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## Banding Together

*The division in Congress about whether employment protections should exclude transgender workers has forced unity for gay rights activists across the board.*

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As the old saying goes, nothing focuses the mind like the prospect of a hanging in the morning. Last month the Democratic leadership in Congress unexpectedly decided to strip protections for gender identity and expression from the proposed federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act, or ENDA. In an unprecedented show of unity, within 48 hours more than 100 LGBT organizations from across the country sprang into action to form United ENDA, a grassroots campaign to pass only the original, unified bill. Indeed, virtually every national LGBT organization unanimously opposed the stripped-down version of ENDA as morally, legally, and strategically wrong.

Last Friday, on behalf of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, I attended a meeting in which senior staffers from the Democratic leadership informed LGBT advocates that our congressional allies intend to move forward with a sexual orientation-only bill -- over the opposition of more than 300 LGBT organizations, including all of the LGBT legal groups, the American Civil Liberties Union, **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, the Equality Federation, Pride at Work, Stonewall Democrats, the National Black Justice Coalition, Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and scores of state and local groups. Tammy Baldwin's staff relayed Representative Baldwin's opposition to this strategy and her strong commitment to passing a bill that protects all LGBT people. Indeed, from the start, Baldwin has consistently maintained that we have the votes to pass an inclusive ENDA and likely to fend off potential Republican efforts to strip gender identity from the bill.

Throughout this ordeal, Tammy Baldwin has shown extraordinary leadership and courage, and she is fast emerging as our rising star in Congress. Similarly, the Equality Federation, a national coalition of state-based LGBT groups, has emerged as a powerful new leader at the federal level. In the past two weeks, the Equality Federation was able to mobilize more than 55 state groups from 43 states to oppose a noninclusive bill and to generate thousands of e-mails, phone calls, and visits with congressional representatives. Never before has the full power and geographic diversity of the LGBT grassroots movement been so dramatically in evidence. NGLTF has also played a welcome new leadership role by coordinating the efforts of other LGBT and allied groups in an extremely nimble and effective campaign.

What do these developments portend for the future? To an unprecedented degree, the LGBT movement has made its voice heard in an entirely new way in Congress. Following Friday's meeting, we have redoubled our efforts to build congressional support for an inclusive bill. In the longer term, many of the groups that have come together to form United ENDA are developing new plans to strengthen our collective federal presence. With new clarity, we understand that we have the power to control our own political destiny and that we must play a much more active role in shaping federal policy.

We are also more unified than we have ever been. Over the past decade transgender people have been reintegrated into the movement after several decades of post-Stonewall banishment. Just as important, many lesbian, gay, and bisexual people who previously felt isolated and marginalized because of their gender expression have felt truly accepted and included for the first time as well. Collectively, we have rejected the wounding accusations that our enemies for so long have used to divide and debilitate us -- accusations that gay men are not "real" men and that lesbians are not "real" women. For the first time, we are operating from a deep-seated conviction that we *all* deserve full equality and respect.

The results have been stunning. Our movement is visible, effective, and respected in a way that it has never has been before. Across the country, LGBT people have rejected an ENDA based on an outmoded and divisive model of our community. Some of our leaders -- both in Congress and within our community -- have been resistant to this message, but new leaders and new voices have emerged. Whatever the outcome of this particular battle, we are poised to be an even more effective advocate on behalf of the entire LGBT population in Congress and the White House as we prepare for the 2008 national election.