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## Gay rights groups angered by weaker antidiscrimination bill

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Leading gay rights organizations, with the pointed exception of the Human Rights Campaign, withdrew their support Monday from a landmark gay civil rights bill after House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco and Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., pulled transgender people from the legislation that would protect gays and lesbians from workplace discrimination.

The intense backlash by the gay community surprised House Democratic leaders, forcing them to postpone what had been intended as a big House vote this week to include gays and lesbians in the nation's job discrimination laws for the first time in American history.

The debate playing out between gay rights activists and two of their biggest supporters in Congress raises a classic political question: Are activists better off compromising and accepting progress or continuing to fight for everything they want?

Gay rights groups have been waiting for a decade for the bill to pass, and many say a few more months to try to build support for including gender identity would be worth the wait. They say transgender people will have little chance of winning protection from discrimination if they aren't included in this bill.

Pelosi and Frank, however, fear the inclusion of gender identity will kill the overall bill - again denying gays and lesbians protection against job discrimination.

Pelosi, D-San Francisco, issued conflicting statements in reaction to the turmoil. The first, issued Friday, declared her personal support for including transgender people in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act but asserted she would stick by her decision to drop them from the bill to give it a greater chance of passage.

On Monday, the speaker issued a new statement saying, "After discussions with congressional leaders and organizations supporting passage" of the bill, committee and floor votes on the bill had been postponed to "allow proponents of the legislation to continue their discussions with members in the interest of passing the broadest possible bill."

The new statement was signed by Rep. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., the only openly lesbian member of Congress (Frank is the only openly gay member), who had withheld her endorsement from the bill after the decision to drop transgender people.

The statement also was signed by Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, who heads the committee that will oversee the bill. The committee's vote on the jobs discrimination bill had been scheduled for today but was postponed until the week of Oct. 15.

**Nearly 100 gay organizations sent a letter Monday to every member of the House saying "very clearly and unequivocally that we refuse to accept and in fact we oppose any legislation that leaves any part of our community behind, particularly the transgender community," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task**

**Force. "This is a watershed moment in the history of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement. The last five days have been one of the most grueling and difficult we have ever faced, but our community has rallied in ways we've never seen before."**

The letter was signed by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; National Stonewall Democrats; Lambda Legal; the National Center for Lesbian Rights; and dozens of other national and state groups.

Frank argued last Thursday in pushing to strip gender identity from the bill that the measure would fail if transgender people were included. Frank issued a four-page statement late Friday defending his decision. He promised hearings on a separate bill banning workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual identity as a way to educate the public and members about a group he said was only recently added to legislation covering sexual orientation.

The definition of transgender is still in flux, but it includes transvestites, people who have changed their gender and others whose sexual identity, as opposed to orientation, is at issue.

"Being in the majority is a mixed blessing," Frank said in the statement, saying House Democratic leaders faced a difficult choice between achieving historic protections for sexual orientation - which could pass the House - or waiting until enough votes are there to include gender identity in the bill, too.

"The question facing us - the LGBT community and the tens of millions of others who are active supporters of our fight against prejudice - is whether we should pass up the chance to adopt a very good bill because it has one major gap," Frank said. "I believe that it would be a grave error to let this opportunity to pass a sexual orientation nondiscrimination bill go forward, not simply because it is one of the most important advances we'll have made in securing civil rights for all Americans in decades, but because moving forward on this bill now will also better serve the ultimate goal of including people who are transgender than simply accepting total defeat today." The timing of the decision drew wide suspicion among activists who questioned why Democratic leaders were in such a hurry to pass the jobs discrimination bill this week.

A companion bill has not been introduced this year in the Senate, and even if the legislation passed both chambers, supporters believe it is sure to draw a veto from President Bush. Pelosi and Frank are scheduled to be honored this week at two major gay activist dinners in Washington - Frank at a Victory Fund dinner scheduled Wednesday and Pelosi at the Human Rights Campaign national dinner Saturday. Some gay groups were organizing protests over Pelosi's appearance.

HRC, the largest gay rights lobbying force on Capitol Hill, has refused to respond to requests for comment since Frank announced the decision last Thursday.

HRC president Joe Solmonese released a statement calling the news "devastating" but did not say whether the group would join others in boycotting the legislation.

House leaders "very firmly believe" the legislation will pass if gender identity is scrapped, Solmonese wrote in the statement. "After trying everything at our disposal to change this outcome, we are just beginning to come to terms with what that means."

Toni Broaddus, executive director of Equality Federation, a group working to pass gay anti-discrimination laws in the states, said eliminating transgender people from legislation has proven to be a mistake where it was tried at the state level.

"It's hard for us to even look at this strategy as something that serves the community well because we know it's been flawed in the states."