

Crackers at the Barrel

Doug Graves

Cracker Barrel, a Southern restaurant chain known for its racist hiring policies and Confederate flag decor, instituted a company-wide policy in 1991 to not employ persons “whose sexual preferences fail to demonstrate normal heterosexual values.” Twelve people were promptly fired from the chain because they were lesbian or gay.

Several hundred people from the Detroit/Ann Arbor activist community took part in a series of energetic demonstrations to protest the opening of a new Bigot Barrel in Belleville, Mich. beginning October 1.

The left/liberal “leadership” of the “protest coalition” issued a list of demands asking Cracker Barrel to rehire all terminated employees, advertise in the gay/lesbian media, donate to AIDS research and so on. While the many anti-authoritarians who participated in the actions were not eager to embrace a “right to work” ethos, they were visible in facing off the backlash against sexual freedom represented by Cracker Barrel and the large cop/right-wing christian/homophobe presence at the demonstrations.

Brutality by the cops, who were overwhelmingly white, badgeless, and wearing surgical gloves, set the tone for the tense weekly Sunday confrontations. One top cop on the scene said the gloves and not wearing badges was a “common safety measure.” A regular contingent of pro-Cracker Barrel demonstrators also appeared each week carrying placards with slogans such as, “We’re the Gay Bashers,” “If You’re Not Straight, Get out of the State,” and “I’ve Got A Cure For Aids,” (with a picture of a handgun).

In one instance, when a skirmish line of cops in riot gear forced the protesters out of the street and toward a muddy ditch by the side of the road, a demonstrator grabbed a cop by his baton, threw him into the ditch and successfully escaped. The following Sunday, the same man was singled out by storm troopers on horseback, beaten and charged with assault

Some local punks from the notorious 404 collective, who had brought donuts with them hung on strings at the end of bamboo fishing rods, responded with chants of, “Bad Cop, NO Donut.” During the protests, anti-gay demonstrators were allowed to stand on Cracker Barrel property, protected by the cops. “I don’t want ‘them’ touching my food!” they screamed.

Like many political situations, the Cracker Barrel protests ultimately devolved into a petty power struggle between liberals and leftists, namely the original coalition leadership and the RWL (Redundant Wreckers Legion). The RWL attempted to control the protests at every level with their stifling tactics and rhetoric, to the point of trying to suppress any autonomous speech or action which did not fit into their “militant” scheme of things.

The RWL, an authoritarian trotskyist cult, has massed half of their 120 national members in Detroit, making their usual disruption even more troublesome. They accused anarchists, radical faeries and independent thinkers of not being “serious” or “militant” enough for staging a same sex kiss-in and a dance in a circle singing (to the tune of “London Bridge”) “Cracker Barrel. Falling Down, Falling Down...My Fair Faggot”! So, we had to fight not only the cops and the Cracker Barrel supporters, but also the leftist cops.

As the movement against Cracker Barrel dwindled under the weight of a court injunction against the queer liberation activists, arrests, police brutality, and internal movement squabbles, serious questions are raised about the value of participating in spectacularized left/liberal events. The need for autonomous groups of homo-/bi-/omnisexual community and action presents itself again.

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