

On Dec. 14, the Human Rights Campaign joined Equal Benefits Advocates, the group that initially called for a boycott of United Airlines because of the company's ongoing opposition to a San Francisco ordinance requiring companies doing business with the city to offer employees' domestic partners the same benefits offered to married spouses.

HRC, a national gay and lesbian political organization based in Washington, D.C., joined a delicately worded boycott against United, the world's largest air carrier, because the organization "could not think of an alternative approach that would be effective" in changing the airline's policy, says HRC's executive director, Elizabeth Birch.

United and the Air Transport Association, an airline trade group that represents many major airlines, have been fighting for two years against a San Francisco ordinance that requires companies holding contracts with the city to provide the same benefits to gay or straight domestic partners that are offered to married partners.

A number of companies, including BankAmerica and Chevron, have complied with the law, but United has not. United officials say the law creates an economic burden on the company and is not within the scope of the city's power, since federal laws should govern airlines.

"For a company of 92,000 people, any change to our agreed benefits is going to take a pretty major upheaval for everybody," maintains United spokesperson Andy Plews. "We have been resisting really on a point of principle. We cannot have policies dictated by local authorities. We have always contended that airlines should be federally governed."

A federal judge last April ruled that airlines operating in the city were not required to provide domestic partner benefits. In October, the same judge said United did not have to provide nonhealth benefits, including bereavement leave, until a full hearing could be held in early 1999.

The call for a boycott was specifically prompted by these recent efforts by United to avoid providing equal bereavement leave.

"The way in which United is handling the San Francisco ordinance lacks dignity and lacks fairness for their gay and lesbian employees," Birch says. "Of the hundreds of companies that

BOLSTERING A BOYCOTT

National gay and lesbian group joins others taking a stand against United Airlines by Gip Plaster

I've seen grapple with this issue, they are doing it the least humanely."

She adds the company should agree to follow the ordinance, grant domestic partner and related benefits to all its employees, then argue jurisdictional issues in court.

She says all companies should be offering the benefits regardless of whether laws require them, and characterizes United's tactics as cowardly.

"No matter what principle they want to test in court, they need to examine their policies," she says.

A recent HRC media statement announcing

"Neither United Airlines nor the ATA was involved in any aspect of the [ACLJ] suit, or in any effort to consolidate or relate the cases," says a United press statement. "[The ATA case] has been largely decided in favor of the airlines by Judge Claudia Wilkins. The issues in the [ACLJ] suit, however, have yet to be heard by the court."

Spokespersons for the ATA, which represents 22 airlines, also decried the boycott.

"The airlines' position in this matter has always been to protect their rights to conduct business according to federal law and avoid a

who "conceived, drafted and lobbied through the equal benefits ordinance," explains Jeff Shehee, one of the members.

The boycott says that "where customers have a choice (and choice may be driven by price, use of frequent flyer points or availability of other flights), customers should try to fly another airline."

It states that if a choice does not exist, "Equal Benefits Advocates requests the customer take the opportunity to educate United and the public by wearing a button or sticker expressing their support of the boycott."

If United withdraws its lawsuit, the boycott will end, according to the wording established by the group.

While United does not provide all the benefits it could for its employees, the company does donate money and services to a number of gay and lesbian causes and groups, including the International Gay Rodeo Association. The boycott does not offer instructions or advice to these organizations that now find themselves accepting money from a company that another gay and lesbian organization is boycotting.

"I think each group has to make its own decision," Birch says. "We would not begin to instruct another gay group."

While she does not make a recommendation about whether other groups should refuse money from United, Birch does call on other groups to consider joining the original boycott by Equal Benefits Advocates.

"They should get information from the San Francisco group and make a decision if they want to support their efforts as we did," she says.

Birch notes that HRC has never accepted money from United, nor does it accept money from other controversial companies, including alcohol and tobacco companies.

United with Pride, the nonprofit gay and lesbian employees group at United, has not taken a position regarding the boycott.

"United with Pride neither supports nor does not support the boycott. Our position is to take neither side," says Nick Morse, the group's executive director.

Morse adds that he "questions the benefit of a boycott" and believes education of employees and the management at United is needed.

"The employees here need education more than pushing," he says.



that the group had joined the boycott attempts to draw a link between United and the American Center for Law and Justice, an organization created by conservative Christian television commentator Pat Robertson that has mounted its own case against the San Francisco ordinance.

"If there was any doubt as to where United stood on gay and lesbian equality, this was clarified when they elected to form a partnership with one of the most rabid anti-gay organizations in America," Birch says in the release. "In essence, United has joined forces with Pat Robertson to promote the unfair treatment of gay Americans."

United officials say the case involving United and the ATA was filed several months before the ACLJ case and is being heard before the same judge because court rules require it.

patchwork quilt of inconsistent local regulation of what is fundamentally an interstate industry," according to an ATA statement. "The airlines maintain that the appropriate forum for addressing the domestic partners benefits issue is in discussions and negotiations between individual companies and their employees."

Birch says she could not provide any evidence that United and the ACLJ had worked together, but adds the airline should be alarmed to find itself fighting on the same side of the issue as Pat Robertson.

"That doesn't even prompt them to take a deep look into their internal actions," she says.

The boycott leaves room for consumer discretion and does not call for a complete boycott of all flights by United. Birch says the wording was decided upon by Equal Benefits Advocates.

The group is composed of the three people

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