

Obama, Labor, and Marriage Equality

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Global Research, May 16, 2012

16 May 2012

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Since President Obama made his very calculated public statement announcing that he was “personally” in favor of same sex marriage, among the many commentators who have rushed to his support have been a significant number of Labor leaders.

Richard Trumka, President of the AFL-CIO, stated “Look, I support that position. We support it as the labor movement because of discrimination.” He explained, “There are 1,128 obligations and benefits you get from being married, responsibilities and obligations, as well as some benefits. We think that everybody ought to be treated equally. So it’s marriage equality we’re looking at, and people shouldn’t be discriminated against.”

While many union members likely disagree with Trumka’s stance, support of same sex marriage and all civil rights is the only position that is consistent with the interests of working people as a whole. Though unions are generally focused on better wages, benefits, and working conditions for their membership, they cannot take effective action for these needs without building broad unity among all workers regardless of race, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation. Consequently, since the mass efforts of the LGBT community have galvanized around the issue of marriage equality, the union movement needs to get behind it. For LGBT workers, this issue is as central to their lives as their working conditions. For those workers who are currently opposed to same sex marriage, they need to learn that they are better able to struggle for improvements in their lives if they are united with their gay brothers and sisters. Given the bipartisan attacks against workers, they cannot afford to let their prejudices get in the way.

Nevertheless, the uncritical praise for President Obama’s remarks create the impression that they have been more motivated to getting him re-elected than as commitment to LGBT equality. This is because Obama’s remarks fell far short from the step forward for which they are being touted. In fact, politically they are a step backwards. The President did not say he considered marriage equality a civil right. Moreover, he made it a point of stating that he considered the matter of same sex marriage best decided on a state-by-state basis. This has been the fall back position for every two-faced faker in civil rights’ struggles from the days of slavery and Jim Crow to *Roe v. Wade*. In other words this means that Obama condones discrimination where bigots have the political upper hand.

President Obama’s advocating of a state-by-state approach towards marriage equality undermines the efforts of those who are fighting for it as a constitutional civil rights issue. Jim Cook, in his article “Barack Obama’s Bullshit Gay Marriage Announcement” explains:

“There are currently at least three cases winding their way toward federal courts that address the issue of whether (among other things) the equal protection clause of the constitution guarantees gay men and women the same access to marriage rights as

heterosexual men and women — the Proposition 8 case, in which David Boies and Ted Olson challenged California’s ban on gay marriage, and several challenges to the Defense of Marriage Act, which bars gay men and women from receiving federal marriage benefits and allows states to refuse to recognize valid gay marriages. Obama’s Justice Department has admirably declined to defend the constitutionality of DOMA. But the position he enunciated today is in opposition to Boies and Olson: Obama is saying that if he were a judge, he would have rejected Boies and Olson’s constitutional arguments and affirmed the right of Californians to enshrine bigotry in their state constitution.”

Experience has shown that this president’s “support” for progressive measures results in, at best, political inaction. Union leaders certainly must remember Obama’s “support” for the Employee Free Choice Act (card check) and other pro-worker measures he promised during his campaign and dropped once elected. For them to uncritically line up behind Obama’s comments on same sex marriage, without clarifying that they consider it a civil rights issue *in opposition to the President’s state-by-state approach*, makes them look, at best, foolish, at worst, insincere.

It is perhaps hoped by those moved to uncritical support of Obama’s comments to encourage his “evolution” on same sex marriage towards political action that he currently opposes. However, in the realm of politics, such changes are more determined by the movement of social forces than by personal appeals and clever statesmanship. In other words, the LGBT community and their supporters in Labor must not blunt their struggle for marriage equality in the hope of appealing to the good conscience of corporate politicians and not making too much trouble. They must continue the fight through independent mass action and educating their worker brothers and sisters who currently do not understand the issue of marriage equality.

The best way of educating on a mass level is through common struggle. This was vividly demonstrated in 1974 in a Teamster Local 888 conflict with Coors Brewing Company.

After settling a five-month strike, Coors remained the sole distributor that refused to sign the new contract. Local 888 President Allan Baird realized that his union did not have the ability to win on their own without the active support of the LGBT community in San Francisco. He met with Harvey Milk, who was a rising openly gay activist in the city, hoping to get support for a boycott of Coors. Milk’s only condition was that the Teamsters begin to hire openly gay drivers. Baird agreed and the union began to hold true to its promise within a week, beginning a city-wide boycott that lasted three years, uniting the interests of the Teamsters and the San Francisco LGBT working class community.

This struggle demonstrates how workers are educated in mass action about the need to overcome anti-gay prejudices in order to win as a class. It also suggests, in miniature, the approach labor leaders can take today that will strengthen the fight for marriage equality. In 1974 the main issue for the Teamsters was to settle the contract fight with Coors. This led them to start a form of union-conducted affirmative action in the hiring of openly gay workers. Today, the main issues workers are facing are the need for a real jobs program and the need to stop cuts to such public services as Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and education by taxing the rich. If the labor movement conducts such a struggle through mass action, independent of the corporate two party system, the need for unity will become apparent. This will create more fertile ground for winning marriage equality for the LGBT community than any presidential campaign statements.

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