



Boycotts

by Linda Rapp

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Boycotts have been used with varying degrees of success to attempt to effect changes in the policies of target institutions or corporations. In recent decades glbtq rights advocates have organized a number of such efforts to protest discriminatory practices and policies.

When Charles Cunningham Boycott, a retired British army captain, refused to reduce rents for tenant farmers in County Mayo, Ireland during hard times in 1880, the Irish Land League called for a non-violent protest. The tenants would not communicate with Boycott, who had to bring in workers from Ulster for the harvest. Boycott left Ireland shortly thereafter, but not before his name became synonymous with the practice of refusing to do business with a person or company with whose practices a group disagrees.

Boycotting antedates the incident in County Mayo and has been used by a wide variety of groups including labor unions, civil rights organizations, and interest groups such as environmentalists. The Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott during the African-American civil rights movement and the California grape boycott on behalf of Chicano farm workers are but two well-known examples from the 1960s and 1970s.

The intent of a boycott is to bring about change in institutional policy, and the means to that end is withholding business.

Florida Orange Juice Boycott

The first glbtq boycott to receive considerable media attention took place in 1977 when Anita Bryant, a pop singer and former Miss Oklahoma then employed as a spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission, founded an organization called Save Our Children, which was dedicated not to the welfare of children but to the repeal of a Dade County, Florida ordinance that protected gay men and lesbians from discrimination in employment and housing.

The prospect of a boycott of Florida orange juice, the product Bryant endorsed in advertisements, drew a mixed reaction from people concerned with gay and lesbian rights. Some, lesbians in particular, were reluctant to undertake a campaign that could cost a woman her job when Bryant's actions had been in her role as a private citizen rather than in the course of her work for the Florida Citrus Commission. Others expressed fears that Bryant would be cast as a "holy Christian martyr," concern for farm workers, and doubts about the effectiveness of boycotts as a tactic. Some of these reservations were allayed when the Florida Citrus Commission specifically endorsed Bryant's campaign and announced their support for her.

Momentum for the boycott grew. San Francisco activist Harvey Milk, then a columnist for the *Bay Area Reporter*, called for support, comparing the action to the Boston Tea Party. The Alameda (California) County Democratic Central Committee encouraged "all Democrats" to take part in the boycott, citing "the Bryant forces' disregard for the separation of church and state." David Goodstein, the publisher of *The Advocate*, lent both editorial and considerable financial support to the campaign.

Organizations responded. The San Francisco Tavern Guild stopped using Florida orange juice, as did gay bars and restaurants throughout the country. The American Federation of Television and Radio Artists unanimously voted "to deny their services and talents to Bryant."

When put to a referendum, Dade County voters repealed the gay rights ordinance by a large majority, dealing a blow to the gay rights movement. Nevertheless, glbtq rights activists found cause for hope. Milk stated that because of Bryant "the entire nation finally opened up and talked about Gay people." Goodstein suggested she deserved a "Gay Unity Award" for bringing people together to fight for their civil rights.

Bryant's status as a controversial figure cost her professionally. Sponsorship offers dwindled, and she saw some eighty entertainment bookings canceled in a year. Both her professional and personal life were in a shambles by 1980, when she divorced--for which she was condemned by many of the same right-wing Christians who had applauded her campaign to abridge glbtq rights--and was fired by the Florida Citrus Commission.

Bryant returned to Oklahoma, remarried, and tried to resurrect her career. By 1997 she and her second husband had numerous liens against them for unpaid taxes and other debts, and they filed for bankruptcy. Their next venture, a theater in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, was also unsuccessful. They filed for bankruptcy again in 2001.

In 1994 the Florida Citrus Commission hired another homophobic spokesperson, Rush Limbaugh. Joining glbtq rights groups in denouncing the choice were feminists, African Americans, and the state's governor, Lawton Chiles.

Dade County finally passed a new glbtq rights ordinance in 1998. A repeal effort by conservative Christians in 2002 failed.

Coors Brewing Company Boycott

Another significant boycott was that against the Coors Brewing Company. The action was initiated in 1973 by labor unions protesting the company's antagonistic attitude. They were soon joined by gay men and lesbians, African Americans, and Latinos dissatisfied with the corporation's practices.

Glbtc activists were particularly incensed that the brewery put prospective employees through a polygraph test to determine, among other things, if they were homosexual. Not surprisingly, Coors did not have an anti-discrimination policy, and prospective employees discovered to be homosexual were not hired.

To enlist the support of the gay community for the boycott, union officials approached Milk, who agreed to encourage participation in the boycott in exchange for jobs for gay men on Teamsters Union beer trucks.

The Coors boycott was joined by glbtq people across the nation. After several years of ignoring the boycott, the brewing company in 1978 made the minimal concessions of dropping the sexual orientation question from the polygraph test and announcing a non-discrimination policy.

