

[Fight the Right Action Kit](#) (1993)

Organizing Organized Labor

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The union movement is a working class movement as old as the history of workers in this country. Union organizers and activists fought and died for the right to form and join unions, and built those unions into a major force in American history that continues to affect the lives of people in this country and around the world.

The labor movement championed the fight for the eight hour work day, minimum wage laws, child labor laws, and compensation for workers injured on the job. It is the labor movement that, through bargaining for and winning health care benefits for union members, sets the standard for fair treatment of non-union workers. While the labor movement isn't perfect, it has a history to be proud of and deserves the support and respect of the broader progressive community.

Imagine what it would be like to organize for gay and lesbian equality if our employers did not have to release us after an eight hour work day. For those of us who live in communities without legal remedies for anti-gay or lesbian employment discrimination, unions may provide the only protection we have, while again setting the standard for non-union employers.

The connected problems of union busting, replacement workers, exporting jobs, a floundering economy, and decreasing numbers of organized workers have all taken a very heavy toll on the labor movement. Many of the setbacks in the union movement are directly linked to the right wing agenda. It is critically important for labor unions to recognize the right wing as the extremely well organized and well monied enemy of the working class that it is.

Unions must begin to seriously examine the ways in which the right wing uses single issues – such as anti-gay and lesbian campaigns – as a way to advance their much broader agenda; an agenda which includes the further erosion of organized labor.

The union-busting tactics of the Coors Brewing Company, founded by John Birch Society member Joseph Coors, is but one example of the relationship between anti-union activities and radical right wing politics. The Heritage Foundation, a right wing think tank, was founded by Joseph Coors and significantly funded with Coors Brewing Company profits.

The Heritage Foundation is an organization that plots strategy for the right wing. They pick an emotional issue, name the scapegoat, and launch attacks in order to build their membership and solicit large sums of money. The Heritage Foundation was a primary contributor to the plan to target gay and lesbian citizens in the "Save Our Children Campaign" in Dade County, Florida in 1977. The Heritage Foundation was also involved in the Briggs Initiative in California in 1979, and in the Oregon and Colorado anti-gay initiative campaigns in 1992.

Simultaneously, the Heritage Foundation helped Ronald Reagan become the most rabidly anti-union president in recent history. The Heritage Foundation has also been at the forefront of efforts to oppose pay equity for women, parental leave, government subsidized child care, social security, fair taxation, and numerous other issues directly affecting labor.

One hand washes the other on the side of the right wing. It's time for labor and the civil rights movement to do the same.

Unions can begin to rekindle the spirit of trade unionism in its broadest sense and make unions relevant again to members and unorganized workers by being visible in struggles that people really care about. Individual union members participate in a variety of social movements, but they may not be identifying themselves as union activists in those organizations.

There are gay and lesbian people involved in every union. However, many union activists don't understand this. Because homophobia and heterosexism exist in the labor movement just as it does in the broader society, many union activists are "closeted" in their unions. They may be "out" in their social life, to their families, and to their friends, and still not be comfortable enough to "come out" in their local. Some of those inactive members who never attend meetings or participate in union events may be gay and lesbian members who would participate actively in their union if they knew that their union cared about their concerns as gay and lesbian people.

Additionally, unions could and should see organizing against the right wing as good public relations. Because the right wing has a broad reaching agenda, countering their activities provides unions with a chance to organize on a variety of fronts with a variety of constituencies. This provides workers with positive contact with labor unions.

Unions can play an important part in the fight against the right wing. There are structures in place that reach a broad cross-section of American society. Members can activate their unions to take on the right wing, and community activists can learn to support and utilize unions in common struggle against the radical right.

Unions Have Something Unique To Offer Any Struggle

The union movement is rooted in struggle. Struggle is a way of life to a union activist.

- Experienced union organizers bring a wealth of information and experience in the mechanics of organizing.
- Identifying leaders, developing organizing committees, and recruiting activists are essential skills for both internal organizing (empowering membership) and external organizing (organizing the unorganized). Union organizers do both, and can bring this expertise to a campaign.
- Unionists are often experienced campaigners.

1. Most unions have a communication system set up to contact members. Regular meetings, phone trees, mailings, and newsletters are common. Generally the rank and file membership represent broad cross sections of working class people whose support is critical in our fight against the right wing.

2. Unions may be in a position to donate money and/or staff support to the cause. Unions can also make in-kind donations of services and equipment, office space for field operations, and other critically important resources for organizing.

3. Union activists are used to engaging in concerted action – strikes, demonstrations, picket lines, etc. A committed union activist is fearless. Union activists who identify as union organizers generally have experience in organizing people, conducting meetings, designing plans, taking assignments, and reporting back on those assignments.

4. Unions are opinion leaders. The endorsements of unions give campaigns and candidates credibility. Union support may translate into support from candidates and elected officials.

How To Get Your Union Involved

1. Know the structure of your union local, and identify the key players.

2. Locate members of like mind and call a meeting. Develop an organizing committee or a lesbian/ gay/ bisexual caucus that targets other members for inclusion. Seek out people who are elected or natural leaders and others who have leadership potential.

3. Create a plan that targets key leadership in the union structure and assess each for support or opposition to the issue. Include an action component at each meeting with assignments and a system for follow up to ensure that the assignments are completed.

4. Once you identify leaders who are supportive, give them all the information on the issue you can so that they feel comfortable discussing it with undecided leadership.

