Organized Labor

by Tina Gianoulis

Bayard Rustin worked to build alliances between labor, black activists, and religious groups. He was one of few openly gay activists involved with labor movements during the 1960s.

Rooted in a mutual belief in basic human rights, the labor movement and the queer community found points of natural alliance even before the beginning of an organized gay movement.

As the gay liberation movement developed during the 1970s and 1980s, gay and lesbian activists worked both inside and outside unions to challenge organized labor to broaden its struggle against workplace discrimination to include sexual identity. As a result of this bridge-building by courageous glbtq workers, labor unions became some of the first mainstream organizations to call for equal rights for queers. Gay unionists have also worked, somewhat less successfully, to mobilize broad-based support for issues of labor and class justice within the various glbtq communities.

Background

Working people have banded together for mutual support for centuries. As early as the Middle Ages, trade societies and craft guilds set standards for labor quality and provided training, regulation, and assistance for workers.

However, it was the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century that ushered in the modern labor movement. New mechanized production methods transformed the entire concept of labor, creating a class of workers who were treated by many factory owners as hardly more human than the machines they operated.

By the early 1800s, workers in factories, mills, and mines began to organize to demand improved working conditions, using strikes, walkouts, and other tactics. They formed a number of labor organizations, including some that represented workers in a wide range of trades, such as the Knights of Labor, founded in 1869; the American Federation of Labor, founded in 1886; and the Industrial Workers of the World, founded in 1905.

Some of the earliest labor organizing work was done by women, some who worked in mills and textile factories and others who grew up with wealth and privilege but devoted their lives to social justice.

Helen Marot (1865-1940), who helped found the New York Women's Trade Union League in 1903, was only one of many lesbians who were early union activists in the United States. Marot was one of the first to organize office workers in the Bookkeepers, Stenographers and Accountants Union. Head of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGU), she was part of the commission that investigated the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire that killed 146 workers in New York City.

While Marot came from an upper-class Philadelphia family, other early lesbian union leaders rose from the rank and file. Pauline Newman (b. 1890), for example, was an eastern European Jewish immigrant who worked in a number of sweatshops before becoming the first woman labor organizer in the ILGU. At the age of fifteen, she joined the Women's Trade Union League, where her dynamic speaking ability made her an

effective organizer.

Early unionists frequently embraced socialist and communist ideals of sharing wealth and control of production. Harry Hay (1912-2002), for example, was a communist who helped organize the 1934 general strike of dockworkers in San Francisco. In 1950, Hay founded the Mattachine Society, one of the earliest gay rights organizations in the U.S., and in 1979 he helped launch the gay movement Radical Faeries.

One of the earliest examples of gay influence in the labor movement has been documented by gay historian Allan Bérubé. Before his death in 2007, Bérubé had spent over a decade doing research for a forthcoming book titled *Queer and Gay Identities in the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union, 1930s to 1950s*. The Marine Cooks and Stewards Union (MCS) represented waiters, cooks, and laundry workers on passenger ships and freighters in the Pacific Ocean. The union was racially mixed, left wing, and supportive of its many gay members.

However, the anti-communist fervor of the McCarthy era led to purges of blacks, communists, and homosexuals, not only within the MCS but throughout U.S. organized labor. Unions that had once been hotbeds of radical activity became defensively right wing. Gay men and lesbians continued to work actively in unions, but few felt free to be open about their sexual identities.

One exception was Bayard Rustin (1912-1987), a Pennsylvania-born African-American Quaker, who became a conscientious objector and social activist in the civil rights movement. Rustin worked hard to build alliances between labor, black activists, and religious groups.

In 1964, he became the first executive director of the A. Phillip Randolph Institute, the AFL-CIO's black constituency group. Though Rustin was open about his gay identity, many of his co-workers in the labor and civil rights movements were afraid to be associated with homosexuality, and Rustin found himself pushed out of the public eye. Though he became a gay rights activist in the last decades of his life, his biography on the AFL-CIO website still does not mention that he was gay.

Gay Liberation Era

After the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969, gay membership in unions quickly became visible once again. Queers had always faced discrimination at work, and gay and lesbian rights on the job immediately became an important part of the new gay liberation movement. Though many union members might be socially conservative, the concept of equal rights for all workers was such a vital part of the labor movement that some unions were among the first advocates on behalf of gay rights.

In 1970, the American Federation of Teachers became one of the first unions to make a pubic statement denouncing discrimination against gay men and lesbians. In 1974, the members of the New York chapter of the union founded the Gay Teachers Alliance, one of the first gay union caucuses. The same year, Ann Arbor, Michigan's Transportation Employee's Union ratified one of the first contracts prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual preference.

One of the country's first unions of graduate teaching assistants, the Graduate Employees Organization of the University of Michigan, went on strike in 1974 to force the university to agree not to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.

However, not all unions embraced the gay liberation movement. In New York, Los Angeles, and other cities, unions representing firefighters and policemen were among the most intransigent opponents of gay rights ordinances designed to insure equal opportunity for gay men and lesbians. In a famous incident in New York in 1972, leaders of the firefighters' union physically attacked Morty Manford and other members of the Gay

Activists Alliance demonstrating in favor of a gay rights bill.