The boycott was still in progress when in 1995 Coors gave domestic partnership benefits to its gay and lesbian employees--a perk already enjoyed by unmarried heterosexual workers living with a person of the opposite sex--and began to court glbtq consumers. Coors became a major sponsor of Denver's PrideFest and began placing ads in publications targeting the glbtq market, including *The Advocate*.

Mary Cheney, the lesbian daughter of then-Representative (now Vice President) Richard Cheney, was hired as a marketing representative to promote sales in the glbtq community. The Coors Brewing Company also began contributing to glbtq causes and institutions, such as a community center, arts and cultural events, and organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against

Defamation. As a result, Coors began gaining glbtq customers, particularly in the Denver area.

The boycott remained strong in other areas of the country, however, as Scott Coors, the openly gay scion of the family, discovered when he attempted to buy a Coors beer in a San Francisco bar in the late 1990s.

At issue for those perpetuating the boycott were the Coors family's foundations, the Adolph Coors Foundation and the Castle Rock Foundation, both of which provide strong financial support to right-wing groups opposed to glbtq rights. Activist Morris Kight, who was among the earliest proponents of the boycott, stated in 2001 that "the issue for us is that the money the family makes off beer is funneled into antigay causes."

The conservative ideology of most of the family came to the fore when Pete Coors entered the Colorado Republican primary race for the United States Senate in 2004. Coors' support for a constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage revived interest in the boycott. In response, the Coors Brewing Company, in ads stating their opposition to the Federal Marriage Amendment, has explicitly disassociated itself from Pete Coors's support for the amendment. (Ironically, Coors' right-wing opponent in the Republican primary, citing Coors Company policies, has accused Coors of "promoting homosexual causes." Coors won the Republican primary, but was defeated in the general election.)

Tourism Boycotts

The lucrative tourism and convention industries are inviting targets when a city or state adopts measures offensive to various constituencies. Arizona's rejection of a Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday led to a six-year boycott of the state by many groups, including the National Football League, which moved the 1993 Super Bowl from Phoenix to the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California.

Before the United States Supreme Court in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) struck down all American sodomy laws, several professional groups refused to meet in states that retained sodomy laws or in cities that did not have anti-discrimination ordinances that protected glbtq people. Many cities adopted anti-discrimination ordinances in order to forestall such boycotts.

In contrast, the city of Cincinnati, Ohio in 1993, with the approval of 63% of the voters, adopted a charter amendment to ban enactment or enforcement of laws protecting citizens against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. As a consequence, many organizations have refused to hold conventions in the city. In 2004, the Greater Cincinnati Convention and Visitors Bureau reported that the city had lost at least \$46.5 million in convention business since the amendment's passage.

In November 2004, voters, at the urging of a broadly-based coalition of civic, business, and religious leaders, repealed the offensive amendment. The Cincinnati city council is expected to adopt an inclusive anti-discrimination ordinance, a move that will likely end the boycott.

Colorado Boycott

Glbtc activists adopted the strategy of a tourism boycott when Colorado voters passed Amendment 2 in 1992. This law prohibited local governments from enacting measures protecting the civil rights of glbtq people with respect to employment and housing, and it repealed ordinances already passed in Denver, Aspen, and Boulder.

As a result of the boycott, thirty-one organizations relocated conventions scheduled for Colorado. These included the American Foundation for AIDS Research, the National Organization for Women, the American Association of Law Libraries, and the National Council for Social Studies.

The organization Boycott Colorado announced an end to its operation when the Colorado state supreme

court invalidated Amendment 2 in 1994. That decision was appealed, but in 1996 it was upheld by the United States Supreme Court in *Romer v. Evans*, a landmark gay rights ruling.

Estimates varied on how much the boycott cost Colorado. State tourism officials acknowledged a loss of some forty million dollars in convention and tourism business, while boycott organizers put the figure in excess of one hundred million dollars.

A similar boycott has been proposed against the state of Virginia, whose General Assembly passed a measure in 2004 outlawing civil unions and "any partnership contract or other arrangements that purport to provide the benefits of marriage." The provision has serious implications for important family matters such as decisions regarding emergency health care and hospital visitation.

Cracker Barrel Boycott

In 1991, Cracker Barrel, a restaurant chain headquartered in Lebanon, Tennessee and prolific in the American South, fired eleven gay and lesbian workers for violating a new policy banning the employment of persons "whose sexual preferences fail to demonstrate normal heterosexual values which have been the foundation of families in our society." The blatant homophobia of this action, legal in the cities and states in which the employees worked, touched off a wave of national criticism and protests at Cracker Barrel restaurants throughout the country, and a boycott called by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

In the face of bad publicity, the company soon rescinded its explicit policy banning the employment of homosexuals, but it stubbornly refused either to rehire the dismissed employees or, for many years, to add sexual orientation to its non-discrimination policy.

