

‘Stamping out homophobia all over the world’

Speech - Carol Beaumont, NZCTU Secretary
UK Trades Union Congress Conference – “Stamping out homophobia”
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Tena koutou katoa and warm Pacific greetings on behalf of the NZ Council of Trade Unions. I am pleased to be here and welcome the opportunity as the NZCTU Secretary and the Officer responsible for working with the CTU Out@Work network to share the experience of the NZ union movement in organizing LGBT workers and seeking to challenge homophobia. I am looking forward to learning from you and building links for our Out@Work network.

Let me start by conveying the following greeting of our Out@Work co-conveners – Jo Adams and George Schneider both of whom are active workplace delegates in their unions.

“On behalf of the CTU Out@Work Council, it's affiliated unions, and their many Out@Work members, we would like to extend our greeting to everyone at your conference. While it is not possible for us to attend, we appreciate Carol helping to deliver our message of support to all delegates today.

Here in NZ, the CTU Out@Work Council is a relatively new group - and we are still finding our ways to best achieve our goals. However, we are fortunate that the folks that worked so hard to get us where we are today are still supporting us, and offering us guidance.

We believe that we all face many of the same challenges across the world. With the opportunity to learn from each other, we will be able to benefit from the work that others have done, and help each other achieve greater results.

We have set a modest list of goals for 2006, and we look forward to the challenges that are to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today, and best wishes to everyone there, and we look forward to meeting you in the future”

I have been asked to outline what NZ unions have been doing to address homophobia and to organize LGBT workers and to make suggestions on how we ought to pursue LGBT issues internationally.

I will concentrate on the experience of the NZCTU over the last 6 years during which LGBT issues have become more visible within the union movement. It was during this period that our Out@Work network was established.

We have as a union movement made a start in organizing LGBT workers and addressing their issues. However there is much still to do. We are a long way from having stamped out homophobia – certainly in the community as a whole but also among unions – our officials, activists and members.

Despite legal protections LGBT workers still face homophobia and discrimination in the workplace. If people feel that they will be subjected to inappropriate remarks, harassed or discriminated against then they will not feel that they have the freedom to speak openly about this important part of their life.

I believe there are some basic premises that guide our work:

1. That union activity is the key way to make improvements at work
2. That as the largest democratic organization in NZ we have a responsibility to not limit our efforts to the workplace.
3. That we must take a leadership role in promoting human rights and combating all forms of discrimination at work or in wider society.
4. That those directly facing particular discrimination, in this case homophobia, have the right and responsibility to create their own strategies and solutions for fighting that discrimination
5. That by recognizing our diversity and being active on all fronts and by making the links between workers we will build a stronger union movement.

Before considering the events that shaped our strategy over the last six years I stress that there have always been some within the union movement who have made the links and who have supported campaigns to improve the rights of LGBT workers. In NZ in the 1980s and 1990s there were key campaigns that some unions and unionists supported – the decriminalization of homosexuality and the addition of sexual orientation to the areas of prohibited discrimination under our Human Rights Act. In preparing for this speech I recalled a group set up in the mid 1980s in Wellington called GLUE - gay and lesbian unionists for equality. This small group of primarily lesbian feminists worked to promote union recognition of the need to promote and protect the interests of lesbian and gay workers.

The context in which our recent work takes place is important to note. The NZ union movement survived a period of sustained attack on working people and their unions during the 1990s. During this period unions hunkered down and attempted to survive. Much activity including challenging homophobia or specifically organizing disadvantaged groups was put on the back burner.

Since the end of 1999 when the election of a Labour led Government meant the change of legislative and policy settings to a more positive environment the union movement has worked hard to rebuild workers rights and working conditions and our economy

After six years of a Labour led Government and with another three (just!) there is much still to do. NZ is still a low wage economy. The damage done after over a decade of right wing economic policies left workers vulnerable and the union movement severely weakened. The gap between rich and poor grew significantly. Union density at the beginning of 1991 was 51.7% of wage and salary earners; at the end of 1999 it was 21.1%. While we have grown by 17% since 2000 union density is still only 21.1%. I note that we are not alone in these challenges.

As a union movement we did well to survive the 1990s where our very right to existence was challenged but I am clear (with the benefit of hindsight) that we made many 'mistakes' in the 1990s. We could not or did not stop a change to a primary focus on the enterprise level in most situations. We developed a huge reliance on the organiser as the union leader at the workplace level. Often we failed to cooperate and outright inter union competition took place in many workplaces. As our income reduced we reduced our investment in education of our leaders. Some unions stopped engaging on industry issues as their capacity become increasingly taken up as bargaining agents. Many unions limited their agenda to a narrow industrial relations agenda rather than wider social or community issues. These 'mistakes' were built on the back of a union movement that had been complacent and too reliant on legislative props in the period prior to the election of a National (conservative) government in 1990.

