



Labor Moves Behind Marriage Drive

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06/26/2008

Speaking by phone from the nation's capital, Hans Johnson was just back from a fundraiser in California.

"The one in Hollywood was a way of recognizing the heroic efforts of the LGBT and allied leaders who stood up to Briggs in 1978," Johnson said.

The Briggs initiative, named for State Senator John Briggs, would have banned gay and lesbian teachers in California's public schools. It was defeated, in part, by opposition from California teachers unions and an alliance made two years earlier between the gay community and 22 union locals that included the Teamsters, the Building and Trades Council, and the International Longshoremen.

"It was a crucible of the modern gay rights movement," Johnson said. "It was also a teachable moment for labor about its mutual interests with the LGBT community."

Roughly 120 people attended the Hollywood event including Dolores Huerta, a co-founder with Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers, Sal Rosselli, the openly gay president of the 130,000-member Service Employees International Union (SEIU) United Healthcare Workers-West, and Reverend Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Church, a gay denomination.

They raised \$20,000 to aid Honor PAC, a gay Latino political group, in its work to defeat a California ballot initiative that would amend that state's constitution to define marriage as solely between one man and one woman and perhaps also nullify any same-sex marriages entered into in that state between June 16 and the November vote.

The fundraiser was sponsored by the 340,000-member California Teachers Association, which officially opposed the marriage initiative on June 7, Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California, SEIU 721, a public employee local in southern California, and Rosselli's union.

Thirty years after Briggs, organized labor is stepping up to aid the gay and lesbian community in battling another onerous initiative.

"It reflects the insult to union members in having a small cadre of religious right activists dictate what can and cannot be bargained for, and to undo hard-won family recognition policies," said Johnson, an officer of Pride at Work, an LGBT labor group affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

The Hollywood fundraiser was the second event that Johnson has produced. The first, done with the National Council of La Raza, a Latino group, benefited the Task Force California Committee, an anti-initiative effort coordinated by Johnson and run by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. He will produce three other gay-labor fundraisers over the next three months.

While organized labor has a decades-long record of support for gay and lesbian causes, it has only slowly supported the push for same-sex marriage.

When California voters passed a law barring same-sex marriage in 2000 by a margin of 61 to 39 percent - California's highest court struck it down in a May ruling - labor was less engaged.

A "handful" of labor groups in California's 58 counties took a stand on the 2000 initiative on the slate cards that show the union position on candidates and ballot proposals, according to Johnson. The slate cards are given to union members before they vote.

Since then, dozens of union locals across the country and national organizations have supported same sex marriage. In 2006, the California Labor Federation, an umbrella group that represents more than 1,200 union locals and 2.1 million union members, passed a resolution that supported the "rights of all California workers to access the full and equal rights of civil marriage."

Sensing that they can defeat the November 4 California initiative, gay trade unionists and groups are pressing labor harder this year to take a position against the initiative. "I would expect that we will have far more than a handful of county federations," Johnson said.

Steve Smith, a principal at the Dewey Square Group and the campaign manager of Equality for All, the coalition that opposes the marriage amendment, agreed.

"I think most of organized labor will be with our side of the campaign," he said.

In July, at the labor federation's biennial conference, gay and lesbian union members will seek a resolution that "will call on all labor unions and central councils to oppose the amendment," said Jeremy Bishop, executive director of Pride at Work. "This would encourage all unions to get involved in the fight."

They will also ask labor leaders to speak out against the initiative and support same-sex marriage, as well as place pro-same-sex marriage messages in labor newsletters. These are not insignificant.

In 2004 exit polls, 28 percent of California voters said they had a union member in their household and 17 percent said they belonged to a union. Getting those people to convince friends and family members to oppose the amendment is one of the most effective ways to win votes.

"Labor has come out really vocally against the amendment," said Sandra Telep, program director for Pride At Work. "We're trying to get that to translate into action."