Indeed, opposition from conservative municipal unions, along with the Catholic Church and other religious groups, stymied the adoption of a gay rights bill by the country's largest city until 1986.

In contrast, in 1974 in San Francisco, glbtq community leaders, including Harvey Milk (1930-1978), forged an effective alliance between the gay community and organized labor. Milk, who successfully sought support from labor unions in his campaigns for public office, rallied the gay community to support the union boycott of Coors Brewing Company, whose policies were both anti-union and anti-gay. The boycott of Coors beer gained momentum when gay bars in San Francisco refused to sell the product.

The working relationship between the San Francisco gay movement and important unions bore additional fruit in 1978, when California legislator John Briggs introduced a referendum to prohibit gay men and lesbians from teaching in schools. The gay-union alliance helped defeat the Briggs Amendment.

The 1980s and Beyond

In 1983, representatives from a number of unions came together to form the San Francisco Lesbian/Gay Labor Alliance (LGLA) to work on both increasing union awareness of the issues of gay workers and informing gay men and lesbians about union and class issues.

Other queer activists worked around the country to promote gay issues within their unions. In Chicago during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Tom Stabricki and Barry Friedman, lovers and officers of their local of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) came out publicly and took a leadership role in gaining union support for gay rights.

In 1986, queer unionists in New York formed the Lesbian and Gay Labor Network (LGLN), which not only focused on gay and lesbian workers, but on other issues important to gays and labor alike, such as the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and farmworker boycotts of grapes and lettuce. Queer workers in Boston formed the Gay and Lesbian Labor Activists' Network (GALLAN) in 1986.

At the same time, however, labor rank-and-file did not always follow their leaders, and many gay workers suffered as much discrimination and harassment from their fellow workers as they did from their employers and often received little support from their unions.

Indeed, some employers introduced anti-discrimination protections from the top down rather than as the result of union pressure, sometimes even against the wishes of unions.

But by the mid-1980s many unions had begun to accept their gay constituencies. Some of the largest and most powerful unions, including the AFL-CIO, AFSCME, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) had included gays and lesbians in their definition of diversity, and queers began to be included in labor events.

In 1987, for example, LGLN was invited by the New York local of the United Auto Workers to organize a gay contingent in that year's Labor Day March. In 1991, the large international conference, Labor Notes, in Detroit invited a gay caucus to make a statement at a plenary session.

Within the gay movement, labor activists and working class queers were beginning to find each other. Both the Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1987 and the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation in 1993 featured large gatherings for gays interested in working in the labor movement.

In 1994, when New York hosted the Stonewall 25 anniversary celebration, queer labor activists met and launched a national gay labor group they called Pride At Work (PAW). By 1997 PAW had become an official part of the AFL-CIO, though acceptance as a constituency group did not come easily.

Several members of the AFL-CIO's executive council opposed affiliation, arguing that gay men and lesbians were not historically discriminated against in collective bargaining. In response, some members of the executive council and the glbtq union community accused those opposing affiliation of homophobia. But AFL-CIO president John Sweeney pushed hard for the affiliation, and it was eventually granted. However, the union refused funding for its gay group.

Canadian Experience

In many ways, the Canadian labor movement has been more strongly engaged in the quest for equal rights for glbtq workers and citizens than has the American labor movement.

In 1981 the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) became the first union in Canada to win collective agreement language prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. This occurred at a time when Quebec was the only province to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Following the example of the CUPW, other unions soon added non-discrimination as a bargaining priority, and in 1985 a union representing library employees won domestic partner benefits for its members.

In 1992, the Canadian Auto Workers won recognition of same-sex relationships as part of a settlement, marking the first major breakthrough in the private sector.

Perhaps most importantly, the Canadian labor movement has advocated strongly on behalf of glbtq issues not simply in the workplace but in Canadian society generally. This advocacy culminated in strong union support for same-sex marriage.

As Alan Sears has observed, Canada's labor movement played a major role in securing equal marriage: "The Canadian Labour Congress issued a statement in support of the legislation, as did most provincial labor federations and many member unions. This cause brought together many of Canada's unions, in both the public sector--such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE)--and the private sector--such as the Canadian Auto Workers and the Steelworkers."

Class Consciousness and Globalization

Like San Francisco's LGLA, most gay union groups have seen raising class consciousness within the queer community as one of their primary goals. This work has proved easily as difficult as promoting queer acceptance on the job, as many middle-class gay men and lesbians have regarded the working class as conservative and homophobic. However, many radical groups, particularly within the lesbian community, have worked to educate middle-class queers about the concerns of the working class.

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, issues of free trade and globalization have prompted U.S. gay and lesbian labor activists to make international connections to link the issues of queer rights, workers' rights, and human rights in the face of multinational corporate policies that undermine all three.

In 1999, when the World Trade Organization met in Seattle to map out strategies of globalization, Seattle's Out Front Labor Coalition (now a chapter of PAW) worked in concert with other local groups, such as Dyke Community Activists, to organize an educational conference titled "Queers Fight the WTO." The event provided information and built solidarity for a queer contingent in the massive protest that disrupted the

WTO meeting.

International activists such as Carmencita "Chie" Abad, a Filipina lesbian labor union organizer who worked in Pacific Island sweatshops making clothing for The Gap, have traveled to the U.S. to help educate queer activists about the disastrous effects of global economic policy.

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About the Author

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