

“Gay Teachers Fight Back!”: Rank-and-File Gay and Lesbian Teachers’ Activism against the Briggs Initiative, 1977–1978

SARA SMITH-SILVERMAN

American River College

AT A PRESS CONFERENCE IN LOS ANGELES in September 1978, John Briggs, a California state senator from Orange County and self-proclaimed born-again Christian, roared: “If you’d put a second-grade child with a homosexual you’re off your gourd. . . . We don’t let necrophiliacs be morticians,” he persisted. “We’ve got to be crazy to allow homosexuals who have an affinity for young boys to teach our children.”¹ The “homosexual” in question at the press conference was Larry Berner, a thirty-eight-year-old second-grade teacher at Fitch Mountain Elementary School in Healdsburg, California, a quiet town on the Russian River sixty-five miles north of San Francisco.² Briggs directed his animosity at Berner because Briggs was in the midst of a campaign to pass Proposition 6, an initiative planned for the California ballot of 7 November 1978 that, if approved by voters, would have barred gays, lesbians, and advocates of gay rights from teaching or working in California’s public schools. Berner, out as gay in his personal life but not at work, came out of the closet at his elementary school to join the campaign to defeat Proposition 6. In defense of his activism Berner proclaimed: “I’ve already been hit once, by guilt, fear, and ignorance, which filled me with self-hate and controlled my social and personal behavior for 30 years. . . . I’m determined to stand and fight, determined to live and work as a member of this society with rights equal to those of everybody else.”³

Larry Berner was one among many gay and lesbian teachers who campaigned to defeat the Briggs Initiative, a sweeping proposition that would

¹ Penelope McMillan, “Briggs Points to Gay Teacher in North as Example,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 1978.

² Doyle McManus, “Healdsburg’s ‘Weirdest Event’: Briggs Debates Gay Teacher,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 26, 1978.

³ “Briggs Special, Larry Berner,” audiotape, KNBC Channel 4 News Broadcast, AC0664, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (hereafter ONE Archives), USC Libraries, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

have had devastating consequences for the gay and lesbian community. The initiative read, in part:

One of the most fundamental interests of the State is the establishment and preservation of the family unit. Consistent with this interest is the State's duty to protect its impressionable youth from influences which are antithetical to this vital interest. . . . The State finds a compelling interest in refusing to employ and in terminating the employment of a schoolteacher, a teacher's aide, a school administrator or a counselor . . . who engages in public homosexual activity and/or public homosexual conduct directed at, or likely to come to the attention of, school children or other school employees.⁴

Had it passed, the Briggs Initiative would have superseded union contracts and set up hearings controlled by school boards to determine whether or not the teacher in question should be fired. Any protections negotiated in union contracts, such as the right not to be discriminated against based on sexual orientation, would have been made irrelevant by the Briggs Initiative.

Polls taken just a few months prior to the November election showed majority support for the Briggs Initiative; as late as August 1978, 61 percent of voters favored Proposition 6, while 31 percent opposed it, with 8 percent undecided.⁵ However, the initiative ultimately failed by a wide margin, with 59 percent voting no and 41 percent voting yes.⁶ The Briggs Initiative was defeated in large part due to a substantial grassroots campaign spanning the state and led by gays and lesbians, including gay and lesbian teachers.

This article examines how gay and lesbian teachers organized to defeat the Briggs Initiative in 1977 and 1978. Rank-and-file teachers in California influenced the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—the California statewide affiliate and its local unions—to actively oppose the initiative. The 1970s marked a turning point in the relationship between the labor movement and the gay and lesbian movement. Though queer workers had previously influenced their unions to advocate for queer rights, queer labor activism had its national “coming-out moment” when unions—most prominently the Teamsters—joined with gay and lesbian activists in the mid-1970s to boycott the antiunion and homophobic Coors Brewing Company.⁷ The

⁴ “California Voters Pamphlet, General Election, November 7, 1978,” UC Hastings Scholarship Repository, https://repository.uchastings.edu/ca_ballot_pamphlets/, accessed September 7, 2019.

⁵ “Opposition to Proposition 6 Growing, California Poll Finds,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1978.

⁶ “Edition-Time Ballot Returns in Statewide Voting: Prop. 6: 2,222,784 41% Yes; 3,203,076 59% No,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1978.

⁷ Historian Allan Bérubé, for instance, shows how the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union advocated for the rights of its queer members between the 1930s and 1940s. See Bérubé, “No Race-Baiting, Red-Baiting, or Queer-Baiting! The Marine Cooks and Stewards Union from the Depression to the Cold War,” in *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community,*

campaign against the Briggs Initiative is less well known, but it represents another key moment in queer labor activism in the 1970s because the campaign against the Briggs Initiative made the AFT in California one of the first unions to merge queer rights with the union movement.

