

January 21, 2019

OPEN LETTER TO THE LEADERSHIP OF THE BIRMINGHAM CIVIL RIGHTS INSTITUTE IN SUPPORT OF DR. ANGELA Y. DAVIS

As scholars and historians of the Black Freedom Movement, and as veteran civil rights and human rights activists, we are appalled and outraged by the decision of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) to “dishonor” our colleague and sister, Angela Y. Davis, by rescinding its 2019 Fred Shuttlesworth Award, claiming that she does not meet the criteria for the award. As a daughter of Black Birmingham whose sense of justice was shaped by her community’s organizing tradition, who better than Davis to be honored by such an award.

There are few individuals more admired and beloved in the U.S. Black Freedom struggle, and the global struggle for human rights and justice than Angela Y. Davis. Her status as an international human rights advocate is iconic. Davis has been an unwavering stalwart in the fight for freedom and justice for more than fifty years, speaking out against racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, Islamophobia, war, settler-colonialism, and imperialism around the world. She has been one of the most ardent advocates for prison abolition and for humane alternatives to the caging of our fellow human beings. She has also been a steadfast supporter of indigenous peoples. And yes, she has spoken out strongly in support of Palestinian rights, as have millions of principled activists around the world, including tens of thousands of Jews, and many Israelis.

In reflecting on the BCRI decision we are reminded of the following quote by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “The ultimate measure of a man (or woman) is not where he (or she) stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he (or she) stands at times of challenge and controversy.” Sadly, the BCRI leadership has failed to live up to King’s challenge, caving in to pressure to reverse their earlier decision to honor Davis.

We may not all agree on the best way forward in the Middle East but we do share Dr. Davis’ view that the Israeli Occupation is wrong, and that the repressive, discriminatory and often violent policies of the Israeli government vis-à-vis the Palestinian population are wrong and indefensible. This is not a stance against the Jewish people, as is sometimes erroneously suggested, and as evidenced by the increasing number of Jewish people who are a part of the movement for Palestinian rights. Rather it is a stance against the policies of the Israeli government, and our own government’s immoral support of those policies. This is one of the fundamental human rights issues of our time, and we will not be bullied into silence on it. Individuals and institutions that choose to punish, censor, blacklist and dishonor anyone who dares to take a critical stand on this issue are acting in the disgraceful tradition of McCarthyism and furthering the intolerance of dissent.

Finally, we are especially disturbed and angered by the recent targeting of Black supporters of Palestinian rights. Journalist and scholar Marc Lamont Hill was abruptly fired as a CNN contributor for expressing his views on Palestine at the United Nations in December of last year. And now, Angela Davis is publicly disrespected in this way, in her hometown, a site of so many heroic struggles for the values that she, and many of us, uphold. This reminds us of the ways in which liberal supporters of civil rights reforms turned their backs on Dr. King when on April 4, 1967 he dared to speak out condemning the war in Vietnam. This sends a clear message today: how dare independent Black activists express views on international politics that differ with mainstream U.S. policy. This message, was then and is now, paternalistic and insulting. Many others, especially Palestinian and Arab scholars and activists, have also been targeted and attacked for their outspoken stance in support of Palestinian human rights. And we support their right of expression as well.

We stand with Angela Davis and applaud her outstanding and admirable track record as a public intellectual, feminist scholar, and advocate for peace, freedom and justice around the world. The BCRI leadership has refused to recognize or value Dr. Angela Davis's sterling human rights record. They have instead chosen to pander to conservative critics and the pro-Israel lobby. History will not view this decision kindly.

Angela Davis represents the best of the tradition Black freedom fighters who were uncompromising internationalists, refused to bow to intimidation, and were unafraid to speak truth to power. We thank and honor Angela Davis for her life's work, her moral courage and her visionary leadership, even if BCRI has chosen not to do so.

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