

OUT FOR OURSELVES



The Lives of Irish Lesbians & Gay Men

# Out at Work

**E**ven when gay men and lesbians have come out to their friends and perhaps to their families, it is usually the case that they have not come out at work. This will happen only when the lesbian or gay man is confident of her or his identity. It's easy to understand. People are afraid that their colleagues may turn against them, they are afraid of being ignored for promotion and they are afraid of simply being sacked. Lesbians and gay men are very used to hearing anti-gay jokes and sneering comments from people with whom they work. It never seems to occur to most people that lesbians and gay men are likely to be among their listeners. It's pretty difficult to talk about your gayness to people who seem to be full of prejudices and think in stereotyped ways. The fears about promotion are also real – promotion is never easy and bosses can always find excuses to deny promotion to people they don't like or approve of. Think how difficult it usually is for *any* woman to get the promotion she deserves.

The fears of being sacked are the most worrying of all. With our appalling unemployment, the possession of a job is a privilege rather than the right it should be. You will not generally read in the papers that people have been sacked for being lesbian or gay but it does happen. The person sacked doesn't want a public fuss. They go quietly because they hope to get another job. They go quietly because making a fight of it seems useless. If an individual worker is sacked, the workforce or the union will usually protest, but the workforce or union officials share the employer's prejudice. Lesbians and gay men must *know* that their colleagues will stand beside them. They are unlikely to believe support exists if all they hear are those anti-gay jokes and offensive comments. It's not easy for lesbians or gay men to protest at such comments or threats to their jobs. Colleagues must be actively supportive. It is as intolerable that a person should be sacked for being lesbian or gay, as it would be to lose a job because of being black.

The responsibility for taking up the fight for workers' rights lies with trade unions who are the only organisations working in this area. Trade unions have charters which state their commitment to equal pay and equal employment opportunities for all. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions' Women's Charter states specifically that a worker will receive support if s/he is dismissed or refused promotion on the grounds of age, sex, creed, colour or sexual orientation. Lesbians and gay men have had a few significant gains within the trade union structure. Notably the passing of a lesbian and gay rights proposal by the ICTU conference in 1982, and an ICTU

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sponsored half-day seminar on lesbians and gay men at work, in November 1985.

However these gains are small when compared with the general level of ignorance and fear of lesbian and gay sexuality in the work place. While the ICTU seminar was considered successful, overall, it was preaching to the converted. The trade union membership who voted through the proposal in '82 apparently without contention (or perhaps more importantly without discussion) were not in evidence at the November '85 seminar. Trade unions too, for all their pledges of solidarity with the underprivileged are notably absent from the lower paid occupations – particularly those employing women. Lesbian and gay socialists and trade union activists are therefore faced with the dilemma of working actively within trade unions which often marginalise our interests. Ensuring that we are not marginalised involves considerable energy and work from those lesbians and gay men lucky enough to be able to come out fully at work. At the moment there are very few who are in that position and consequently our gains within the trade union movement are few and far between.

The advantages and disadvantages of working within trade union structures are discussed in depth from differing points of view in the following two articles.

## Work and the Trade Unions

Work is the most central part of our lives. It's how we get the money to survive and do the things we choose. A job, if you can get one, can be exhausting, uplifting, deadly boring or destructive to your health. If you have a good wage you can get a place of your own, be more independent and better able to deal with anti-lesbian or gay prejudices. If you have to deny your sexuality at work, it puts you under a lot of stress and alienates you from your co-workers.

Because jobs are so important, it is here that discrimination is most effective and subtle and it is here that we are most vulnerable. There is no lesbian or gay man who can feel secure about getting and keeping a job and being fairly treated in it. The majority of women do not even get into the paid labour force. Only thirty-six per cent of employees are women. With more than a quarter of a million people unemployed, the AIDS hysteria, greater employer power and defensive trade unions, our job prospects are getting worse. The effect is that many of us are in badly-paid, insecure jobs or are unemployed and eventually forced to emigrate.

In Britain, there have been many well publicised campaigns against attempts to victimise lesbian and gay workers. This is not yet the case here because the discrimination is covert, and people do not feel that there is strong enough support to make an effective challenge.

Kincora is the only example we have of an open and organised attempt to discriminate against us. The health board in charge knew of allegations of sexual exploitation in the child-care home but did nothing except get involved in a politically motivated cover-up. Finally the scandal was made public and scape-goats had to be found. Management decided to fire all lesbian and gay social workers. As long as they thought you were a lesbian or gay man you were gone. Paranoia reigned. Boy George records were banned from health board homes. This avoided dangerous investigations into the sinister role of the security agencies in the cover-up. An inquiry recommended that more and better-trained staff was the answer but this was rejected as it would cost too much money. Management also seized the opportunity to introduce 'positive vetting', which means that the police would be asked for a report on all job applicants. The unions strongly resisted this serious attack. All the myths about lesbians and gay men as child molesters came out into the open and, although initially unprepared, the unions successfully dispelled them, got the full support of all the workers and forced management to back off.

Unions are our only reliable defence when our jobs are under threat. Again and again it has been proven that workers cannot rely on employment protection legislation or the courts. Remember that in the same week judges jailed the Ranks workers for occupying their workplace and freed the

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Fairview killers.

Some progress has been made in getting the unions to give us open and positive support. In 1982 the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), representing 655,000 workers in different unions, north and south, adopted a policy of support for lesbian and gay workers. This policy has been incorporated into the ICTU Women's Charter and Youth Charter. They have made representations to the government to have the Unfair Dismissals Act amended to explicitly include lesbian and gay workers. The ESB Officers Association have produced an information leaflet on lesbian and gay rights. My experience in the Local Government and Public Services Union (LGPSU), is that both branch and leadership levels are supportive in a practical and public way. There is resistance at times and it can get frustrating going over the same arguments again and again but it is both necessary and productive. The most significant step forward recently was the holding of an ICTU workshop on lesbian and gay rights at work in November 1985. People came from all over the country and drew up a broad and detailed series of recommendations to be considered by Congress. But such moves took place over four years and this does not match the scale of the problem.

