

## Union and Proud:

# At UNITE HERE, gay rights leader bridges two movements

Gay civil rights leader Cleve Jones was a star guest April 20 at the kickoff in Portland of the newly-chartered Oregon chapter of Pride At Work. Pride At Work is an AFL-CIO constituency group for gay and lesbian trade unionists and is meant to connect the labor movement and the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered) community. Its goals are to promote full equality in the workplace and greater participation by LGBT members in their unions, and to build support for the union movement in the LGBT community.

Jones is one of the founders of the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. In the 1970s, he was an intern in the office of gay rights leader Harvey Milk, a San Francisco city supervisor who was assassinated in 1978. For the last six years, Jones has worked for the hotel and restaurant union UNITE HERE, particularly on its "Sleep With the Right People" campaign, an effort to get gays and lesbians to patronize hotels that respect the rights of their workers.

The Labor Press spoke with Jones during his visit to Portland.

### How did you come to be involved with the labor movement?

My father's family is from Detroit, and they were staunch supporters of unions. One never crossed a picket line. One never violated a boycott. So I grew up with these values. When I moved to San Francisco and got active in the early gay rights movement, there were a couple unions that were early supporters of equal rights for gay people. Among them was the hotel workers and restaurant workers union, Local 2 in particular. I worked in a hotel for a while as a dishwasher, and had a lot of friends working in restaurants and hotels. If my roommate was on strike, I'd go down and walk the picket line. Understood: San Francisco is still a really



Cleve Jones, front and center, celebrates the founding of an Oregon chapter of AFL-CIO Pride at Work.

strong labor town.

### What's the connection between the labor movement and the gay rights movement?

In my mind it's all one movement. Most of my adult life has been spent working on LGBT issues, but I believe very strongly that any movement that seeks only to advance the narrow interests of its own members is a shallow movement, no matter how just their issues. The movements that change the world have been movements that cross barriers and boundaries and find common ground between different kinds of people.

### What do you think of Pride At Work?

I think it can play a really important role. Very often when people think of the gay community, they think of people like me, white gay guys from middle class backgrounds. The reality is gay people come in all sizes, shapes, colors, from all sorts of backgrounds. We're born into rich families and poor families, but the overwhelming majority are working class folks. So yeah, we're concerned about equality for gay people, but we also are concerned about

the issues that confront all working people: safety on the job, decent wages, access to health care, the ability to get our kids an education, to breathe clean air and drink clean water. I want to make sure the LGBT community is right there fighting alongside everybody else for the changes this country needs, and Pride at Work can be part of that.

### What does Pride at Work do?

Pride at Work exists to bring labor issues to the gay community and LGBT issues to the labor movement. Right now is a very exciting time to do that. What's happened since Wisconsin is really extraordinary. I'm 56. I have never in my lifetime heard so many young people talking about collective bargaining as a fundamental right. I want to make sure that everybody — gay and straight, young and old, black, brown and white, native-born and immigrant alike — understands that we

have an opportunity right now to take this country back. But it will only happen with a strong labor movement.

### Has workplace discrimination against gay, lesbian and transgendered workers been taken up as a union issue?

Job discrimination is very significant within the LGBT community. It's widespread. In some jurisdictions there are legal protections on the books now, but in many states there are no such protections. One of the ways organized labor has assisted is to include non-discrimination clauses in contracts. There are many workers in this country whose only protection against discrimination comes from their union contracts. Health benefits for partners is an example. This has been a big issue within the gay community because our relationships are not fully acknowledged by the state. Many think of it as a sentimental issue. Some think of it as a religious issue. I think of it as an issue of economic justice.

### Right, straight workers can marry and have their partners be covered by all sorts of benefits, but gay workers most often don't have that right.

There are about 1,100 rights granted to heterosexual couples that are denied to same sex couples, and most of these are economically significant. That's a big deal.

In our union, we have a very diverse membership. We are largely immigrant. People from almost every country in the world are members. They come from all different faiths and political beliefs.

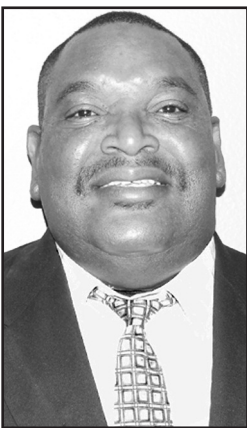
There's still differing opinions on the issue of homosexuality. But I think increasingly our members are united in understanding the economic justice component of the struggle for equality.

### How much does Pride at Work have to contend with homophobia in union workplaces?

Not nearly as much as I had anticipated. I think workers are getting smart. It's still important, though, for LGBT people to come out and be visible. Over 30 years ago, Harvey Milk taught us that the single most important thing gay people could do was to come out, to reveal their true nature to their families, friends, and co-workers. We understand how important that is, because just through coming out we shatter the myths and stereotypes and hateful lies that have been used against us for so long. All of the studies and polls have shown that once people understand that they have gay co-workers and family members, they are much less likely to hate or fear us or discriminate against us. Part of what Pride at Work does is enable and encourage workers to come out and also show that gay people are taking responsibility for the larger struggle.

I love my union so much, because when I go and visit members, whether in Toronto or Honolulu, Phoenix, Philadelphia or Miami, San Diego, Minneapolis, I walk into these rooms filled with hundreds of workers, and they are young, old, gay, straight, black, brown, white, from all different countries and native-born, and they're all on the same program. I think there's great power in that, and great potential.

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