provided for them and actively support the system in an attempt to protect themselves and win further breadcrumbs of protection. A well known example is the Gay Association of South Africa which went so far as to raise money for the "boys on the border" despite the fact that gay men in the South African Defence Force (SADF) are regularly segregated and assigned office work so they do not disrupt the macho sense of camaraderie amongst the supposedly heterosexual troopies. Another highly suspect group is the Transvaal Organization for Gay Sport (TOGS) which appears to be an elitist organization for older white men who have a definite stake in the maintenance of the apartheid class structure. In a number of countries there has been a trend by wealthy gay men, and some lesbians, to protect themselves from being associated with the grass-roots gay and lesbian organizations in the hope that they will be rewarded by their capitalist heterosexual masters. White men are not the only ones to blame. Too many white lesbian South Africans accept apartheid as being in their interest and refuse to unite with their black sisters. Generally these women have their circle of friends, shun political activity, hide behind various degrees of alcoholism and vote NP at election time. Some of these people, male and female, are committed racists and must be bypassed during the formation of progressive structures. Others are, like many white South Africans, ignorant of how most of their fellow citizens live and will be open to political education and mobilization.

On the other hand there are also self-professed progressive lesbian and gay organizations such as Lesbians and Gays against Oppression, Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand, and the Organization of Lesbian and Gay Activists. It will be these and similar organizations that will work together to formulate a national programme of action. It should also be noted that a number of Afrikaner writers who met with representatives of the ANC at Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe in August of 1989 raised the issue of the movement's position on lesbian and gay people's rights.

The significance of the ANC's acknowledgement of gay and lesbian rights as a human rights issue in South Africa can be seen as going against the grain of the legacy that has built up under colonialism and apartheid. On a number of occasions the movement has affirmed the legitimacy of lesbian and gay insistence on being part of the agenda for a new South Africa. There is no other government in Africa with the progressive analysis of

society that is central to the workings and decision-making of the ANC.

Gays and lesbians around the world know, however, that recognizing gay and lesbian rights "in the context of human rights" is unlikely to have an immediate effect, or perhaps any effect on reversing the pervasive anti-gay ideologies of most societies. Firstly, there are concrete issues, such as: job protection, the right to housing, the right to participate in religious movements of one's choice, the right to hold government and security related jobs, the right to bear arms in the military, the right to have children or to foster parent, and in the case of divorces the right to equal consideration in the area of custodies, the right to common law or other forms of marriage,.... The list is perhaps endless as there are no guarantees for a lesbian or gay man in world made for heterosexuals. Either lesbians and gay men are supposed to fight every expensive and humiliating battle themselves or the state must step-in in a preventative manner. To allow the status quo to continue is obviously to ignore the inherent justness of the claim by lesbians and gay men to equal status in society, that is, it is to give tacit approval to oppression and to challenge homophobes to do their worst. As European and North American lesbians and gays know all too well, when all else fails some heterosexuals are quite happy to turn to violence against sexual minorities, especially when they know they can get away with it.

The goal of lesbian and gay men internationally is not to gain a truce with heterosexuals but to challenge them to recognize the inherent violence of their societies and to recognize that in the final analysis we are all diminished by the oppression of minorities. The target is not just a statement on human rights or even an exhaustive list of legal protection but to open up the debate of lesbian and gay rights in the context of the whole society and the destruction of patriarchy through the building of socialism. The whole view of sexuality and gender must be challenged in a consistent and revolutionary way.

No discrimination on a societal level is without motivation. A revolutionary movement must address the issue of what motivates discrimination against gays and lesbians, how this is related to social and ideological inequality between men and women as maintained by certain modes of production, and how an objective understanding of 'homophobia' can lead to a successful transformation of society. All modes of production so far have depended on a sexual division of labour which has maintained gender inequality. This gender inequality is an inherent part of the foundation of all exploitative societies. The 'father' is the controller of wealth and power in the family, and the family is a microcosm of the state. Arbitrary distribution of power and wealth to ~~the~~ favour the few is 'naturalized' through patriarchal institutions like the family. Clearly the deeper one goes into this analysis the more threatening it becomes to heterosexuals who believe in the sanctity of the status quo. By illuminating homosexuality revolutionaries are exposing to the society its "other", its unconscious self, its secret that it is not an absolute but rather another complex ideological construction

built on a material foundation that is unevenly distributed.