However, we have to look at our progress as workers in the context of what is happening for workers generally. There is a worldwide and increasingly powerful ideology which says that high unemployment is here to stay, that economic growth depends on private enterprise, cut-backs in public services, low wages, weaker unions and reductions in workers' rights.

It would be wrong to think that this is just a passing phase created by Reagan and Thatcher. Right-wing elements have been laying the groundwork for years and the threat to our standard of living will continue. In Ireland, employers have been steadily building their organisations since the sixties. They have developed powerful and well-funded agencies, such as the Federated Union of Employers, the Confederation of Irish Industry and the Department of the Public Service. Along with this, right-wing economics promotes and relies on the traditional values of family and religion and opposes demands for equality made by women generally and by lesbians and gay men. Part of this ideology is based on alienating workers from their unions. The media and the educational system are used to foster the prejudice that unions are selfish, irresponsible, too powerful or just old fashioned and irrelevant. There are still many employers who refuse to allow their workers join a union and they can get away with it.

While the progress society has made since the nineteenth century in terms of incomes and conditions of work, better housing, health and civil liberties was fought for and won by the labour movement, that is not to say that unions are above criticism. We can point to their inability to represent our interests as lesbian and gay workers and their failure to make substantial progress on the 1982 policy. Although women are the leaders in many important labour struggles, they are excluded from positions of power and

sometimes even from union membership. Unions have been racist, sectarian, sectional and elitist. The craft unions ignored the needs of manual workers who had to set up their own general unions. Up to now the movement has not given any priority to women workers, part-timers, casual workers, the low waged and areas of work that are difficult to unionise. Irish union leaderships have become complacent and do not seem to realise that the ground is shifting underneath them.

But the need for rebuilding unions and involving new sections of workers, such as young people, is beginning to be recognised. For all their failings, trade unions are the only way that people without power or privilege can hope to maintain and improve their standard of living. Unions are democratic organisations, whose only strength is the awareness and commitment of the general membership. For lesbians and gay men there are no difficulties in getting actively involved in unions but it would be almost impossible for many of us to come out in our branches. The issue of prejudice coming from trade unionists was identified as a major problem at the ICTU workshop. It is ironic that many of us who are working hard to protect the interests of our union and members, fear victimisation in return if we are open about our sexuality. This is a major obstacle in our progress within the unions.

Because we have been marginalised as a group, we have tended to become isolationist in our attitudes. The first priority for the trade union movement is well paid jobs with good conditions for all those able and willing to work. With high unemployment and emigration depleting our community, it should be a priority for us as well. The ICTU recently produced *Confronting the Jobs Crisis*, a policy document on economic and social development on the basis of people's needs. How these issues will be decided and in whose interests will determine the quality of our lives just as much as a charter for lesbian and gay rights. But as lesbians and gay men who are committed members of trade unions, we should make no apology for demanding our rights as workers. You will often come across people who are convinced that their values and priorities are the only proper ones and other issues which affect women, gay men or young people are all non-union matters. Our answer to this type is 'Move over brother, this is our union as well'.

Where do we go from here? The ICTU lesbian and gay workshop allowed us to share and analyse what we had learnt over the years and we now have a clearer sense of direction. We want a serious commitment of resources put into combating prejudice within the trade union movement. Each lesbian and gay worker should feel confident about going to their union to get action against discrimination by either management or co-workers. We want our interests to be represented within the structures of the ICTU through regular consultative conferences. We want our needs taken into account in day-to-day union work such as negotiating contracts of employment, leave entitlement and pensions.

Unions have nominees on a whole range of government committees and

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agencies and should ensure that these do not work against the interests of lesbians and gay men. There should be a person in the ICTU with responsibility for getting action on such an anti-discrimination programme. A lot of this work would be carried on at ICTU or head office level. But unless the issue is taken seriously at branch level and pushed from there, the working lives of the average lesbian or gay man will not improve much.

Because we are in different branches in different unions there is an interim need for a network to link up the individual lesbian and gay trade unionists. On most issues, lesbians will have more in common with other women workers than with gay men so agreeing on objectives will not be easy. What practical priority will gay men put on equal pay or child-care facilities or positive action for women workers? There are also massive differences in the needs of workers in badly paid, insecure jobs with a ruthless management and a weak union and those in good jobs with effective unions. Of course, as we go along and learn more from our successes and failures we will have to keep on re-examining our analysis and direction.

We have a lot to contribute to unions from our particular experience of being lesbians and gay men and have a lot to gain from our involvement with them. Unions have deep links in the community. They are in a negotiating position with the centres of power and are accessible to us. Workers' co-ops and housing co-ops are another way for us to make a living space in this tight society and these have their roots in the trade union movement. This is how we will survive in between the froth and excitement of single issue campaigns.

Trade unions have gone through generations of struggle: successes, failures, sell-outs and compromises. A lot of this history is unwritten but there is enough there for us to deepen our understanding of our own fight. Like for example, the working class women who were caught in a dilemma between middle class suffragettes who were interested in getting the vote but not in workers' rights and the mostly male trade unions, who were not committed to women's rights. Trade union values need to be brought into the lesbian and gay movement so that we do not allow people's work to be exploited even if it is in the interests of some 'greater' objective. The lesbian and gay movement is a recent one and we have a great deal to learn from trade union structures and traditions which have been developed over more than a century.

*Kieran Rose*