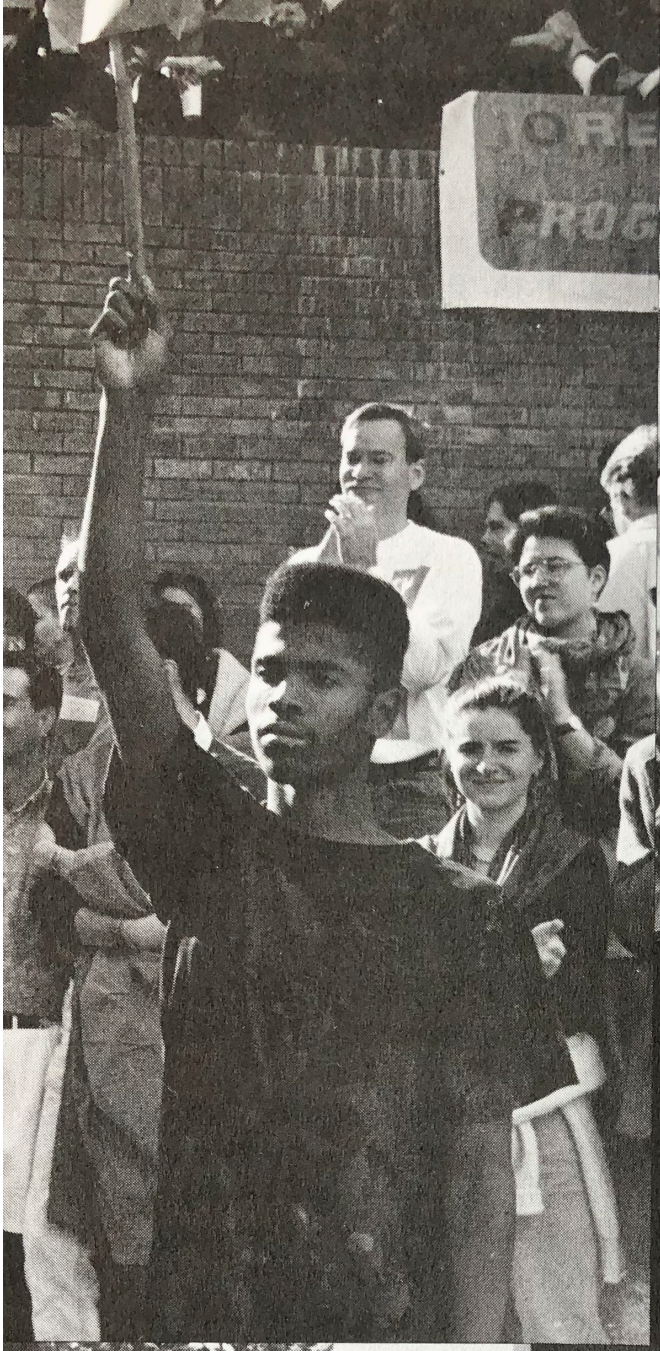

"Lesbians and gays are not a sexual orientation—we are people who are union members, stewards, bargaining representatives, local officers, and staff."

We Are Union Builders Too

Oregon union tackles discrimination based on sexual orientation

■ *Ann Montague*

Most unionists agree that discrimination is a union issue. Unions have civil rights departments and push legislative agendas, but it's the stewards who are on the front lines every day defending workers against discrimination on the job. But what if the steward speaks or acts in ways which exhibit bigoted attitudes? What does this do to the stewards' overall effectiveness? How can the victim of discrimination be fully represented? How does the steward's behavior reflect upon the union?

The Oregon Public Employees Union (SEIU Local 503) took its commitment to ending discrimination further when it bargained in 1987 to add a "no discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation" guarantee to the union's contract language with the state (see box). The union followed up by holding the first ever "Lesbians/Gay Member Discrimination Training for Stewards" in 1992.

With the unqualifed support of the local's Executive Director and Board of Directors, I initiated a process to address the

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ARTICLE 22
of SEIU Local 503's contract with the State of Oregon

"No Discriminations. The policy of the employer and the union is to continue their policies not to engage in unlawful discrimination against any employee or applicant for employment because of race, color, marital status, religion, sex, national origin, age, mental or physical handicap. *Neither will the Employer discriminate based on sexual orientation.*"

problem of homophobia in our union. By 1990 it became clear to me that the guarantee to protect the rights of gays and lesbians would be only a paper victory unless stewards and member leaders were educated about homophobia and how to deal with it in the workplace. Most non-gay stewards could neither effectively enforce Article 22 nor credibly defend a member against discrimination; many could not even comfortably say the words "lesbian" or "gay."

In the beginning the task seemed almost too overwhelming and the problems and barriers too great. But with the institutional support of Local 503 and the technical expertise of Mary Kay Henry from the International staff, the training was developed over the course of a year. Henry, whom I had met at Gay and Lesbian Caucus meetings held at various International meetings, used her knowledge of union training programs to help design the program.

DESIGNING THE TRAINING

In planning a workshop on homophobia, careful consideration goes into how to present the material in a clear, constructive way. Our first decision was to focus the entire training on lesbian/gay member discrimination. It could not be just another "diversity" workshop which slips sexual orientation in with a long list of other types of discrimination. One of the biggest problems in dealing with lesbian/gay discrimination is "denial" and "invisibility." There had to be no avenue of avoidance. We also believed that a "let's-get-in-touch-with-our-feelings" type of training would be the wrong approach. The training would deal directly and straightforwardly with the responsibilities of the steward and the union in the workplace; inevitably, the participants would deal with their own feelings.

