

## Activists seek reconciliation, renewed push for ENDA

But some urge celebrities to boycott HRC dinner in New York

By LOU CHIBBARO JR., The Washington Blade | Feb 21, 10:25 AM

Leaders of a newly formed coalition of nearly 400 gay and transgender advocacy groups that criticized Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and gay Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) last fall have vowed to redouble efforts to help pass a trans-inclusive gay rights bill.

About 80 officials of the United ENDA Coalition, attending the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force's annual Creating Change Conference in Detroit Feb. 6-10, reiterated their strong opposition to Pelosi and Frank's decision to push through a version of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, or ENDA, that left out protections for transgender persons.

Pelosi and Frank, along with most other House Democrats, said they could not line up enough votes to pass ENDA with transgender protections. They argued that the quickest way to build support for a trans-inclusive measure was to pass the narrower, gay-only version first, which they said would clear the way for the broader version sometime in the future.

But in a development that startled House Democratic leaders, the decision to move ahead with the gay-only version triggered a firestorm of opposition from state and local gay activists, who said they considered transgender persons an integral part of the GLBT community.

In what Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.), the only openly lesbian member of Congress, called a deluge of phone calls and e-mail messages sent to House members, the activists demanded that Pelosi and House Democrats put forward a fully inclusive bill or no bill at all.

**The Task Force, which sided with the activists demanding a trans-inclusive bill, took the lead in organizing the United ENDA Coalition. The coalition began with just over a dozen groups and quickly mushroomed to more than 200 organizations by early November.**

**This week, the Task Force released a list showing that 373 groups had joined the United ENDA Coalition as of Feb. 19.**

After emerging from a closed-door meeting in Detroit on Feb. 8, United ENDA Coalition officials stopped short of calling for the creation of a new gay rights lobbying organization in Washington.

In the midst of a heated dispute over ENDA, some gay and transgender activists called for transforming United ENDA into a new, grassroots oriented organization in Washington to serve as the GLBT community's lobbying arm. The Human Rights Campaign has served as the community's main advocacy group before Congress and federal government agencies for more than 20 years but came under fire after refusing to oppose the gay-only version of ENDA last year.

HRC announced more than four years ago that the group wanted Congress to pass a trans-inclusive version of ENDA and it would oppose any efforts to restrict the bill to sexual orientation only protections. But in October, HRC President Joe Solmonese said HRC had to adapt to changing circumstances when Pelosi and Frank, along with other Democratic leaders, announced they would put forward a gay-only version of the bill after determining they didn't have the votes to pass the broader, trans-inclusive version.

Solmonese said it would be untenable for HRC to ask members of Congress to vote against a gay rights bill after the group had lobbied for gay rights legislation for years.

Some other activists sided with HRC, saying that Congress historically has passed civil rights legislation for other groups, including African Americans, in stages as support for civil rights bills increased over time.

The ENDA controversy continued this week as gay and transgender activists upset over HRC's decision to go along with a gay-only ENDA called for a boycott of HRC's annual fundraising dinner in New York City, which is scheduled for Feb. 23. Veteran gay activist Allen Roskoff, president of the Jim Owles Democratic Club of Manhattan, drew media attention by calling on actress Vanessa Williams, who is scheduled to be honored at the HRC dinner, to cancel her appearance.

"We're asking everyone to boycott the event, including the celebrities," Roskoff said. "We want the politicians, the celebrities, and everyone else to stay away from this event." He said members of his group and other gay Democratic clubs in New York would join transgender activists in a picket line in front of the hotel where the event is set to take place.

HRC spokesperson Brad Luna said small groups of protesters have picketed outside some of HRC's recent events, including the group's Washington dinner last October. He said there has been no net drop in attendance for any of the events.

**In his keynote address at the Creating Change conference in Detroit, Task Force Executive Director Matt Foreman called for reconciliation among gay activists and Democratic congressional leaders over the ENDA flap. But he said the developments leading to the formation of United ENDA had permanently changed the way gay activists would push for legislation to end discrimination.**

**"Out of the pain and turmoil of the ENDA fight, the powers that be on the Hill now understand that no one organization and no one person speaks for our community," Foreman said. "In other words, the power dynamics of our movement have shifted profoundly, and that's not just a good thing. It's a great thing and we have to keep on building on this momentum."**

**Foreman called on United ENDA coalition members to engage in grassroots lobbying in their home states for the reintroduction and passage of a trans-inclusive ENDA in 2009, when he predicted a new president and a more gay-supportive Congress would be inclined to pass such a bill.**

**“We need to press ahead without bitterness and rancor,” he said. “The fact is, if an inclusive ENDA is to pass any time soon, we have to work with Speaker Pelosi, Rep. Frank, and the Human Rights Campaign,” Foreman said. “We’re simply not going to get what we want if we remain divided and focus on lateral sniping.”**

Frank startled many of the nation’s gay leaders last October when he reported that private head counts taken by House Democratic leaders showed there were not enough votes to pass ENDA if it included protections for transgender persons. The version of ENDA introduced by Frank and other lawmakers at the beginning of 2007 called for banning job discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Both Frank and Pelosi said vote counts showed they had enough support from Democratic and Republican House members to pass a version of ENDA that banned job discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The two said they strongly support a trans-inclusive bill but believed the best path for passing such a measure would be to move forward with the narrower bill and to continue efforts to build support for the more inclusive bill.

Under Pelosi’s direction, the House passed the gay-only version on Nov. 7 by a vote of 235 to 184. The Senate, which has yet to vote on the bill, was expected to vote on the measure sometime this year, according to Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), the bill’s chief Senate sponsor. Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) told the Blade last week that she was unaware of a timetable for introducing ENDA in the Senate.

Rick Rosendall, an official with the Gay & Lesbian Activists Alliance of Washington, which was among a number of local groups that supported the Pelosi-Frank strategy, called into question assertions that the United ENDA Coalition had a significant influence on House members.

Rosendall noted that the coalition’s main action included sending a petition to all House members asking them to oppose any version of ENDA that did not include full protections for both gays and transgender persons.

“If you look at the vote count, United ENDA didn’t change more than seven votes,” Rosendall said, referring to a decision by seven gay supportive Democrats to vote “no” on ENDA because it lacked transgender protections.