

DEPARTMENTS

LGBT Workers Need Unions, Not Rainbow Capitalism

Major companies are weighing the benefits of pinkwashing as anti-LGBT extremism is on the rise. Doug Ireland's 1999 piece reminds us what organized labor can offer queer and trans workers.

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Activists rally in support of LGBTQ rights at New York City Hall on October 8, 2019 in New York City. (Photo by Drew Angerer/Getty Images)

anti-gay and anti-trans agitators have been making news by boycotting major corporations running Pride campaigns and stocking rainbow merchandise. While many corporations make profit-based calculations to decide whether to continue their support for the queer community, in 1999 for *In These Times*, Doug Ireland described how queer and trans workers were winning labor and gay rights battles

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by organizing across communities. Ireland's words serve as a reminder of how capital has no vested interest in queer and trans liberation, but the labor movement should—and it can win meaningful, material protections for queer and trans workers.

In 1999, Doug Ireland wrote:

Tracy Cleverly worked at the Salt Lake City franchise of a national restaurant chain, where she received positive evaluations and a promotion. She got along well with her co-workers and manager, who knew she was lesbian. But when the restaurant hired a new manager, he announced that “I don’t want those kind of people working here.” Within weeks he fired Cleverly and other lesbian and gay employees.

Jesse Shaw worked as a social worker in a Whitfield, Miss., center for mentally disabled children. She brought to work photos of herself, her female partner and their two dogs to show a co-worker who had asked to see them- and left them on her desk. Ten days later she was fired. “Not because you’re gay,” she was told, “but because you brought in pictures of your lover.”

Robert Lewis worked at a North Canton, Ohio, mail-order company. After learning he was gay, co-workers repeatedly verbally harassed him and slashed his tires. Lewis complained to management, but the harassment worsened. He quit after a co-worker told him, “We’ve driven out others like you, and we’ll get rid of you too.”

These incidents, just a few of dozens compiled by Georgetown Law Center professor Chai Feldblum for a report on workplace discrimination against gays, show why same-sexers need unions that are prepared to stand up and fight for them. For a long time, most of organized labor turned its back on gay people—until gay union activists began fighting for themselves.

Veteran union organizer Nancy Woforth recalls the first stirrings of gay people in the labor movement: “It was over 25 years ago when a handful of people met in a converted funeral parlor in San Francisco to discuss the idea of forming a gay/labor alliance. ... It seemed an impossible dream.” Today, Woforth—the business manager and secretary-treasurer of Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 3 in the Bay Area—is the co-chairwoman of Pride at Work, the national organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender labor. Formed in 1994, Pride at Work celebrated its recognition by the AFL-CIO as an official constituency affiliate last February.

Today, in what Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union, calls a “sea-change” in the labor movement’s attitudes toward gays in the last few years, Pride at Work has active chapters not only in San Francisco but in Los Angeles, Seattle, Philadelphia, Washington, Atlanta, New York and several states. And in just the past six months, new chapters have started pulling themselves together in Chicago; Louisville, Ky; St. Petersburg and Orlando, Fla.; Dayton and Cincinnati, Ohio; Hartford, Conn.; Helena, Mont.; and Bloomington, Ind. That this was all accomplished entirely by

volunteers, both union staffers and rank and file, makes it all the more noteworthy. And now the AFL-CIO has given Pride at Work enough money to hire a full-time executive director—who starts in July—and pay for travel and chapter development, as well as providing space for a national office in Washington.

There have, of course, always been lesbians and gays in the union movement—I was a UAW staffer myself in the '60s—but this newfound visibility is good not only for gays, but the labor movement as a whole.

A few examples:

In Boston, where the Gay and Lesbian Labor Activists Network (GALLAN)—the local Pride at Work affiliate—has been in existence since 1986, a Teamsters local representing the drivers of Miller Beer trucks sought GALLAN's help in organizing a boycott of Miller in Boston area bars. GALLAN responded by leafletting gay bars about the boycott, challenging the attempt by conservative elements in the gay community to villainize Teamsters members as thugs, and publicizing labor's active support of pro-gay ballot initiatives. The Teamsters won their strike and sent a large contingent to march in Boston's Gay Pride Parade.

