



Pride at Work Convention Ramps Up Call for Change

September 13, 2006

By Joel Wendland

San Diego — Nearly 200 members and allies of Pride at Work, AFL-CIO (PAW) met for its national convention this past weekend. In a pre-convention interview, PAW Executive Director Jeremy Bishop described the main purpose of this convention, titled No Turning Back in 2006, as both educational and a moment to relax before the election season struggles.

The convention was a time, Bishop remarked, for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) union members and their allies "to come together and just relax and recharge their batteries with people who understand the struggle and understand what they go through."

California State Assemblyperson John Laird (D-Monterey), one of six openly gay state assemblypersons, described PAW as an important bridge between labor and the LGBT communities. Coming from a union family and with years of experience in labor, Laird said, "I have always believed in coalitions as important to winning struggles for LGBT civil rights. Labor has always been an important part of the fight."

Laird went on to say that the next fight for California's LGBT community is for marriage equality, which is tied to the 2006 election. Democratic gubernatorial candidate Phil Angelides has promised to sign a marriage equality bill if elected. For this reason, the defeat of Arnold Schwarzenegger is key, Laird added.

In her remarks, the International Secretary-Treasurer of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) and PAW co-president Nancy Wohlforth echoed Laird's sentiments. "I don't think I've seen any union group do better at building coalitions than Pride at Work," Wohlforth said.

Wohlforth further boasted of PAW's unique role. "We're the voice of LGBT working people across the country," she stated. But "we're an organization that speaks out for social justice and peace for everybody, not just us," she added.

Wohlforth praised major LGBT civil rights organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) for having unionized staff. "That is a testimony to our community, that we get it," she said.

Likewise, in some areas labor generally has come to support LGBT issues because of the efforts of Pride at Work, such as in California where the state federation of the AFL-

CIO has endorsed marriage equality.

Wohlforth concluded, "We are up against a powerful religious right with a theocratic agenda. We're up against an administration that has launched an attack against our civil rights and liberties." Indeed, Wohlforth wondered if there was any difference between the theocracy of the Bush administration and Republican Congress and the religious fundamentalists of the Middle East.

Pride at Work and LGBT civil rights organizations, however, have been fighting to change this country and are having an impact "because of the guts and decency of tens of thousands of people all over the country."

Keynote speaker Marsha Botzer, a co-chair of the board of directors of the NGLTF, a newspaper guild member, and PAW board member, recalled how solidarity in the labor movement was an important factor in her gender transition. Speaking for thousands of working persons in a similar situation, Botzer said, "all they want is everyone to be treated with fairness and equality in the workplace."

AFL-CIO Executive Vice-President Linda Chavez-Thompson, a long-time supporter of Pride at Work, expressed her pride in having been named an honorary lesbian and praised PAW's commitment to the struggles of working people.

She pointed to the Bush administration and the Republican-controlled Congress as the major source of woe for working people. "Everyday working people are working harder and harder for less and less." Though health care is being stripped, pensions are being taken away, and wages have stagnated, Bush and the Republicans are refusing to listen to working Americans.

Bush administration and Republican policies have damaged the country. They have allowed "big business to cut and run from America," Chavez-Thompson remarked. "Our values don't mean anything to them."

Chavez-Thompson called on labor to support candidates for Congress who will lead in government to turn the course around for working people.

Other speakers included Leslie Cagan of United for Peace and Justice, who recalled that all of the administration's claims about Iraq that it said were justifications for war proved to be false. "What do you do when you realize what you're doing is wrong?" Cagan asked. "You end it. It's not rocket science." But the administration and the Republicans have refused to follow this simple advice.

Workshops and seminars included discussions on the campaigns for marriage equality and educationals on how to bargain effectively for better contracts, including domestic partnership benefits and health care for transgender persons. Some workshops also addressed the 2006 election specifically, providing know-how and resources for responding to right-wing divisiveness.

The convention also passed a number of resolutions addressing issues facing working people. Resolutions calling for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the impeachment of George W. Bush resoundingly passed. Resolutions of support for marriage equality, universal health care, women's reproductive rights, opposition to

discrimination against transgender workers, for the rights of straight and LGBT immigrant workers, and for international solidarity with LGBT people globally passed easily. The convention also unanimously adopted a resolution of support for establishing a César E. Chávez holiday.

--Joel Wendland is managing editor of Political Affairs and may be reached at jwendland@politicalaffairs.net