

Queer Americans and Unions: Redefining Equality at Work

Throughout the twentieth century and continuing into the modern era, labor unions in the United States have advocated for the members' rights within and outside of the workplace. Labor unions are uniquely positioned to further advocate for the rights of marginalized people because they exist as regulatory bodies outside of governmental structures and derive their power from their membership. Looking specifically at equality for LGBTQ+ employees, labor unions have consistently been ahead of the rest of America. As early as the 1930's, unions with substantial queer membership were strong advocates for fair and equal treatment within the workplace. 'Queer work,' or jobs that are held primarily by queer individuals, provide unique avenues for advocacy, as the majority interests within the union are the minority interests outside of it. In other unions, smaller coalitions of queer workers pushed the policies and politics further to the left, eventually having national impact. The queer communities within labor unions propelled a new idea of equality at work that shaped the labor movement throughout the twentieth century.

Historically, unions have not always worked to foster inclusive environments but have remained ahead of the curve in terms of recognizing and advocating for the rights of marginalized people. Unions are designed to represent the collective ideas of the membership, and in industries where the membership is largely heterosexual white men, diversity frequently falls to the far edges of their political agendas (1). Internal politics of unions also deeply impact the acceptance or rejection of diverse leadership and membership. Exclusion can be used as a tool to limit the supply of labor and increase the bargaining power of an organization. Fear of lower wages or strong prejudices can lead to large scale attempts to exclude certain groups from the workforce (1). On the other hand, diversity can also be an asset for unions. The power of a union comes from collectivism, and building a large tent of support can increase the negotiation

power of the union(1). Across America, people of color, specifically Black men, make up a greater percentage of union membership than white men. Of the Black working population, twenty percent are union members compared to just fifteen percent of white men(1). Beyond having racially diverse membership, the Council for Industrial Relations, a national governing body for unions, distributed anti-discrimination propaganda as early as the 1950's, and the President of the American Federation of Labor-Council for Industrial Relations delivered a speech in 1951 affirming that, "Our fundamental aim is inclusion, rather than exclusion... The labor movement has done more than any other organization or group to advance the cause of interracial justice, and of economic and social democracy"(2). Additionally, unions backed the feminist movement of the 1970's, distributing propaganda displaying the message "A woman's place is in her union"(3). Although labor unions have a complex history with diverse membership, they have consistently supported social movements fighting for equality.

In relation to the queer liberation movement, unions representing members in traditionally queer jobs were uniquely positioned to successfully advocate for radical inclusion as early as the 1930's. The Marine Cooks and Stewards Union, established in 1901, had substantial queer membership(4). The reasoning for this is twofold: first, the union was one of very few places that would hire queer men discharged from the military during WWI for being gay, and secondly, the reputation as a 'safe space' for gay men led to many workers joining (4). The power of the queer workers within the union can best be demonstrated through a slogan they adopted in the late 1930's, "It is anti-union to race-bait, red-bait, and queen-bait"(4). By centering queer people, they were better positioned to advocate for their own rights, and the rights of their fellow workers. Tying the struggles faced by queer and non-white workers to the union cause promoted a culture of respect and acceptance far beyond what existed outside of the

union. As one heterosexual sailor put it, “The most important thing was not that we had gays. It was that an injury to one was an injury to all — and we practiced it” (4). Similarly, at Barney’s, which was described as the ‘gayest workplace ever’, union members leveraged their queerness in their advocacy for more fair treatment(5). In 1996 when Barney’s filed for bankruptcy, the workers began advocating for a Successor Clause to be added to their contracts that were set to expire within months. This clause would guarantee that any new ownership of Barney’s would be required to retain all of the union contracts and maintain the benefits that had already been negotiated. Progress on this front was slow, as the workers staged subtle protests inside of the store, and eventually, the contracts expired without the clause. On April 6th, the day Barney’s was set to open for the season, the workers staged a union-themed drag show on the street outside(5). The show attracted enough attention to sway management, and the contracts were closed shortly after(6) By being out, loud, and proud, the workers at Barney’s were able to gain public favor at a time when support for the queer community was not strong. Coming together and leveraging identity has proven to be one of the most effective strategies for the advancement of both union and queer rights.