In Atlanta, whose airport is a major hub, there was a drive to organize flight attendants at AirTran (formerly ValuJet). Bill Green, who is openly gay and heads both the Association of Flight Attendants' AirTran local and the AFA's Eastern Region covering nine airlines, says: "We sent some of our members who are lesbian and gay—and there are a lot of 'em—into the gay businesses and bars to rally support. They knew of our struggle at AirTran, and we told people, 'If we go on strike, don't fly AirTran'—a lot of our local drag queens use it to fly to Florida, and our gays vacation up and down the East Coast. The response was terrific." AFA got its contract with AirTran.

In Seattle, the Communications Workers of America recently began a campaign to organize 6,000 "permatemp" workers at Microsoft and other companies in this high-tech capital, many of whom are gay. Andrea Demajewski, the CWA staff organizer spearheading the campaign (baptized WashTech) and a Pride at Work activist, has been using an Internet chatroom for gay techies to identify gay Microsoft workers and bring them into the organizing drive. Demajewski says that being openly lesbian has been an advantage for the WashTech effort: "Gay high-tech people are very supportive of our work. It's always true that if you reach into the gay community, you find people who understand from their own life experiences the need for organizing."

Considering how insular and arteriosclerotic the labor movement often was in the days of leaders like George Meany and Lane Kirkland, the strides made by labor's gays have been enormous. The first major gay-labor coalition in the history of the modern American gay movement began in 1975 in San Francisco, when Bay Area Gay Liberation (BAGL, then the largest local gay group) decided to support a strike by municipal workers. This led to a mutual assistance agreement between the city's Central Labor Council and the organized gay community, whose interests frequently coincided. Later that same year, when the Coors brewing company tried to bust its Teamsters local, the gay community enthusiastically supported the union's boycott because of the company's notoriously anti-gay policies. (Coors workers were required

to take a lie detector test that included the question, “Are you homosexual?”) By the end of the ’70s, California’s labor movement was a solid gay ally, providing the money and manpower to defeat the 1979 Briggs Initiative, which would have banned homosexuals from teaching in public schools.

In 1982, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) became the first major union to adopt a resolution opposing discrimination against gays and lesbians. Ginny Cady, a 22-year AFSCME veteran who serves as international union president Gerald McEntee’s gay liaison, says that in the early ’80s this was largely a pro forma position: “There wasn’t a lot of support or discussion of gay issues—it just wasn’t talked about. Now, a majority of our contracts have sexual orientation in their non-discrimination clauses, and increasing numbers include domestic partnership benefits for same-sex couples.”

AFSCME’s national conventions now feature an informal “gay day,” with a gay caucus, workshops and reception. McEntee has a 12-member gay and lesbian advisory committee, with delegates appointed by the union’s regional vice presidents. AFSCME’s legal department even filed a friend-of-the-court brief in the successful fight to have the Supreme Court strike down Colorado’s Amendment Two, which would have barred local gay rights laws in the state.

The SEIU is another union that has undergone a radical transformation into one of the most gay-friendly in the AFL-CIO. “I remember six years ago at our convention when, for the first time, an openly gay delegate stepped to the microphone with fear and courage to support a resolution opposing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation,” says SEIU president Stern. “To see how far gay and lesbian people who stood up for themselves have come in what I like to think of as a more and more progressive union is thrilling.”

Now, there is a Lavender Caucus in each of the union’s three regions in the Western region alone there are more than 30 local caucuses and Stern predicts that it will soon become the second such interest group to be recognized by the national union (along with AFRAM, the African-American caucus), entitling it to significant financial support.

Tom Barbera, a rank-and-file SEIU activist from Massachusetts who chairs Pride at Work’s Chapter Development Committee, credits Stern’s predecessor, John Sweeney--now AFL-CIO president--for leading the way. “Sweeney really took a strong stand for inclusion of gays and lesbians in the civil rights struggle,” Barbera says. “Whenever he made a speech, he always made sure to include us in the list, along with women and people of color. It’s the fact that Sweeney now is the federation’s president that has dramatically opened up the labor movement to Pride at Work and what we do. As someone who’s been around for awhile, I’m so happy that there’s a place for lesbian and gay working-class people.”

