

A labor of love

Gay rights activists are finding common ground and forming surprising alliances with America's labor unions



Alan Van Capelle and union member Frances Martínez

It can't be only LGBT people talking about LGBT issues," says former union organizer Alan Van Capelle, the executive director of New York's gay advocacy group Empire State Pride Agenda. "If we can win over rank-and-file workers, then we're in a much better position. [And] if it's only labor talking about their own issues, they lose."

Two years ago Van Capelle decided to test that theory in a major way. He launched a new outreach program at ESPA called Pride in Our Union, headed by Desna Holcomb, a longtime labor activist and cofounder of the AFL-CIO's LGBT constituency group Pride at Work.

Pride in Our Union's mission is to bring together gay rights and workers' rights in one powerful alliance. In the process, says ESPA spokesman Joe Tarver, LGBT people are "finding out that labor is not the homophobic group of blue-collar workers that a lot of people think it was."

Indeed, a statewide contingent of New York labor unions representing more than 850,000 members strongly endorsed the

marriage equality bill Gov. Eliot Spitzer introduced in the state assembly this spring, where it passed before stalling in the state senate.

Prairie Wells of Capital District Area Labor Federation is one of many LGBT union activists working with Pride in Our Union. "My mother was a roofer," says Wells, who is a lesbian. "She encountered discrimination because she was working in a nontraditional field. People said she looked like a lesbian."

A few years ago, Wells convinced a local labor council to endorse a nationwide job protection bill for transgender workers. More recently, the head of a local construction union told her he would support the same-sex marriage bill because it would mean not having to negotiate partner rights in contracts. "Even a year ago, if I had heard the head of the electrical workers union say he stood in solidarity with us, I would have laughed," she says. "It's pretty amazing."

Pride in Our Union not only lobbies union officials but works personally with LGBT union members—like New York

City hospital worker Carmen Acosta, who reenergized the influential Lavender Caucus of the United Healthcare Workers East. In May, hospital workers represented the largest contingent of ESPA's annual lobbying trip to Albany. As a result of such enthusiasm, United Healthcare Workers promised to push to include same-sex partners in family medical leave provisions during its next round of contract negotiations with hospitals.

LGBT organizations in other states are now following ESPA's lead. Labor unions supported California's marriage equality bill, which passed the state assembly. California also saw a joint forum earlier this year with the local labor federation and the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center, marking the beginning of a series of conversations on issues of mutual concern. Thalia Zepatos, the Los Angeles-based director of organizing and training for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, cited Pride in Our Union as an "out-front model" for similar groups. "What ESPA has done is really comprehensive, and other states are looking to them as a template," Zepatos said.

In Connecticut, Love Makes a Family, a nonprofit marriage equality group, has been trying to get unions behind their state's marriage initiative, which has been slowly gaining ground in the legislature. Executive director Anne Stanback was recently invited to speak at the International Association of Machinists Connecticut State Council annual conference, and a statewide AFL-CIO resolution has endorsed marriage equality. "A lot of the unions we work with now view marriage equality as a civil rights issue as well as a workers' issue," Stanback says.

The same also holds true in New Jersey, where shipping giant UPS announced this summer that it did not plan to extend benefits to the civil union partners of hourly employees, citing a technicality over the definition of "married spouse" in its existing contract with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which represents roughly 250,000 hourly UPS employees nationwide. Under pressure from Lambda Legal, state officials, and the Teamsters, UPS recanted three weeks later. "The old image of labor being progressive on everything but gay rights and other hot-button issues is out of date," says Steve Goldstein, executive director of Garden State Equality. "They've come a long way." —Steve Weinstein