

AFL-CIO Convention Passes Historic Resolution on Diversity

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PITTSBURGH, PA If there were any doubts that the American labor movement stands strongly in favor of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, they were set to rest the minute former United Mine Workers president Richard L. Trumka took the podium last Wednesday as the newly elected President of the AFL-CIO.

Speaking at the labor federations quadrennial national convention, the feisty third-generation coal miner issued a clear call for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender voices in the labor movement and American life.

“What does labor want?” Trumka asked the 3,000 elected delegates and guests gathered in Pittsburg’s David L. Lawrence Convention Center. We want a nation where it doesn’t matter what the color of your skin is, or what sex or religion you are, or whether you’re gay or straight or what country your family’s from because here, in America, we believe everyone ought to have their chance to step into the winner’s circle.

Trumka’s election, along with the selection of 39-year-old Liz Shuler as the AFL-CIO’s new Secretary-Treasurer and the return of Arlene Holt Baker as the labor federation’s Executive Vice President, capped a week that LGBT activists called historic. Delegates to the convention, elected to represent 11.5 million members across the country, repeatedly included issues of concern to the LGBT community during debates and speeches, including marriage equality and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). President Barack Obama, Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis and Caroline Kennedy were among the guest speakers at the convention, which marked a high point in the labor movement’s commitment to LGBT equality.

Prior to Trumka’s election on Wednesday, the convention issued a bold call for the full inclusion and participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers in American society and the labor movement. The resolution, entitled A Diverse and Democratic Labor Movement, declared that “LGBT workers make a tremendous contribution to the labor movement. We must include LGBT brothers and sisters in all our efforts to achieve diversity within the labor movement.”

It called for LGBT workers to be given every opportunity for full participation and representation at every level of the labor movement, including leadership, while reasserting that the AFL-CIO will do all in our power to secure the enactment of an inclusive ENDA. The resolution passed unanimously. It can be read at the AFL-CIO website: <http://www.afl-cio.org/aboutus/thisistheafclcio/convention/2009/upload/res7.pdf>

The debate preceding the vote was marked by a series of impassioned speeches from a diverse group of leaders and delegates. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Secretary-Treasurer Bill Lucy, who marched alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with striking AFSCME sanitation workers in Memphis on the

day the civil rights leader was assassinated, was among those who called for passage of the resolution. “This is not an issue of being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender,” Lucy said. “This is an issue about all of us.”

Maine AFL-CIO President Ed Gorham informed the delegates of the November 3 referendum on marriage equality in Maine. Opponents of Maine’s gay marriage law have secured a place on the ballot to overturn the law signed earlier this year that would make Maine the sixth state to allow gay marriages. Gorham urged delegates to contact everyone they know in Maine to vote against the referendum and support marriage equality for the LGBT community.

Office and Professional Employees (OPEIU) Secretary-Treasurer Nancy Wohlforth, an open lesbian member of the AFL-CIO executive council, received a standing ovation after decrying the countless numbers of federal benefits denied to her partner of 28 years, including Social Security benefits. She noted that only a union contract can protect workers in 32 states who otherwise could still be fired simply because of their sexual orientation. “A person should not be discriminated against because of who they love,” Wohlforth said.

In a fiery and emotional speech, United Mine Workers of America President Cecil Roberts declared that support for women, people of color and LGBT workers was essential for the growth of the labor movement. “When we open doors, we build for the future,” Roberts said. “The door is wide open. We celebrate diversity. We are not afraid of diversity.”

The resolution requires that state, area and local labor bodies designate one or more seats on their governing boards for representatives of constituency groups that are viable in their area. It further urges all national and international unions to appoint liaisons who will work with the AFL-CIO to focus on diversity and full inclusion of women, people of color, LGBT workers, young workers and workers with disabilities in their unions.

Wohlforth said this language would encourage LGBT workers to organize additional Pride at Work chapters across the country and become more engaged in the effort to build strategic partnerships among labor and LGBT organizations. “We’ve made tremendous progress,” she said, “but there is a lot more work that needs to be done.” In 1980, Wohlforth was a founding member of the Lesbian and Gay Labor Alliance, the forerunner of Pride at Work. She was a primary mover in seeing that Pride at Work received official status as a constituency group of the AFL-CIO in October 1997.

Wohlforth noted that the Pittsburgh meeting would mark the end of her tenure as Co-President of the group. She and Co-President T Santora, president of Communications Workers of America Local 9000 in Los Angeles, had previously announced their plans to retire as leaders of the group. They presided at the 2009 Pride at Work convention, which was held in Pittsburgh in the days leading up to the AFL-CIO convention. Pride at Work executive director Jeremy Bishop also announced that he would be leaving the

organization to take a position in the Obama Administration. He will be a special assistant at the U.S. Department of Labor.

The Pride at Work Convention focused on strategic planning and laying out a foundation for future growth. Delegates to the convention elected a new slate of officers noted for its diversity. The new executive committee includes an Asian-American, a Latino, a transgender woman and one LGBT ally. Delegates and leading labor officials gathered at a Saturday night reception hosted by Wohlforth, OPEIU International President Michael Goodwin and the national executive board of Pride at Work. The reception was held to build additional labor support for passage of the Employee Non-Discrimination Act.

Goodwin praised the efforts of Pride at Work to build a strong bridge between the labor and LGBT movements. "It is amazing what you are doing," he said. He reminded the delegates that you are working on behalf of millions of Americans and he called Wohlforth the greatest leader for your cause who has ever existed. Among the guests were out-going AFL-CIO President John J. Sweeney, Executive Vice President Arlene Holt Baker, former AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Linda Chavez Thompson, Association of Flight Attendants President Pat Friend and one of two openly gay national union presidents, Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers.

John Sweeney expressed his thanks to the group for all they have done to strengthen the lives of working Americans. "As busy as the convention preparations are, I really wanted to stop by. I am so proud of Pride at Work," he said. "I thank you for all the great work you have done." Sweeney is credited with spearheading the inclusion of Pride at Work as an official AFL-CIO constituency group. As AFSCME President Gerald W. McEntee noted during a convention tribute to Sweeney, "Our movement is stronger today because he understood that labor would be stronger when our house was more open to the voices of all workers."

Pride at Work's new Co-Presidents are Stan Kino, a San Francisco based United Airlines flight attendant and organizer for the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA-CWA) and Donna Cartwright, a Baltimore based writer and member of the Newspaper Guild. Cartwright is among the first transgender officers of a national LGBT organization. Tony Fernandes of Boston and Cheryl Bollinger of Michigan, both with SEIU, were elected Co-Vice Presidents. Brian Polejes, a union representative and organizer for SEIU Local 1000 in San Diego and a steward for his staff union, UAW Local 2350, was elected Vice President of Organizing. Connie Cordovilla, Associate Director of the Human Rights and Community Relations Department of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) was reelected to the position of Secretary. Cynthia Paul, an SEIU lawyer in Michigan, was elected Treasurer. Jo Kenny of San Jose was appointed interim executive director. She has been the group's development director for the past five years.

As the AFL-CIO convention came to a close, The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette highlighted the message of inclusion sent throughout the week: Diversity has emerged as a strong subtext throughout the week, the paper noted, with speakers at plenary sessions recalling the

labor movement's history of becoming increasingly inclusive, and attendees in breakout sessions pushing discussions. The convention's theme was We Are Many, We Are One. For LGBT leaders at the historic gathering, this was the convention when the labor movement and the LGBT movement were joined as one.