How to proceed:

Below is a proposal for a political agenda that deals with the issues raised here. The first section is addressed to lesbians and gay men inside South Africa, the second section consists of recommendation to the African National Congress.

To the Community:

Years of oppression have decreased the ability of lesbians and gay men in South Africa to carry out united actions and democratic decision-making. The central objectives for activists are the unification of the community, the democratization of community structures, and integration of community organizations into the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM). Clearly, none of the following suggestions will be easy to bring into effect. There is always the risk of state repression at any point. But, as with all other South Africans, lesbians and gays must accept that the struggle is a difficult one that requires immense discipline and commitment by activists. Smallness of numbers can be to activists' advantage as they can organize more successfully against the enemy than vice-versa. The enemy relies on the momentum of ignorance and hatred built up over centuries of patriarchy. The enduring motivation for community organizers is that the days of apartheid are numbered and a new era is dawning. At this time of upheaval progressive lesbians and gays must seize the initiative to bring about profound and irreversible changes in South African society that will include them.

In many cases no infrastructure exists at all and activists will be struggling even to initiate the sense of belonging which must precede building unity. To achieve this activists should:

- create coalitions of already existing, multi-racial lesbian and gay organizations.
- encourage new formations, especially amongst youth and women in all sectors of the society.
- educate people in the community on how to run organizations democratically and provide inter-group workshops on approaches to leadership, recruitment, fund-raising, and other essential tasks.
- focus should be on coalition building. Small, grass-roots organizations coming together to strengthen networks without shifting power to a few individuals will make community structures durable and motivated.
- it is essential that activists work with and within unions. The only real guarantees for linking sexual orientation and job rights will come through unions.
- existing media associated with the MDM should be approached to help with publishing newsletters and advertising community events and programmes. It is also high-time that Exit commits itself to progressive change and stops worrying about what the Nats will think.
- this whole network can then be linked up with the MDM. It is imperative that the community recognizes that the present apartheid regime is irrelevant to the struggle of gay and lesbian people. Energy must be focussed on bringing about a

new social order in a post-apartheid South Africa.

- activists should join other, non-gay, organizations especially overtly political ones to show the community members where they are represented and where they are not.
- organising around the AIDS crisis is an obvious example of a place where (male) community-specific issues can link up socially and politically with heterosexual interests.
- as soon as possible activists should initiate a democratically achieved political programme to be presented to the ANC. Such a programme would detail community objectives, recommendations to the movement on policy issues, and a statement of commitment to the principles of a democratic and non-racial South Africa. The process of drafting the document could itself help strengthen community unity and democratization. Congresses and other forums could be used inside the country to bring as much participation and awareness as possible into the drafting of such a programme. The document could also be taken to unions and other progressive organizations for endorsement and support.

To the cadres of the African National Congress:

Despite the fact that some heterosexual comrades have taken on the responsibility to inform themselves around the issue of sexual orientation, lesbians and gay men within the ANC should be taking the initiative to open a Movement-wide debate.

- the first task is becoming visible. Visibility means telling your unit commander about your sexual orientation (if you have not already!). It also means raising the consciousness of comrades you work with and not allowing homophobic comments or actions to go unchallenged. All of this can be done in a constructive atmosphere and as part of one's overall political and ideological education.

- open the debate up with other comrades both at the personal level and in larger forums. Write in to the Movement publications expressing your views and helping to contextualize the objectives of lesbian and gay comrades in the overall struggle.

- assess the possibility of going out into the community to help mobilize progressive elements to take on active roles in establishing links between lesbian and gay organizations and the Movement. This would include those activists with open links to the MDM and the ANC as well as recruiting individuals to Umkhonto weSizwe to work in the military underground.

- those cadres who are also active in the South African Communist Party could work on developing a materialist critique of gender and oppression in conjunction with the material that is surfacing around the issue of feminism.

An Injury To One Is An Injury To All! Forward to Victory!