

Labor, Civil Rights Groups Praise Introduction of Anti-Discrimination Bill

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A measure that would outlaw discrimination in the workplace based on sexual orientation and gender identity was re-introduced in Congress yesterday (4-24-07). The bipartisan bill, known as the Employment Anti-Discrimination Act (ENDA), would make it illegal to fire, refuse to hire or refuse to promote an employee based on the person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Expressing strong support for passage of the bill, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney said, "In far too many states, it is still absolutely legal to fire someone because of their sexual orientation and gender identity or expression."

Sweeney added that protections against job discrimination should be expanded to include sexual orientation and gender identity. "It is just plain wrong for anyone to discriminate against or fire a worker based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and this legislation gives Congress the chance to make such shocking discrimination illegal once and for all," he stated.

Nancy Wohlforth, Co-President of Pride at Work, AFL-CIO, the LGBT voice in the labor movement, said, "The fundamental precepts of the labor movement are centered around the recognition that workers must be assessed only on their job-related performance. Yet, all forms of workplace and employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression remain lawful in the majority of US states."

Currently 33 states lack legal bars against discrimination based on sexual orientation, and 42 states allow discrimination in the workplace based on gender identity.

In a press statement, ACLU Legislative Counsel Christopher Anders added his organization's support for the bill. "Too many people for too many years have lost jobs for no good reason. Congress should pass, and President Bush should sign, this bipartisan bill this year," said Anders.

The National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC), a Washington DC-based civil rights organization dedicated to empowering Black same-gender-loving, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, weighed in with support for ENDA. H. Alexander Robinson, NBJC's executive director and CEO, said, "We envision a world where all people are fully empowered to participate safely, openly, and honestly in family, faith and community, regardless of race, gender-identity or sexual orientation. ENDA is particularly important because it will provide protections in the workplace, the source of most people's livelihoods."

Robinson urged quick and decisive action by Congress to provide this protection. "Discrimination is wrong and discrimination in the workplace should be illegal," he stated.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), which first supported the original version of the bill introduced in the mid-1970s by Rep. Bella Abzug (D-NY), echoed support for the bill.

NGLTF Executive Director Matt Foreman especially singled out for praise the bill's inclusion of transgender workers for protection against discrimination. "We vowed we would not support an Employment Non-Discrimination Act that left behind the transgender members of our community," he said.

NGLTF withdrew its support for ENDA in the late 1990s when its leading proponents failed to include gender identity as a protected category. Supporters of the more inclusive version of the bill won their case in 2005 when the bill was revised.

A spokesperson for the Business Coalition for Workplace Fairness, a coalition of companies that support passage of the bill, cited legal protections from discrimination as the best way to promote diversity, a key to productivity and the recruitment of qualified and talented workers.

Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA), one of the bill's original co-sponsors, rejected criticism leveled by anti-gay opponents of the bill. In the few states where similar measures have been adopted, Frank asserted, "it has caused none of the problems that opponents inaccurately claimed it would and it has provided job protection for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people who ask simply to be allowed do their jobs and be judged on their job performance."

Responding to anti-gay critics of the bill, ENDA supporters point out that the bill excludes small businesses from its scope, has nothing to do with legalizing gay marriage, and would not require companies to create new employee benefits.