

Pride at Work—the Oregon chapter of the national gay, lesbian, bi and trans caucus of the AFL-CIO—educates and advocates specifically for queer workers but not exclusively for them. Christa Orth, a member who joined this past summer, is working to educate people on its existence and purpose.

“We’re a democratic organizing model that is inclusive of all people who are marginalized in society: gays, people of color, women, old people, people with disabilities, etc.,” she says. “We are one of the most progressive organizations in the country, so we work on issues of economics and class, social justice, anti-racism, transphobia issues and the like. So we’re in a lot of different places. When someone comes and joins PAW, they’re not just fighting for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; they’re fighting for the rights of all people who want respect and dignity in what they do.”

Some of the numerous resources PAW provides are support to community campaigns and local labor struggles, assistance in developing leadership skills and practical organizing experiences, and information on how to deal with work-related harassment. The chapter also holds general meetings once a month.

PAW Oregon just was chartered as an official affinity group at the state AFL-CIO convention last spring. Since then members have had some notable successes. They were able to get the state AFL-CIO and the Vancouver AFL Central labor council to affiliate, and they solidified a partnership with Basic Rights Oregon on their Fair Workplace Project.

With those successes, Joe Kear, a longtime member of the national PAW and a co-founder

TAKING PRIDE ONE STEP BEYOND

AFL-CIO chapter battles for queer rights on the job

by Anthony Davis

of the Oregon chapter, says one of his biggest challenges will be getting the word out to potential new members. “The best place for us to start is to call all the local unions around and to see if we can present to them a short presentation so that they can know about us. Also, going to events in the community and letting people know that this group exists and ask people to sign up with us.”

The Pacific Northwest shares a rich history of queer activism that is unknown to many. Workers’ rights and gay rights always have converged in one way or another.

“I think it’s important to show people that this is not a brand new movement,” says Orth, who wrote her master’s thesis on queer union activism. “Even though the Oregon chapter of PAW is not a year old, this type of activism has been going on for decades right here. For instance, Seattle Library Workers got the sexual orientation law put in their nondiscrimination clause in their union contract in 1974 and was one of the first unions to have that provision in their contract. It’s important for people to know the history and that we have a foundation to build on. We just have to organize and do it, and the world

would be a much better place for everyone.”

Making the world a better place might be difficult in certain areas. Some people, especially those who are in the trades or more traditional blue-collar jobs, find it difficult to come out in the workplace.

“Right now we just talk to people about PAW and let them know that it’s a resource if they are having trouble,” Orth says. “But I’m never one to tell people to just come out, because I know there are real issues and people can get fired or beat up. But when queer workers hear others talk about our coming-out experiences at work and how we dealt with it, it really inspires people, and I think they start feeling better about themselves. I’ve heard people in the trades especially talk about how it’s really hard coming out, but they don’t regret it at all, and it’s made their working situations and working environment much better. I can’t say that’s the case in every situation.”

Besides letting the sexual minorities commu-

nity know it’s here to help them, PAW has many goals it wants to accomplish. Kear envisions the chapter promoting policies that prohibit harassment and discrimination not just on paper but in practice, helping implement labor safeguards via statewide legislation. Members also hope to help people in low-wage jobs create unions at their workplaces. **J**

PRIDE AT WORK OREGON will discuss last month’s *Creating Change* conference and plan activities for next year 6:30 p.m. Dec. 10 at Communication Workers of America, 2950 S.E. Stark St. You don’t need to be a union member; everyone is welcome. For more information call Christa Orth at 503-231-5759 or Joe Kear at 503-757-8907 or visit www.prideatwork.org.

ANTHONY DAVIS is a Portland free-lance writer.



Joe Kear (left, with L.C. and Ari Hansen at *Creating Change*) has high hopes for Pride at Work Oregon

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