In some places with a history of strong labor-gay cooperation, smart new-breed labor leaders are helping to organize Pride at Work. That’s the case in Atlanta, where Stewart Acuff, the president of the city’s Central Labor Council, also helped mobilize strikes against the Cracker Barrel restaurant chain, infamous

for its anti-gay employment policies. (The Georgia case in which Cracker Barrel fired a cook for being lesbian is portrayed in the superb documentary *Out at Work*, which also featured members of the United Auto Workers and AFSCME who suffered discrimination; the film has been used by Pride at Work as a major organizing tool.)

Pride at Work, its leaders underscore, is firmly in the progressive camp, both within the labor movement and the gay community. As national co-chairwoman Wolforth says, “We reject what I call vending machine unionism—I put in my quarter and you service me—and want to help change the labor movement so that it becomes more of a community again.”

However, as the out gay community has mushroomed in the last two decades, it has come to reflect political and cultural changes in society as a whole, and has a growing conservative element—symbolized by the decision of the nation’s wealthiest gay rights organization, the Human Rights Campaign, to endorse New York Republican Sen. Al D’Amato for re-election last year despite his anti-labor, right-to-life record. Pride at Work’s February convention voted firmly to oppose the Millennium March in 2000—an event unilaterally called by HR and the Metropolitan Community Church (the largest gay religious denomination)—and the march’s conservative “Faith and Families” theme. The gay labor activists see HRC, with its \$15 million budget, as appealing mostly to middle- and upper-class white gays, and view the HRC-led march as a prime case of empire-building that will have little political impact and waste a lot of money and energy that ought to go into grassroots organizing. “Working-class gay and lesbian people get screwed every day,” says Wolforth, “but HRC doesn’t care about that.”

Pride at Work also has helped to unionize large AIDS services organizations, like Washington’s Whitman-Walker Clinic and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, overcoming opposition from conservative gays. Wolforth points to a current dogfight in San Francisco as a “perfect specimen of the ramifications of race and class issues in the gay community.” The Castro Street Merchants Association, representing businesses in the city’s largest gay enclave, are fighting a proposal by the openly gay president of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Tom Ammiano (a longtime teachers union activist), to establish a homeless youth shelter in the heart of the Castro. “A lot of gay kids are forced out on the street when they come out, and many of these gay kids gravitate to the Castro,” Wolforth says. “Yet here we have part of our gay community that’s gotten rich and ugly saying, ‘We don’t want your shelter here.’ This is the guppie (gay yuppie) mentality gone mad.”

Pride at Work is a real-life rebuke to those neocons and neolibs who engage in ritual denunciations of “identity politics”—but anyone with grassroots organizing experience knows that all politics are identity politics, including the working-class solidarity that makes unions possible. And the gay labor activists are proving the truth of the late civil rights leader Bayard Rustin’s dictum that all successful political coalitions are based on mutual self-interest. For example, the Oregon Pride at Work chapter helped the large statewide group, Basic Rights Oregon, initiate an ongoing progressive voter identification project with the state’s labor movement. The more than 100,000 gay and gay-friendly voters identified by the

project helped swell the coalition's roster of progressive voters to over half a million—enabling it to defeat a series of right-wing, anti-gay ballot measures and pass pro-labor referenda, making it a real power in state politics. Similar projects are forming in Michigan, Washington State, Texas and Florida.

But the labor movement still has a long way to go. Only a few national unions have followed the lead of AFSCME in making gay and lesbian issues a permanent and formal part of shop steward training programs. “We get a lot of calls from very homophobic areas, rural areas, where there are very bad incidents of homophobia in plants and on the shop floor,” Woforth reports. “People are afraid to come out, and don’t know how to approach their unions. Even some progressive unions are lagging—the UAW provides very little support for its gay members. So we’ve still got a lot of work to do. And no matter what anybody says, we’re not going to go away, and we’ll keep on growing.”

Until Pride at Work’s Washington office opens, for more information write to them at 340 Brannan Street, Suite 400, San Francisco, CA 94107.

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