So when a Labour led government was elected there was both a huge need and opportunity to effect change.

We consciously set out to develop our union movement by:

- ? Building unity and ownership of a movement wide strategy
- ? Developing understanding of our position and the need for us to organize differently
- ? Building relationships and creating an environment of cooperation
- ? Providing many ways to be active

One of our initial priorities was to develop a shared view about our strategy and the type of union movement we needed to be to deliver on that strategy.

We decided that the NZ union movement had to be a more active, campaigning, organising union movement. Our three key objectives were (and remain) to rebuild the union movement, to build the state both in terms of public services in the widest sense but also active government promoting economic and social

development, and to have unions seen as natural social partners at all levels. These are interrelated with the first being seen as necessary to have the political and industrial strength to deliver the other two.

Over the last 6 years we have built or rebuilt our Local Affiliates Councils – now in 18 locations throughout NZ. We have also built or rebuilt our representative structures – Te Runanga our Maori structure, the Women’s Council, the Komiti Pasefika our Pacific peoples structure, the Youth Union movement and Out @ Work. The emphasis has been on funding activity not structure. We want a union movement that reflects the diversity of our country, where workers can see a place for themselves and also where there a wide range of activities that members can take part in. The results are mixed but there have been some fantastic initiatives.

There was a continuing development of our strategy as we actioned the three key objectives. We articulated all of our work in organising and social and economic development as Organising Plus. The organising core is the ‘must haves’ for members to see the genuine benefit of collective strength – an active organising strategy for collective bargaining; unionising sites and for health and safety. The plus comes from the significant organising opportunities outside a narrow industrial relations agenda. These opportunities are provided in such areas as skills, training and education, economic development, promoting human rights and equity initiatives and so on. The plus also comes from taking up our right to be engaged at all levels with government and employers. Such engagement provides opportunities for growth and helps to rebuild and reassert our right to exist at all levels of society.

We decided we should change the image of the union movement and have worked on ensuring that an active, positive and passionate image is provided. Our spokespeople need to reflect the diversity of the workforce and some real effort is made to ensure worker leaders as opposed to union officials are used where possible.

Last year we had a general election result that was/is uncomfortably close. I believe the role of the union movement was fundamental in the win for the Centre – Left against a well resourced and dirty campaign from the Right. A campaign that also saw ugly attacks on those the Right don’t consider mainstream. It will come as no surprise to you that this included blatant attempts to tap into the racism and homophobia that exists in NZ society. The election result means we must refocus and intensify our efforts as we are still too vulnerable to an attack by the Right and after this years election they are certainly more determined than ever to get rid of us.

This then is the context in which our work in fighting homophobia and organizing LGBT workers has taken place.

So back to 2000 where a group of queer union officials got together to discuss how to promote the rights of LGBT workers. I want to acknowledge that this group and others who joined them were critical in creating Out@Work not any specific action of the CTU as an organisation. Initial activity was around the Hero parade and other community events.

The 2001 CTU Biennial Conference had sent a very important signal with one of the key themes set as Valuing Diversity. The conference saw the establishment of our Youth representative structure and followed work being undertaken by young activists through our Youth Union Movement (YUM).

The Out@Work group voluntarily reported to our National Affiliates Council (effectively our Executive) and increased in visibility. They went on to get endorsement to attend the Workers Out conference in Sydney in 2002. The process of preparing for the conference and actual attendance at the conference provided a huge boost to the activists who attended and led to the development of a clear plan to move forward in NZ.

After attending Workers Out in 2002 the NZ delegation came back committed to:

- ? building a stronger national network coordinated through the CTU. A cross-union network was seen as crucial, particularly as networks only exist within a very small number of unions and to provide a collective voice for queer workers.
- ? ensuring the visibility of Out@Work within the NZ trade union movement as a clear statement that discrimination against LGBT workers is not acceptable. One of our first projects was the development of an Out@Work profile on the CTU website. Also Out@Work has given unions a strong profile in queer community events such as festivals and parades.
- ? providing education and training for unions on issues for queer workers. The idea was to develop a cross-union paid education course for officials and delegates.