In cases where the majority of union membership was not queer, small coalitions were still able to dramatically change policy. In 1970, the American Federation of Teachers became the first union to openly voice their opposition to discrimination against LGBTQ+ workers. In a statement released after the national conference in 1969, they report:

WHEREAS, professional people insist that they be judged on the basis of professional and not personal criteria; and WHEREAS, it is the responsibility of trade unions to provide job protection from all forms of discrimination that is not based on performance such as race, color, sex, religion, age, or ethnic origin:

RESOLVED, that the American Federation of Teachers protests any personnel actions taken against any teacher merely because he or she practices homosexual behavior in private life. (Executive Council) (7)

This resolution was adopted only because of the enormous effort made by a small number of queer workers in attendance at the conference. James Mitchell, a representative of liberal local 280 attended the conference in western themed drag and introduced a resolution on gay rights (8). The resolution was initially killed in the Human Rights Committee, but was later read by the Executive Council. At the conference, no vote was taken on gay rights, but several months later AFT released the statement. Although it was substantially less radical than Mitchell's initial draft, the adoption of a pro-gay stance in the 70's by a national organization was revolutionary (8).

Mitchell was not the only queer teacher advocating for change in the union. In New York City, the Gay Teachers Alliance worked within the local union to create change, and in San Francisco, the Gay Teachers Coalition did the same(8). Inspired by the work of Mitchell and the other teachers unions, members of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Workers also began advocating for gay rights. Tom Stabnicki and Barry Friedman were local union leaders in Chicago, and an out gay couple. At the national conference in 1981, they dressed in drag and held caucuses for queer members. By the next conference in 1982, they had built a strong group of activists, including Bailey T. Walker Jr., an organizer. Together, they introduced a resolution at the conference. Walker described the experience, "They were steeling themselves for what they thought was going to be a horrible battle... He said, 'These are members of the union, working men and women,' and emphasized that the resolution square with the union's tradition of civil rights, [Dr.] King and Memphis, and the women's movement. Not another

negative thing was said” (8). Although the group supporting this resolution was small, they were able to pass it with minimal resistance. This can partly be attributed to the support of the Black Caucus, who wore pins at the convention saying “Another AFSCME Member for Gay Rights” (8). The collective nature of their efforts are the foundation of unions, and were successfully utilized to allow a small group to make a large impact.

The advances in queer protections made in individual unions and locals had a dramatic impact on AFL-CIO policies. One of the strongest advocates for the gay rights resolution in the AFSCME, William Lucy, was the cofounder of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. Lucy leveraged his platform to speak before the AFL-CIO Building Trades and the Industrial Union departments. His impassioned defense on the grounds of shared interests between the two movements won the support of the departments (9). In 1983, the AFL-CIO adopted a gay civil rights resolution. The adoption of these resolutions demonstrates the sort of ripple effect that small coalitions had on the national union agenda. Steadily, they pushed the union to support gay rights building to this national stance on the rights of gay workers. Additionally, at the same convention, the AFL-CIO released another resolution urging the federal government to fund AIDS research and develop systems to protect people from workplace exposure to AIDS, a cause central to the queer rights movement of the time. The resolution says, “To respond to the growing concern about AIDS and AIDS-related problems in the workplace, the Centers for Disease Control ... must develop and issue guidelines to protect all workers who may face occupational exposure to AIDS” (10). In a political climate as conservative as that of the 1980’s under Reagan, this was an extremely bold move. Again, the strong support of unions up and down the ladder stems from the work of small organized coalitions of gay union members.

The labor movement as a whole began to notice the strategic importance of queer workers after their support helped to turn the tide in a boycott. The first major inroad between queer activists and the labor movement came in 1974 during the Coors beer boycott (11). Teamsters unions in the San Francisco Bay area were attempting to win exclusive union contracts with several companies, including Coors. When faced with extreme resistance, the Teamsters turned to a variety of minority community leaders, including Huey Newton of the Black Panther Party and Harvey Milk, a gay community organizer (12). These communities, inspired both by the desire to support fellow working class people, and by the discriminatory hiring practices within Coors, took up the boycott. Milk was able to convince the Tavern Guild, an association of more than one hundred gay bars, to participate in the boycott based on the discriminatory hiring practices enforced by Coors and the rumors that they specifically sought out gay men to fire. Still to this day, Coors beer is not sold in a single gay bar in San Francisco (12). The shared interest of the queer community and the teamsters lead to an extremely successful boycott. Although this boycott did not produce any major culture shifts within the Teamsters union or the broader labor movement, it did provide an inroad to work supported by mutual interests, which was increasingly important in the following years.