My examination of the Briggs Initiative begins by asking why John Briggs targeted gay and lesbian teachers and why the response of gay and lesbian teachers put them at the helm of emergent queer labor activism. The answer to these questions will partly rest on my proposal that the long historical association between teaching and queerness means that teaching can be defined as “queer work,” a concept first developed by historian Allan Bérubé. According to Bérubé, queer work is, in essence, any kind of labor that has attracted a disproportionate concentration of gay men and lesbians, usually one that developed a queer reputation in some way, most prominently through the development of queer work cultures.⁸ In the following section, I elaborate on the definition of queer work, explaining how other scholars have expanded the definition to be more inclusive of other queer identities and kinds of labor, before making my case that teaching could historically be considered a kind of queer work as well. As I explain below, teaching became increasingly queer beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the late 1970s.

By arguing that teaching is queer work, I highlight how the Christian Right's attacks on teachers played on stereotypes about the danger of queer work and also how the association between queerness and teaching made gay and lesbian teachers poised to wage a campaign around sexual identity that pushed the labor movement to promote gay rights as never before. I examine how John Briggs was influenced by Anita Bryant's successful messaging about the supposed dangers posed by gay teachers to children in her broader antigay campaign to bring an initiative to California specifically targeting gay and lesbian teachers. My focus here is on the activism of gay and lesbian teachers in California in the late 1970s to defeat the Briggs Initiative, describing how they formed their own organizations—the Lesbian School Workers and the Gay Teachers and School Workers in the Bay Area and the Gay Teachers of Los Angeles—and how they influenced the teachers' unions to oppose the Briggs Initiative.

Overall, this article demonstrates that it was necessary for gay and lesbian teachers and school workers to organize around their own identities and personal experiences in order to pressure the leadership of the teachers' unions to oppose this blatantly discriminatory ballot initiative. Rank-and-file gay and lesbian teachers in California in the late 1970s placed the teachers'

and Labor History, ed. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). See also Miriam Frank, *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 77–82.

⁸ Allan Bérubé, “Queer Work” and *Labor History*,” in D'Emilio and Freedman, *My Desire for History*, 260–61, 263.

unions at the vanguard of queer labor activism. By forming groups meant for gay and lesbian teachers and school workers and proclaiming their identities proudly and very publicly, gay and lesbian teachers formed new queer work cultures rooted in activism. This, I argue, began to shift the definition of teaching as queer work toward a kind of labor that was now more empowering for gay and lesbian teachers. By their example, they generated hope for gays and lesbians that they could marshal the support of the labor movement to defend their rights in a deeply homophobic society, and they did so at a time when the Christian Right was putting gays and lesbians on the defensive and when there appeared to be very little likelihood of progressive change on gay rights.

TEACHING AS "QUEER WORK"

The term "queer work" was first defined by Allan Bérubé in his pioneering research on the queer and antiracist Marine Cooks and Stewards Union, a union active in the mid-twentieth century. Bérubé writes that queer work consists of professions for which gay men and lesbians "were supposed to be especially well suited," such as when white gay men worked as stewards on luxury liners, performing feminized labor that involved serving others—a kind of undervalued labor otherwise reserved for women and people of color and deemed unsuitable for straight white men.⁹ One of the things that made being a steward queer was the fact that employers actually hired them during a period when employment discrimination against queer workers was perfectly legal and rampant across the United States, resulting in a disproportionate number of gay men working as stewards. This fact became known to the public to the extent that stewards developed a reputation for being queer. The labor of stewards also came to be defined as queer because gay stewards established queer work cultures aboard ship, as well as in their union. They called each other "queens," for example, gave each other girls' names, and sometimes performed in drag for each other aboard ship.¹⁰ They earned such a queer reputation that other seamen renamed their ships: the *Lurline* became the "Queerline" and the *Matsonia* the "Fruitsonia."¹¹ Bérubé wondered what makes a certain kind of work queer, asking, "What are some of the stereotypes of queer work for *women* that you've heard of?" His list includes professions like gym teachers, police officers, auto mechanics, carpenters, bus drivers, and work in the trades, all kinds of labor that involve women defying gender norms by performing the types of physical labor that were typically reserved for men. But he also includes professions as seemingly varied as teachers at girls' boarding schools, nuns, nursing administrators, and African American blues singers. What might make these

⁹ Bérubé, 260–61, 264–65.

¹⁰ Bérubé, "No Race-Baiting," 299.

¹¹ Bérubé, "'Queer Work,'" 261.

types of work queer is that they involve same-sex environments, which served to facilitate queer relationships, as well as queer identity formation. Or perhaps, as Bérubé argues, it was that these women were in positions of authority in historical contexts that dictated female subservience to men, a fact that helped to create the stereotype that women who had consciously removed themselves from this condition must be queer.¹²

How scholars have defined work as queer is evolving as the relatively young fields of queer labor history and queer labor studies mature. Bérubé acknowledges that his definition is by no means definitive. What makes each kind of work queer is distinct and is shaped by the type of work, the time period, and the race and ethnicity, gender identity, and gender expression of the particular group of queer people under study. Anne Balay's 2018 book *Semi Queer* emphasizes the evolving definition of queer work in her discussion of transgender women in the trucking industry in the present day. Trucking has become queer work because conditions in the industry have deteriorated in the last forty years, and employers have been more willing to hire people from marginalized backgrounds, whom they then pay less and treat worse than the cisgender white men who once almost exclusively dominated the labor force. This is one reason why there are increasing numbers of queer and transgender truckers, not to mention workers of color, immigrants, religious minorities, and cis women.¹³ But Balay's interviews with transgender long-haul truckers reveal that structures of marginalization can also attract queer workers to certain jobs: working alone in their trucks protects them from transphobic complaints from customers, employers, or coworkers.¹⁴