Developing informed delegates and visible networks makes a powerful statement that unions:

- ? are inclusive
- ? do not tolerate discrimination against any of their members and
- ? support the human rights of all workers

In 2003 the CTU ran the first Out@Work Kamp with about 45 union delegates. The Kamp was deliberately structured as an organizing event where LGBT workers identified key issues and potential activists and where concrete plans to strengthen the Out@Work network using these issues and activists were made. Delegates at the Kamp voted to seek formal recognition as a representative structure within the CTU. That remit was passed unanimously later that year at the 2003 CTU biennial conference and the Out@Work Council became a formal

part of the CTU structure with the right to be represented on our National Affiliates Council and also the right to put forward remits to our Biennial Conference. The fact that there was no opposition to the remit was a significant victory that was hard to imagine happening even a decade earlier.

In 2004 Out@Work focused on:

- ? building membership activism and networks within specific unions
- ? developing CTU and union submissions on the Civil Union Bill and education material for union journals on the legislation.
- ? planning for two key events in 2005 - Kamp 05 and the first Council meeting.

'Kamp 05' provided a chance to bring together Out@Work members from many unions and the 2-day workshop took a similar organizing approach to Kamp 2003. Plans were put into place to enable the first Out@Work Council meeting to be held in August 2005 with representatives selected.

At the first formal Council meeting the Council selected the Out@Work co-conveners.

The presentation to the 2005 Biennial Conference was an important opportunity to promote the work of Out@Work and to attempt to broaden affiliate support. Co-convenor George Schneider supported by members of Out@Work made a very well received presentation.

He started by stressing the diversity of membership of Out@Work. Out@Work attempts to include all types of people - Gay, lesbian, fa'afafine, Takataapui, Transgender, Bisexual and Intersex - all people who have been discriminated against in many ways over the years for their sexual orientation. Fa'afafine is a Samoan term that literally means to be like a woman, and Takataapui a Maori term to describe intimate friends of the same sex. Stressing the diversity of membership of Out@Work is to show that we recognise and welcome all members of this community in our multi-cultural country.

The presentation received very favourable responses from the affiliates present. This led to more unions becoming involved in Out@Work and for our co-convenor George it felt like the idea that there are actually union workers in EVERY union that are possible Out@Work members was slowly being accepted.

At the Council meeting in November 2005 a work programme for this year was developed and includes:

- ? Establishing Out@Work networks in more worksites and regions
- ? Working to raise positive issues around the Gender Identity Bill and to gain Union support
- ? Developing links from all union websites to CTU Out@Work page for unified messages.

? Continuing to develop the proposed Diversity poster

The Diversity Poster, while initiated by Out@Work is a joint effort of all the CTU representative structures to produce a poster to go into workplaces with the clear message that union members come in all colours, all sizes, all genders, and all orientations. This Diversity poster is a clear message to everyone that each and every Union is made up of diverse people and from that variety comes our strength.

My outline of the work of the NZ union movement on fighting homophobia would not be complete without noting that a small number of our affiliates have developed their own LGBT networks and worked actively in fighting homophobia in the areas they cover. I don't have time to outline this work but a specific example is the work done by the secondary school teachers union over many years in promoting safe schools for LGBT teachers and students.

In reflecting on the work so far there are some key themes I think are important to note:

The emphasis put on respecting diversity and in fighting against discrimination and for human rights of all workers has been an important part in developing support for Out@Work and its work. The response among union leaders has been mixed – a small number who don't support the representative structures generally (not just Out@Work), a larger number who are disinterested and an increasing number who cannot help but see the strength that is being added to our union movement.

The development of Out@Work in this way and the organising approach taken by them means that our work in fighting homophobia is integrated into our overall union movement strategy. This sends an important message that this is core union business.

It has also taken time and effort to ensure the issues are consistently put forward. Building relationships with and respect for the individuals promoting the issues of concern for Out@Work has also been important. An example was the experience of a CTU staff member in transitioning from female to male and his openness in sharing that journey meant that a great deal more understanding about transgender issues was built up among union leaders and key activists.

The Out@Work network has maintained close links with the wider LGBT community through other organisations and community events. This is an important way to make contact with LGBT workers as invisibility in a workplace setting is a particular difficulty and of course is why the fight for visibility is so important.

The community link is of importance as a model to the rest of the union movement as we recognise the need to more strongly campaign in the community if we are serious about building union strength. For too long we have focussed primarily on the workplace. Our attempts to take our campaigns outside of the workplace have tended to involve the notion of making links with community groups as if they were external to us rather than recognising that union members are part of communities already. Our comrades in Australia have provided a good model of community campaigning in their current fight against obscene industrial legislation imposed by their Government.