We also concluded that the title for the training had to have the words "lesbian and gay" in it. We needed to get the stewards away from the specific contract language terminology of "sexual orientation." The contract language needed to be translated into real

union members. Lesbians and gays are not a sexual orientation—we are people who are union members, stewards, bargaining representatives, local officers, and staff. At the same time, the title needed to specify "discrimination" to keep the focus on the contract and workplace issues.

The training centered on equipping stewards with the skills to recognize the existence of lesbians/gay discrimination in the workplace; define homophobia and heterosexism; and defend lesbian/gay rights on the job by enforcing Article 22 and confronting discrimination in the workplace.

We decided that the stewards would best learn these skills through a problem-solving approach. By focusing on actual scenarios of discrimination and homophobia which occurred in the local, stewards would more readily relate to the problems. However, we knew of only a few instances of discrimination and were concerned that we might have trouble finding more. Instead, we found that as we talked to one lesbian or gay member he or she would lead us to another until we had an avalanche of examples. They came from case workers in social service agencies, clericals and security in higher education and nurses in institutional settings. Hearing the stories was painful, but at least no one could say, "It's not a problem." We developed training scenarios from specific instances of discrimination; these scenarios became the heart and soul of the training.

To promote discussion in the trainings questions were developed to follow the presentation of each scenario. Stewards would reflect on and discuss such questions as: "Is there a problem?" "Is there a contract violation?" "What would you say to the worker?" "What would you say to the supervisor?" "What would you say to lesbian/gay members?" and "What would you say to other members?"

The original plan called for doing the first training at our annual statewide stewards conference. Upon reflection, we decided that the first training should be done for union staff. After all, it is the staff that encourages and develops stewards, and we needed them to be as excited about our training as we were. Also, we were concerned that although the union staff intellectually understood and supported anti-discrimination measures, most of them had not experienced homophobia firsthand. We wanted them to understand that they needed to learn from gay and lesbian members.

We also developed different objectives for the staff training. These included: (1) What do you do when a worksite is divided over discrimination issues—and what not to do; (2) How to support members who are closeted and members who are "out"; (3) How

LRR FOCUS: "Do's and Don'ts for Members who are Closeted and Members who are Out."

DO confront homophobic jokes and attitudes wherever they strike. Closeted gays have very good hearing. If you let a comment or joke slip by within hearing range you can be assured that your credibility with that worker is destroyed.

DO always integrate lesbian/gay issues into the overall mission of the union. If you talk about gay issues only when you are talking to people you "think" are supportive, you have missed an opportunity. "Truly, We are Everywhere."

DO learn to speak without assumption of heterosexuality. When talking to members—closeted members are made uncomfortable and "out" members will be made angry.

DON'T try to guess who is and who isn't.

DON'T advance strategies for lesbian/gay union leaders. That is not your job—it is ours.

DON'T assume who would be willing to be a spokesperson for lesbian/gay issues. Being "out" is a very personal decision. It is often done in stages—don't push.

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to be effective allies of lesbian/gay leaders in the local; (4) How to develop leadership in rank and file lesbian/gay members; and (5) How to explain the stewards training on lesbian/gay discrimination for the upcoming stewards conference agenda.

The staff training was very successful. After it was over we felt very ready for the stewards conference. The presenters were probably more nervous than the participants. The training began with a lesbian steward telling her own story of discrimination. She spoke frankly about her divided workplace and how she felt about the union's apparent inability to solve her problem. Her story immediately hit home with the stewards. They not only responded to the training, but some even volunteered situations they had been faced with but hadn't known how to approach. It was clear that there was a tremendous need for what we were doing.

THE DEFEAT OF MEASURE 9

Our timing on the stewards training proved to be just right. Soon after the conference the Oregon Citizens Alliance succeeded in getting the signatures required to put their initiative on the ballot.

Known as Measure 9, it would have changed the Oregon Constitution to mandate discrimination against lesbians and gays. If passed it also would nullify the No Discrimination article in our contract. Had the educational work not been done over the previous year, I doubt that our union would have been ready to oppose Measure 9 as aggressively as we did. Both the Board of Directors and the Political Action Committee came out against Measure 9 even before enough signatures had been collected to put it on the ballot. This was unprecedented.

SEIU Local 503 spearheaded the "No on 9 Labor Coalition" and a staff member, Beckie Capoferri, from the local was loaned to the statewide coalition during the last month of the campaign. The union contributed much needed organizing skills to the coalition. In addition to defeating the ballot measure, an incredible amount of coalition building resulted from our work on the campaign. There were monthly outreach trainings for activists throughout the campaign that dealt with racism and anti-semitism as well as homophobia. These ties between gay, African-American and Jewish committees have continued since the defeat of Measure 9.

The defeat of Measure 9 was a victory. But it was a particularly sweet victory when at the post-election rally in front of 800 people Alice Dale, Local 503 Executive Director, told the crowd that every one of our stewards would be receiving training on how to combat homophobia in the workplace. You can believe that the lesbian and gay members of our union will make sure she keeps that commitment. And as a result, our union will be stronger and our members more effectively represented. ■

RESOURCES

Lavender Labor: a national newsletter for lesbian/gay labor activists and supporters. It contains reports on the work of gay/lesbian caucuses, news summaries on gay/lesbian discrimination and actions, and listings of caucuses and organizations. Subscriptions are $10/year made payable to GALLAN. Send to Janis Borchardt, 716 Douglass St., San Francisco, CA 94114.

Pride at Work: Organizing for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Unions, available for $5 from the Lesbian and Gay Labor Network, Box 1159, Peter Stuyvestant Station, New York, NY 10009.

"Comments" by Patti Roberts in *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership,* edited by Dorothy Sue Cobble, ILR Press, 1993. An overview of gay/lesbian unionism and workplace issues.