



POLITICS: The Other L Words

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Looking back at history often lights a path forward for social movements. So it does today for gay rights supporters determined to win passage of long-awaited federal legislation on hate crimes, military service, and nondiscrimination and to preserve marriage equality in the nation's most populous state.

Now, as in the past, two big and overlapping blocs of the electorate and their leaders play a pivotal role in deciding whether fairness will or won't prevail on these priorities. They are labor union members and Latina and Latino voters.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of one of the LGBT movement's landmark victories - beating the anti-gay Briggs Initiative in California. In 1978, as the disco music blared, gay people faced a frontal assault from the religious right, whose leaders launched the first in a wave of statewide antigay referenda to slam the door on newfound openness and reverse legal protection from discrimination. Defeating the hate-based Briggs measure in the Golden State showed that gay people could muster the resources to mount a serious campaign in self-defense and that we could make a convincing case to civil rights and community allies that attacks on us posed a mutual threat.

Labor and Latino voters were vital to the victory over Briggs. Last week in Hollywood, Dolores Huerta, a conscience of California politics who with Cesar Chavez founded the United Farm Workers, bore witness to that fact. "In the '70s, gay people came out to march with us in the strawberry fields and in the grape boycott," Huerta recalled at an event commemorating the defeat of Briggs and raising funds to stop the current attack on marriage equality in the state.

"When some of the same people we were battling went after them, we knew we had to stand with our friends," she added. "That is just as true today as back then. We cannot be afraid or confused or divided in any way. And I say that as a Latina, as a Catholic, and as the mother of 11 children."

Solidarity of the heart is one part of the appeal to Latino and labor voters that the LGBT movement must continue to make. Another aspect of the ties that bind our interests at the ballot box comes down to collective bargaining.

By "some of the same people," Huerta might well be referring to foes of labor, Latinos, and LGBT people such as National Right to Work Legal Defense Fund. Last year, Iowa Congressman Steve King wrote a fund-raising appeal for the anti-union outfit that has long taken aim at the minimum wage and overtime pay. King is the same person who brandished a barbed-wire fence on the floor of Congress in comparing Mexican immigrants to livestock and who blocked an appropriation for housing homeless LGBT youth in California, some of whom are kicked out of their homes by intolerant parents.

In answering cruelty with compassion, California has led the way. California unions were among the first in the nation to win healthcare coverage for the domestic partners of public-service workers in the 1980s. Like Archimedes who vowed he could move the world with a lever and a firm foothold to stand on, those early contract provisions proved a toehold in the law. They yielded a platform on which a generation of scholars, attorneys, activists, labor leaders, and civil

rights allies have built a structure of relationship- and family-recognition policies that has extended health care to millions of Americans, including committed same-sex couples and their children.

Taking aim at marriage equality puts even this patchwork of benefits, piecemeal in nature and lacking in parity to the protections afforded by marriage, in jeopardy. That is a lesson no one can ignore in the wake of litigation in Michigan. There the State Supreme Court, pushed by religious right activists and a state attorney general beholden to them, interpreted a 2004 state ballot measure forbidding equal marriage as barring even basic relationship safeguards secured by local and state workers at the bargaining table.

In this way, the fight for equal rights by LGBT people is a fight against givebacks in negotiations. It is a struggle to ensure that working people not get slapped in the face and told what they can and cannot hope to win through cohesion and good contracts. It is nothing less than a quest to renew and extend the American Dream and to realize the vision of the beloved community in which the labor, Latino, and LGBT communities are common stakeholders.

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