The deliberate attempt to link our representative structures together is important. An example is the diversity poster previously mentioned. This approach can provide the basis for our union delegates to be able to take up issues in the workplace in a more confident manner and hopefully develop greater understanding. This approach is also sensible given LGBT workers are also different ages, ethnicities etc. I believe as a union movement we need at all levels to develop a human rights approach to our organising. Workers rights and union rights are human rights. The right of all workers to be free from the effects of discrimination are human rights.

We need to educate so that every union member recognises that human rights are indivisible and that we all have to promote and defend them.

At our 2005 Biennial Conference the following remit was passed:

“That education on homophobia and discrimination in all its form, take place in all CTU structures and that the CTU be requested to produce educational materials for delegates which challenge homophobia and discrimination and recognise and support diversity within the union movement, and that the CTU encourages affiliates to utilise this material.”

In light of recent events I believe this type of education is becoming more important. In the NZ context, as I mentioned earlier, there are very worrying trends which have been manipulated by conservative politicians. Following a range of measures including Civil Union legislation there was a response that included blatant homophobia but also a sense that benefits to some groups were losses to others. Many of those who were most opposed to progressive social changes were working people including some of the poorest and most discriminated against groups in NZ. Certainly many union members (and potential union members) were part of the strong opposition to the Civil Union legislation. There is a huge responsibility for the union movement to educate our members (and potential members) and their families. An example of how this is playing out is the creation by the conservative National Party of a spokesperson on the elimination of political correctness an idea I understand has been embraced by your own conservatives. Another example is the unwillingness of the Government to support at this time a proposed law change to ensure the

human rights of transgender people. Supporting this change is a key item on the workplan of Out@Work.

Finally I was asked to consider the role of the international union movement.

There is a huge amount of work to do internationally to fight homophobia starting with the real need to build more support within the international union movement. There is a huge amount of homophobia and ignorance to challenge to get wider union support.

I was dismayed when I took part in a panel discussion of fighting homophobia at the Global Congress of the ICFTU at the end of 2004 at the very low attendance at the event. On a more positive note the Congress passed a resolution 'Fighting Discrimination and Achieving Equality' which includes a clear statement that recognizes the discrimination suffered by gay and lesbian workers. It reaffirms the mandate for the ICFTU to commit effort and resources to overcome discrimination at work on the grounds of sexual orientation and calls on trade unions to fight prejudice, bigotry and intolerance in the workplace, in society and in the trade unions. The remit concluded by instructing the ICFTU and regional organizations, working together with Global Unions partners and affiliates, to:

"support union initiatives to combat discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity"

This international work must involve creating forums to debate the issues so we can shift attitudes within the global union movement. There is a real need to use every opportunity to build networks - nationally, regionally and globally -of those who are involved in organizing LGBT workers and fighting homophobia. There are often small numbers and there is the real risk of isolation and burn out. As an example I want to ensure that we build a strong link between our Out@Work network and all of you and your unions through the TUC. It is absolutely clear that sharing ideas, understanding common issues and possible solutions and knowing others share the same concerns motivates and strengthens our work.

Other areas that could be considered by Global Unions Federations and National Union Centres is promoting the inclusion of anti-discrimination and promotion of equal opportunities in measures of corporate social responsibility and in the Framework Agreements negotiated with multinational enterprises. Another international measure that is not straightforward but warrants attention is the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in ILO convention 111 Discrimination (Employment and Occupation). Certainly there is the need to push the ILO and other international agencies to develop work plans that contribute to the fight against homophobia and for rights for LGBT people.

I would like to acknowledge the work of the EI and PSI on LGBT rights and note that the statement from the 1st international LGBT forum in 2004 provides many concrete suggestions for international work.

In conclusion I would express the pride of the NZCTU in the work done so far in the fighting homophobia both at a union movement wide level and among some of our affiliates. I know the Out@Work network is pleased with what they have achieved in a short period of time with few resources. There is much still to do and there is a strong need for international solidarity between those union movements who are challenging homophobia. Between us we need to think about how we can increase the number of unions, national union centres and global union federations who are committed to taking up this challenge. This is particularly important given a rising tide of conservatism and the backlash against those of us who fight for human rights for all. Conferences like this are an important part of developing our strategies and I acknowledge the leadership role being shown by the TUC and UK union movement in looking at your work in an international context.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the conference.