

local news

First they came for us

Oregon has joined the growing effort to eliminate affirmative action and mandate discrimination against immigrants

by Inga Sorensen

Gay men and lesbians in Oregon know what it's like to be the target of discriminatory initiatives. All along, opponents of the measures targeting gay men and lesbians have put forth the notion that these campaigns were just the beginning of a conservative effort to scale back the rights of women, people of color, the poor and immigrants. The growing anti-affirmative action and anti-immigrant sentiment currently sweeping the nation, they say, proves their point.

"I have a copy of the Oregon Citizens Alliance's training manual, which flat-out says the group is opposed to affirmative action. It's right there," says LaVerne Lewis, executive director of the Lesbian Community Project. "We've been saying all along that the OCA's attack on gays and lesbians was just the tip of the iceberg, but nobody has been listening."

Like gay and lesbian rights in the early 1990s, affirmative action and immigration have become this year's hot-button electoral issues. Several initiatives and legislative measures designed to eliminate affirmative action programs and crack down on illegal immigrants are being considered by federal and state lawmakers. On a federal level, House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole have called for hearings on affirmative action, and reports say conservative policy experts are working with party leaders to eliminate funds for the 160 affirmative action provisions in federal law, killing them off by eliminating their funding.

Federal affirmative action policies, which were established in the 1960s, are designed to mitigate past and present discrimination based on race, religion, national origin, age, gender, veteran status or disabilities. This is done through governmental, corporate and college guidelines which require that qualified women and people of color be hired and promoted in order to create equity in the workplace and educational institutions.

Oregon law, meanwhile, requires that all branches of state government and its contractors engage in affirmative action to offer "fair and equal opportunities for employment and advancement in programs and services and in the awarding of contracts."

State Rep. Bob Tiernan (R-Lake Oswego) introduced a bill this session that would have repealed provisions in existing state law that review or encourage affirmative action. House Bill 3394 would have also prohibited the state and its political subdivisions from "utilizing affirmative action in employment, contracting or provision of public services."

While the bill is considered all but dead, the issue remains very much alive. A group called Oregonians for Equal Rights, which drafted the language for HB 3394, has already filed papers with the state to place an initiative on the ballot that would do exactly what HB 3394 would have done.

And don't think the anti-affirmative action mentality is limited to Republicans and conservatives. "Those feelings definitely cross party lines," says state Rep. George Eighmey (D-Portland). Eighmey, who is a strong supporter of affirmative action, says a handful of his Democratic colleagues have secretly professed their support for the growing anti-affirmative action movement.

"They've come up to me and said, 'I'm really glad the Republicans are doing this. We never could have done that when we were in the majority,'" he recounts. "They say, 'Come on, George, you know you feel the same way.' And I just can't

believe it. I tell them, 'No, I think affirmative action is necessary.'"

"I'm afraid to say that there is a growing hostility out there about affirmative action," says William Lunch, a political analyst for Oregon Public Broadcasting and a political science professor at Oregon State University. He believes that if a vote were held tomorrow asking citizens whether they wanted to maintain or abolish the state's affirmative action policy, the latter would win hands down.

"I really do think a lot of this goes back to the ending of the Cold War. Like so many Americans, I never thought I would live to see the Berlin Wall come down. The Cold War gave Americans an external target to focus on. That threat has been removed, and now we're targeting minorities and women, gays and immigrants. It's a very nasty climate out there," he says, adding, "It's not like there weren't people like Lon Mabon and Pat

Statewide, Johnnie Bell, administrator for the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries civil rights division, which investigates discrimination claims, says in her 16 years with the bureau she knows of "only two or three" discrimination complaints brought by white men saying they had been the victim of racial discrimination.

"Take a look at the faces of senior and middle management. Take a look at the faces of those people who are getting public works contracts. The vast majority are white men," she says.

"I agree it's important for us to take the time and evaluate how well affirmative action programs are working. That just hasn't happened," says Prince Washington, Gov. John Kitzhaber's acting director of affirmative action. Washington estimates a little more than half of the state government work force is made up of women; less than 2 percent of the work force is African American.

