

## **LGBT activists look ahead**

**Sherry Wolf**, author of the forthcoming *Sexuality and Socialism: History, Politics and Theory of LGBT Liberation*, reports on the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change conference.

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**NEARLY 2,000 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) activists and straight allies gathered in Denver last week for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's 21st annual Creating Change conference.**

The economic meltdown and marriage equality movement, along with battles to end workplace discrimination and win the right to join a union by simply signing a union card, dominated the five days of workshops and plenaries.

United Farm Workers co-founder Dolores Huerta set the tone for the conference when she called upon all gathered to view the struggle for card-check union membership, known as the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), as their own. The overflow crowd stood and cheered her appeals for unity with immigrant workers and raised their voices in solidarity with labor and civil rights battles, chanting the immigrant rights movement slogan "Sí, se puede!" which President Barack Obama popularized through his 2008 campaign.

Encouraging LGBT activists to take on homophobia and transphobia within the labor and immigrant rights movements, Huerta said, "We have to do more. We've got to get out there and talk to people who really don't agree with us," adding that Gandhi often said that conflict is good, "because if you don't have conflict, you can't make the changes."

The conference drew hundreds of young campus activists as well as seasoned organizers from cities across the country, where same-sex marriage electoral defeats in November have fueled street mobilizations in the thousands. LGBT activists have a sense of confidence that these ballot measures in California, Arizona and Florida can be overturned and will, in fact, help energize a fight for workplace and other rights currently denied LGBT people in most states.

In addition to linking with unions to pass EFCA, the conference highlighted the central importance of organizing to pass a bill, known as the **Employee Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA)**, to end legal workplace discrimination against LGBT people.

Currently, it is legal in 30 states to fire or refuse to hire someone for their actual or perceived sexual orientation; in 43 states, it is legal to do so based on an individual's perceived or actual gender identity. This, despite the fact that according to a 2006 Gallup poll, 89 percent of Americans oppose workplace discrimination against LGBT people.

For many experienced organizers, the movement's explicit opening to alliances with straight people and organizations was a welcome retreat from the marginalization that was often celebrated in the past.

**The Task Force's executive director, Rea Carey, drew thunderous applause when she concluded her State of the Movement remarks with these words: "It is time for us to make**

**new, substantive and strategic friendships with non-LGBT organizations...The time for isolating ourselves as a movement is over."**

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NATURALLY, THE excitement about Obama's presidency was palpable throughout the conference. AIDS activists heralded the impending end of "abstinence-only" education in the schools--a policy that has added thousands of young, mostly non-white men who have sex with men and Black women to the ranks of those infected with HIV/AIDS.

Many Bush-era policies that affect LGBT people are currently under review, and Obama's administration has shown a willingness to work with LGBT advocates that was unheard of in previous administrations.

But what will come of this opening remains unclear, and conference organizers were largely silent about measures to pressure the new president, aside from lobbying and other electoral efforts. For example, despite this being the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in New York City that launched the modern gay movement--which has since expanded to include all sexual and gender identities--there was no call for a national march to commemorate that rebellion and advance the current agenda.

"The Democratic Party still has its limitations," said former Task Force Executive Director Urvashi Vaid. "I'm very hopeful about the new period, but we still have to push and organize to make change happen."

Tensions also exist within the movement over marriage equality demands, with a minority arguing that the fight for marriage unnecessarily narrows the LGBT struggle, or even takes it in a "hetero-normative direction" that embraces monogamy and the state.

These critics are missing three central features of this fight, however. One, it has mobilized tens of thousands who feel enraged that a vote in California actually took away LGBT civil rights, and they want to take this struggle as far as they can. Two, if those organizing for same-sex marriage rights are left to look only to the corporate-driven groups that squandered \$44 million and led the disastrous defeat in California's Proposition 8 battle, LGBT people will suffer further losses. And three, marriage equality would not only guarantee needed material gains to LGBT people, but it would send an official signal from the government that all sexual and gender identities are equal.

Alongside the growing numbers of young activists--for many of whom the conference was their first political educational experience--there is a notable cadre of older LGBT people. This graying Stonewall generation is the largest number of out LGBT senior citizens in the nation's history, and they are among the ranks of the downwardly mobile working class.

Prior to that generation's efforts, it would have been inconceivable for so many LGBT people to live out of the closet as an estimated 8.8 million lesbian, gay and bisexual people do today--as well as not-yet-counted millions of transgender people.

Creating Change expressed much of the tensions, contradictions and hopefulness of the current period.