5. When you know that your issue has the support of a majority of the leadership in the union structure, find a leader to make a motion at a meeting and establish who will second the motion. If it's an open meeting, make sure you have plenty of supportive voices or votes for your position in attendance. Bring more people than you think you will need; your opposition may be trying to stack the meeting.

6. If you believe you have the support of a majority of the rank and file membership, and there is significant opposition and/or resistance among official union leaders to taking a position on your issue, you will need to design a special plan to move the leadership to your side.

- In a small local, that may mean running a petition of support for your position targeting at least 50% of the members.

- Schedule a special meeting or stack a regular local or board meeting with members who support your issue.
- Present petitions at a leadership or general meeting.
- Consider organizing a labor coalition around the issue.

7. Once the union has taken an official position, make further requests – a newsletter article, a mailing, or press conference. Start over at step one again if necessary.

8. Continue the work of the organizing committee by utilizing union activists in the activities of the larger coalitions involved in the fight against the right wing.

How Community Activists Can Help Bring Unions & Union Members Into The Struggle

1. Don't send in anti-union community activists to make contacts with a union. I know this sounds obvious, but it can and has happened with disastrous results.

2. Find out what sector of the work force and how many workers the union you are targeting represents.

3. Find out whether there are activists in your group who are union members (even if they are not union activists) who can work on bringing in their locals.

4. Make every effort to identify a member of the union you are targeting to accompany you when making all approaches to leadership and membership.

5. Learn as much as you can about the issues the union local you are targeting is most concerned about. Consider whether your group or coalition of groups can be or are supportive of these issues.

6. Learn about the structure of the targeted union.

- How are decisions made and who are the key decision makers?
- Is there a board of directors?
- Is it a single site local or geographically spread out?
- How many people does the union employ?

7. Learn the history of involvement in similar fights of the union you are targeting. For example, what kind of financial/activist support has this union provided to pro-choice campaigns? The point is to know what the union is capable of and best at accomplishing.

8. Create an action plan for your group, and for the unions you want to involve.

- Keep your plan simple.
- Be clear about what you want to accomplish and build in flexibility.
- If what you want is money, know how much they are capable of giving, how much you want.

- If you need staff support, have a job description of what the staff person would do for you ready.
- Never plan for less than you want and can realistically get.
- Build in a system of accountability. Who is making sure that people are actually accomplishing the tasks you have planned for and assigned?

9. Don't bother to do outreach to AFL-CIO affiliated unions unless your organization is prepared to use union labor for such things as printing, bumper stickers, and buttons. Generally, AFL-CIO activists will look for a union "bug" on your literature and other materials. The "bug" is a tiny logo certifying that the work was done by a unionized shop.

General Information

All unions have some sort of formal organizational structure that varies from union to union. All have constitutions and by-laws that govern the way in which they operate. Most union structures include Executive Boards or a Board of Directors empowered to make decisions between larger general membership meetings or conventions.

For example, Oregon Public Employees Union (OPEU) which represents 20,000 mostly government employees in Oregon is made up of more than 75 locals. OPEU has 6 Districts for which leadership is elected to the Board of Directors. the President, Vice-President, and Secretary/treasurer are elected at General Council every two years. OPEU is Local 503 of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) which has one million members, and is affiliated with the AFL-CIO and CLC. So OPEU's name is Oregon Public Employees Union, Service Employees International Union 503, American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations, Canadian Labor Congress. OPEU/SEIU 503, AFL-CIO, CLC for short.

The majority of individual unions are members of the AFL-CIO, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, though some remain independent. Unions that are members of the AFL-CIO generally do not take positions in direct opposition to the AFL-CIO, though they may take positions on issues which the AFL-CIO had taken no position. Many national and international unions are made up of numerous smaller locals. Assess the state AFL-CIO chapters for the level of support on your issues. If you can get the leadership of the AFL-CIO on board, organizing in the individual locals will be easier.

In the earliest days of the labor movement, unions were built around specific trades i.e., coal miners were organized into one union and painters in another, etc. Much later, unions began to organize "wall to wall" units where workers might have different jobs but all worked for the same boss.

Public sector unions organize and represent government and private nonprofit organizations. These are sometimes called service sector organizations. Since the government is "the boss," many public sector unions have political programs.

Today, private sector unions tend to still be organized according to trade while public sector unions tend to be organized in wall-to-wall units.

All unions have basic common purposes – to organize workers, engage in collective bargaining for contracts, and enforcement of contracts. Some locals are very politically active, others are less so.

The unions you are targeting may have Political Action Committees or political departments. If so, you and members of the union will need to see that both the board and the political department are supportive to your cause.

You May Encounter Resistance

Often unions will respond to your attempts to get them involved in gay and lesbian issues by claiming that the fight for gay and lesbian equality is not a union issue. They may say gay and lesbian issues are too controversial, or that taking on the fight will divide the union membership. Some unions may respond by saying that they're not political.

In order to defeat resistance, you must have an adequate base of support built before making your approach to a union. Your support base should be prepared to deal with resistance, and stay unified in your articulation of why it is so important for unions to take on gay and lesbian civil rights struggles.

You already know that labor cannot stand divided on the issue of civil rights for any class of citizens based on sexual orientation, race, gender, national origins, religion, or disability any longer, and that the survival of the unions as viable working class movement building agents may depend on getting political. Now is your chance to debate these issues in a way which speaks to the needs of both gay and lesbian union members, and the union as a whole.

Remember to curb your dogma and speak in language easily understood by most people. Asking a union to decide to take a stand on something controversial can already be difficult. Making it sound as though the stand they are taking comes with multiple and vaguely defined strings attached may make it impossible.