The efforts of these small coalitions and strategic moves culminated with the creation and acceptance of Pride at Work representing the influence that queer people had on the labor movement. The organization was created by queer labor activists in 1994 as a way to lobby the union to continue their support of gay rights after the relative silence on the Defence of Marriage Act (13). PAW's affiliation with the AFL-CIO was not easily won. In spite of the historic support, members of the executive council argued that the group did not represent a population that was historically discriminated against in the collective bargaining process(14). These

complaints are representative of much of the pushback that activists throughout the twentieth century faced. However, a strong ally, John Sweney, was the president of the CIO at the time and pushed hard for their affiliation. Eventually, in 1997, Pride at Work was recognized as an official constituency group within the AFL-CIO. The organization now works to advocate for the rights of queer workers from the top down, creating a space for workers to be represented both as union members and as queer people.

The advancement of queer rights within the labor movement were carried on the backs of queer workers fighting to improve their conditions both at work and at home. The labor movement consistently remained ahead of the nation in terms of recognizing and protecting the rights of queer workers. For many to this day, a union is the only form of workplace protection they have, which is why the victories won by persistent activists are so important.

(1) Susan Wood, "Unions, People, and Diversity: Building Solidarity Across a Diverse Membership" *The Diversity Factor*, Volume 7, Number 1, Fall 1998, In Cornell University Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/1813/75182> (accessed May 13, 2022).

(2) William Green, transcript of speech delivered before the Institute of Civil Rights and Race Relations of the Detroit and Wayne County Federation of Labor, January 13, 1951, <https://exhibitions.lib.umd.edu/unions/social/african-americans-rights#:~:text=In%201963%2C%20the%20labor%20movement,Voting%20Rights%20Act%20of%201965>.

(3) "A Woman's Place is in Her Union" button, photograph, AFL-CIO Artifact Collection, 1970, <https://exhibitions.lib.umd.edu/unions/social/womens-rights>.

(4) Allan Bérubé, "'Queer Work' and Labor History," in *My Desire for History : Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*, ed. John D'Emilio, Estelle B. Freedman (The University of North Carolina Press: 2011), 259-269.

(5) Miriam Frank, "Coming Out: From Construction of Couture: Coming Out in Unionized Workplaces," in *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America*, (Temple University Press: 2014), 17-47.

(6) Andrew Ross, "Strike a Pose for Justice: The Barney's Union Campaign of 1996," in *Out at Work: Building a Gay-Labor Alliance*, ed. Kitty Krupat, Patrick McCreery (University of Minnesota Press: 2001), 78-92.

(7) American Federation of Teachers, "DISCRIMINATION AGAINST HOMOSEXUALS DENOUNCED," American Federation of Teachers Archive, <https://www.aft.org/resolution/discrimination-against-homosexuals-denounced>

(8) Miriam Frank, "From Common Enemies to Common Causes: The Labor Movement and the Gay Movement in Action and Coalition ," in *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America*, (Temple University Press: 2014), 84.

(9) Howard Wallace, "AFL-CIO Takes Strong Stand for Gay Rights," San Francisco Vector, October 13, 1983, 1.

(10) Susan Seager, "AFL-CIO ends convention with call for AIDS protection," United Press International, November 1, 1985.

(11) Allyson P. Brantley, "Hardhats May Be Misunderstood: The Boycott of Coors Beer and the Making of Gay-Labor-Chicana/o Alliances" *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 89, Number 2, 2020.

(12) Miriam Frank, "From Common Enemies to Common Causes: The Labor Movement and the Gay Movement in Action and Coalition ," in *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America*, (Temple University Press: 2014), 78.

(13) Desma Holcomb, Nancy Wohlforth, "The Fruits of Our Labor: Pride at Work" *New Labor Forum*, Number 2, Spring-Summer 2001.

(14) Miriam Frank, "From Common Enemies to Common Causes: The Labor Movement and the Gay Movement in Action and Coalition ," in *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America*, (Temple University Press: 2014), 100-103.