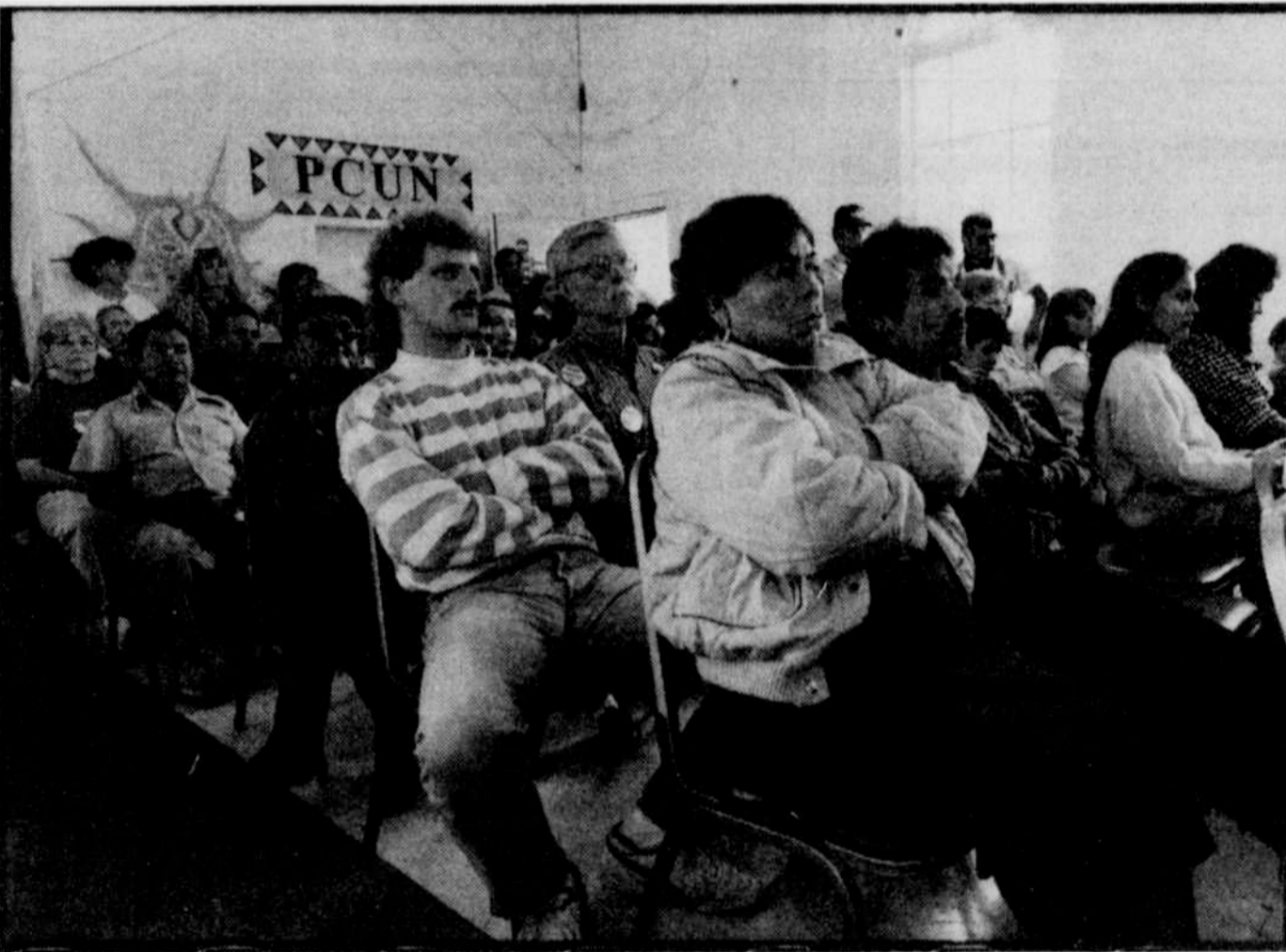


PHOTO BY LINDA KLEIVER

Buchanan parading around before the end of the Cold War. There were. But now they've got a much broader audience listening to their rhetoric."