After years of protests, as well as vigorous debates on shareholder resolutions (sponsored principally by the New York City Employees Retirement System, a major stockholder) at the company's annual meetings, in December 2002 the board of Cracker Barrel's parent company voted unanimously to add sexual orientation to the company's non-discrimination policy. In response the boycott was ended, though many glbtq people still refuse to patronize the company.

Other Boycotts

Other commercial boycotts have included one begun against United Airlines in 1997 over the issue of domestic partner benefits. The boycott ended in 1999 when United announced plans to offer such benefits.

The Human Rights Campaign took the lead in calling for a boycott of Exxon Mobil Corporation in 2001. The Mobil Corporation had had a specific statement against discrimination based on sexual orientation in its employment policy and had offered domestic partner benefits. After Mobil and Exxon merged, however, the combined company did not retain the language about nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation with regard to hiring and only extended domestic partner benefits to employees who had had them while working for Mobil or who belonged to labor unions based in Canada, the Netherlands, or Vermont. The benefits question has yet to be resolved.

The Salvation Army also became the target of a boycott in 2001, again over the issue of the organization's failure to provide benefits to same-sex domestic partners. The Genesee County (Michigan) chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) suggested that people concerned about glbtq rights not only refrain from donating to the Salvation Army's Christmas fundraising drive but also place a "reminder" note in the collection kettle explaining that the potential donor was withholding a contribution because of principled opposition to the Salvation Army's homophobic policies. The national PFLAG organization endorsed the initiative.

PFLAG of Genesee County put a downloadable "reminder" slip on their website, and the tokens began

appearing in Salvation Army kettles in southeastern Michigan.

The slips were similar in design to a one-dollar bill but smaller, emblazoned with a rainbow logo, printed on only one side, and in no way mistakable for United States currency. Nevertheless, a few days before Christmas, Mary Scholl, the president of the Genesee County PFLAG chapter, came home to find on her door the card of a United States Secret Service agent, instructing her to call him. (The Secret Service is the agency in charge of investigations of counterfeiting.) Instead, Scholl--refusing to be intimidated--consulted a lawyer from the American Civil Liberties Union. No prosecution of PFLAG members occurred.

The boycott begun by PFLAG of Genesee County is ongoing and has spread to several other states, mainly in the Midwest, and also to Canada.

Boycotts by Anti-gay Groups

Conservative groups have occasionally launched boycotts against companies with glbtq-friendly policies. In the early 1990s Levi Strauss was targeted, and a few years later the Southern Baptist Convention called for a boycott of the Walt Disney Company. Neither had any great effect.

Many parishes of the Episcopal Church of America have withheld donations to the national organization to protest its gay-friendly policies, especially the ordination of openly gay bishop Gene Robinson.

The Coors company's decision to extend domestic partner benefits to its gay and lesbian employees led Baptist minister Fred Phelps of Kansas to call for a boycott. The conservative group Concerned Women of America announced support for the idea, but their press secretary commented that their members were not "very big drinkers."

Anti-gay groups, with some success, have also attempted to influence television programming by threats of boycotts against sponsors. In response, some television shows have censored their own content. (Gay groups have used the same tactics when confronted with homophobic television programs such as the short-lived talk show of Dr. Laura Schlessinger in 2000.)

Measuring the Success of Boycotts

One of the fundamental necessities of a successful boycott is that a group must either include or attract enough regular customers to have an impact. Since virtually no group is sufficiently large by itself, enlisting the support of sympathetic allies is essential. Thus, publicizing the boycott is crucial. Coverage by the news media can raise awareness of the boycott and its rationale.

Proponents can make participation in a boycott directly known to the target organization by having supporters picket or send letters or other messages such as the PFLAG slips, but it is ultimately impossible to state with precision how much money the boycotters have withheld.

Alexandra Chasin has stated that she has "never seen published evidence of a corporation's interpretation of reduced sales as a recognition of protest," adding that "whenever corporations admit that boycotts are having an effect, they always say that the effect is one of 'public relations,' consistently refuting boycotters' claims that a boycott's impact has been directly financial, and also refuting the logical inference that bad public relations would hurt sales."

Chasin observes that "whenever corporations do admit to reduced sales while a boycott is ongoing, they tend to give other accounts" for them. She points out that boycotts often, however, have "great symbolic value" and can cause serious public relations problems for an organization.

Boycotts can be very long campaigns and may or may not be acknowledged as a contributing factor if and

when a company or institution decides to change its offending policies. They can, however, be regarded as a useful and often successful strategy of protest.

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