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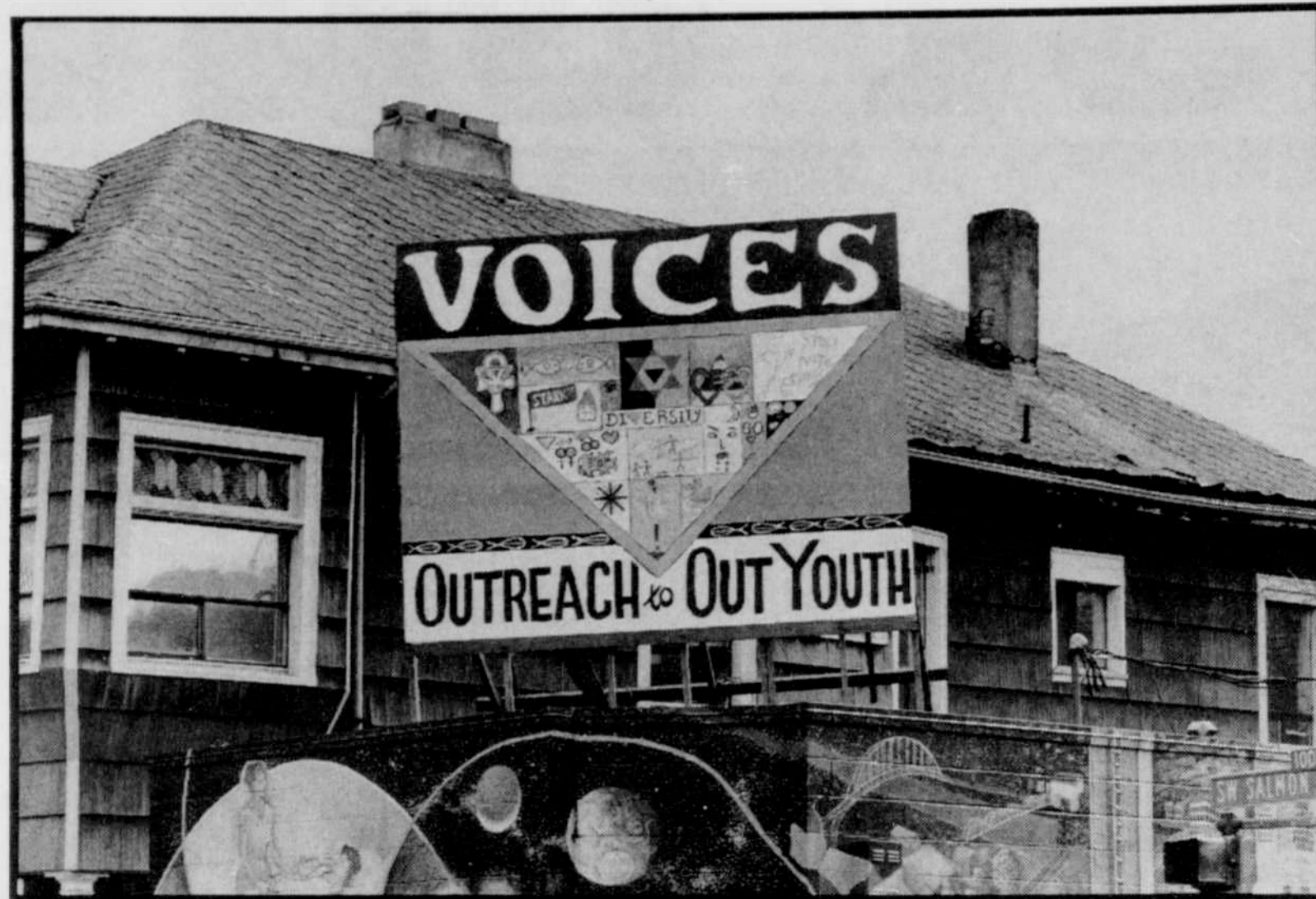
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steppin' out



The new VOICES billboard at Outside-In, 1236 SW Salmon St.

guest editorial

One door opens

Gays, immigrants and earthquake relief mix to protect some and discriminate against others

by Robert Bray

Gays, lesbians and bisexuals in Southern California are still repairing their homes, community centers and AIDS support offices following last January's massive earthquake. Many citizens affected by the temblor are rebuilding their lives with federal disaster assistance authorized by the U.S. Congress.

That assistance—\$8.6 billion for victims of the quake—came with the first federal non-discrimination clause that includes sexual orientation. The legislation authorizing the money contained a little-noticed amendment that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation in distributing emergency earthquake aid. It's the first time the government has banned discrimination against sexual minority communities in a federal program.

But the good news is bittersweet. While the measure opens a door for queers, it slams shut a door for another vilified group, also at the top of the far right's attack list: immigrants.

The queer-inclusive language appears in a controversial section of the legislation that bars assistance to "individuals not lawfully within the United States." The bill requires disaster aid officials to take "reasonable" steps to determine the immigration status of those seeking aid. The measure was quickly condemned by immigrant groups as an example of the rising tide of immigrant scapegoating now sweeping the nation.

Although sexual minorities are protected, the ban against immigrants will result in wholesale discrimination of another kind. All people should be eligible for earthquake relief regardless of immigrant status or sexual orientation. This is a humanitarian concern, and politics should not be a part of the consideration.

The ban also reflects a fear linked with racism. The majority of immigrants in the U.S. are, in fact, European. But the current immigrant-bashing spree directs suspicion primarily toward Latino/as and Asians.

Anti-immigrant sentiment directly affects queers. Many undocumented immigrants and those seeking asylum are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender.

The far right—the same folks behind discriminatory initiatives in several states—are fueling the anti-immigrant backlash. It uses many of the same tactics against immigrants that it does against gays.

First, the concept of protected rights is narrowly defined. Queers are not a "rightful minority" and immigrants aren't "American" so neither should have protection, say the fundamentalists. Queers are demonized as a threat to traditional family values. Immigrants are scapegoated as a threat to U.S. economic security.

The far right aims to institutionalize discrimination against gays in the form of Colorado-style initiatives. It targets immigrants with laws that discriminate against foreign citizens and even their U.S.-born children.

Scapegoating and bashing nurtures an environment of harassment and violence. This makes many queers think twice about coming out. It makes those hit hardest by disaster fearful of seeking assistance.

"The far right has been influential in altering political and ideological culture in this country so people are fairly accepting of intolerance," says Cathi Tactaquin, executive director of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. "They've made it easier for people to rationalize discrimination—to morally and legally justify it against immigrants or gays."

The current battles against sexual minority and immigrant rights pose a critical question about our country: Will our democracy expand to provide rights to an increasingly diverse population, or will it contract to limit rights to a few?

Gay, lesbian and bisexual activists must work in alliance with immigrants, people of color and other groups to expose the broader repressive agenda of the far right—an agenda that attacks basic civil, human, labor, economic and reproductive rights. We must establish a stronger civil rights foundation for all. Then we can build a solid, united front against intolerance that will result in a more inclusive democracy.

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