Based on that rhetoric, one would think white men were being discriminated against in droves. That doesn't seem to be the case, however. Consider the following: The U.S. Labor Department has reviewed discrimination opinions by U.S. district courts and courts of appeal between 1990 and 1994. It found fewer than 100 reverse-discrimination judgments among the more than 3,000 cases. Another new study concluded that an estimated 95 percent of senior management positions in major companies are held by white men.

Bias is not only found in the workplace. Edwin J. Peterson, a former Oregon Supreme Court justice, recently spoke before the Portland City Club about a report on racial and ethnic issues in the judicial system. The 65-year-old Peterson told the crowd that the courts are racially biased against nonwhites. (More than a dozen bills have been introduced this session that address the problem.)

"I've been told the governor plans to conduct a state study exploring whether minorities and women hit a glass ceiling," says Washington, who is also president of the Black Networking Association. "We need to begin to assess what's what, rather than making knee-jerk assumptions."

Both Bell and Washington say their respective offices plan to conduct a series of public forums to help separate the rhetoric from the reality. That strategy will also be employed by the national American Association for Affirmative Action, which met two weeks ago in Portland for its annual conference.

Immigrant rights are also the focus of heated debate. Earlier this session, state Rep. Bill Markham (R-Riddle) introduced a bill modeled after California's Proposition 187, a ballot measure approved by voters last year. Like that initiative, Markham's HB 2933 sought to prohibit undocumented immigrants from obtaining public education, social services and health care. It would have required public schools to verify the immigration status of students and would have forced police to check the status of all people arrested.

Though there are no statistics detailing how many illegal immigrants are in Oregon, Markham has contended that undocumented immigrants are a primary cause of the state's economic and crime problems.

After Markham introduced his bill, there was loud outcry on the part of many Latino/a organizations, and Kitzhaber vowed to veto the measure. Tiernan, chairman of the House General Government and Regulatory Reform Committee, has said he will not schedule a hearing on HB 2933, virtually ensuring its demise. Two other measures, however, have been introduced that would have a similar effect. They are HB 3284, which would require proof of citizenship or legal immigration status in order to receive a driver's license, and Senate Bill 999, which would increase criminal penalties for making false immigration documents.

"Illegal immigrants just aren't the problem in Oregon that they may be in California. I think some lawmakers here are trying to milk the issue for what they think it's worth," says Bradley Maier, immigration coordinator for Sponsors Organized to Assist Refugees, an organization of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, which represents 17 denominations and 2,000 congregations statewide. "What's really ironic about this whole thing, though, is that historically the United States has encouraged immigrants to come here so that there is a cheap and abundant labor pool." For example, says Maier, in 1981 the federal government granted special status to illegal immigrants so agri-business would have an inexpensive labor source.

Much like anti-sexual-minority-rights efforts, Maier believes there is a national organization fueling the anti-immigration campaigns that have ignited in many states. He specifically cites the work of the Washington, D.C.-based Federation for American Immigration Reform. "It's the OCA of immigration issues," he says.

Like affirmative action, Oregonians may be voting on an anti-immigrant initiative in the near future—Markham has publicly threatened to turn to the initiative process to push his plan.

"I think all of this shows how important it is for the liberal left to begin to work together," says Dave Farber, chair of the Harmony Committee, a broad coalition of individuals and organizations including the Lesbian Community Project, the American Jewish Committee, Blacks in Government, Cascade AIDS Project, the US West Foundation, US Bank and many others.

The committee meets on a regular basis to network and discuss human-rights-related issues. Most recently it hosted a meeting which focused on the growing white supremacist activity in the Pacific Northwest.

"I think citizens are tired of being misled by government, so they're listening to other sources. The right has done a very effective job in making themselves a source. We have to do the same," says Farber.

"There could very likely be three initiatives on the ballot next time: one that is anti-gay, one that is anti-affirmative action, and one that is anti-immigrant. I think this clearly shows why it's important that a group like the Harmony Committee be active. It allows us the chance to educate each other about our respective communities," adds LCP's Lewis. "We are many groups coming together to fight the common threat of oppression."