In what follows I will draw on this previous scholarship to examine how teaching constituted a form of queer work. The teaching profession became primarily the domain of women beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, culminating in women occupying five of every six public school positions by 1920. Thousands of women defied older gender norms and left the domestic sphere to pursue a career in teaching, making the profession one of the few paths to economic independence for women. School districts justified hiring more female teachers in various ways, arguing, for instance, that teaching could be considered an extension of motherly duties.¹⁵ But

¹² Bérubé, 261–63.

¹³ Anne Balay, *Semi Queer: Inside the World of Gay, Trans, and Black Truck Drivers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 5.

¹⁴ Balay, 46. Examples of influential scholarship in queer labor history include Frank, *Out in the Union*; and Phil Tiemeyer, *Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality, and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Margot Canaday's current project, *Queer Career: Precarious Labor, Law, and Sexuality in Postwar America*, promises to make a significant contribution to the field. See the description on her website: <https://history.princeton.edu/people/margot-canaday>.

¹⁵ Geraldine J. Clifford, *Those Good Gertrudes: A Social History of Women Teachers in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 6.

economic factors were also at play: before women teachers demanded pay equity with male teachers and before governments began to legislate equal pay for equal work, women could be paid less than men. But women were nonetheless attracted to teaching because it paid better than other employment available to them.¹⁶ Additionally, many school boards implemented rules preventing female teachers from continuing to teach after they were married. Using spurious logic, the intention was to ensure that female teachers would model appropriately gendered behavior for their students and that teaching did not replace marriage and motherhood for hundreds of thousands of new women teachers. The passage of these no-marriage policies ramped up during the Great Depression. In one study conducted in 1930 nearly one-third of large cities had laws prohibiting marriage for women teachers. Another survey conducted in 1938 indicated that of eighty-five cities, 60 percent had a policy, written or unwritten, against hiring and keeping married women.¹⁷ These rules, in combination with cultural norms dictating that middle-class women, especially white women, should quit their jobs after marriage and center their lives around the needs of their families, resulted in a concentration of single women in teaching.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lesbians had begun to concentrate in teaching. As historian Jackie Blount argues, even the relatively low wages earned by female teachers allowed women to build their personal lives around romantic or sexual attraction to other women.¹⁸ Though census data contain no information on sexual orientation, making it impossible to provide a precise number of lesbians in the teaching profession, we can get a sense of the preponderance of queer teachers in early twentieth-century American schools from Katharine Bement Davis's 1929 survey of twelve hundred unmarried college-educated women about their sexual lives. Teachers and superintendents comprised 52 percent of the interview pool, and "*nearly half* reported having experienced either intense emotional relationships or sexual relationships with other women." Of this number, 25 percent indicated that they had explicitly sexual relationships with other women, involving, in Davis's words, "mutual masturbation, contact of genital organs, or other physical expressions recognized as sexual in character."¹⁹ To offset the cost of housing, many unmarried women teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lived with other

¹⁶ Clifford, 49. Male teachers commonly made 40 percent more than women in the early twentieth century.

¹⁷ Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT & NEA, 1900–1980* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 177–78.

¹⁸ Jackie Blount, *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 5. Blount emphasizes that locating evidence about queer educators in US history is difficult, if not impossible, and when evidence is found, especially pertaining to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there often are not explicit references to same-sex sexuality.

¹⁹ Blount, 70–71.

women. As historian Geraldine Clifford stresses, these living arrangements were viewed as "unremarkable," and they even "protected one's reputation, and provided companionship and 'help in doing one's buttons.'"²⁰ These social expectations made it possible for lesbians to acquire and keep positions as teachers and live independently of men, shielded as they were from scrutiny by the presence of single women teachers around them. Additionally, though men never completely ceased working as teachers, communities increasingly regarded men who chose the profession with suspicion, regarding them as effete and lacking in manliness, coded language implying there was something queer about male teachers.²¹

By the mid-twentieth century, public concern had mounted that the preponderance of single women in teaching actually revealed something sinister. As Blount notes, "Unmarried women teachers were [increasingly] suspected of sexually desiring other women."²² By midcentury, the United States witnessed rising divorce rates, declining rates of marriage, a drop in the birthrate, and increased workforce participation by women, all of which contributed to rising numbers of women living independently of men.²³ At the same time, women were demanding political rights at work, activism that historian Dorothy Sue Cobble refers to as "the other women's movement." Beginning in the 1940s a new generation of women involved in the labor movement demanded "first-class economic citizenship" for wage-earning women, including the right to waged work for all women, as well as state support to sustain family life apart from the waged workforce.²⁴ Teachers joined this movement as they demanded equal pay for equal work in teaching. In Chicago, for example, in 1947 women teachers demanded and won the single salary schedule: equal pay for the mostly female elementary schoolteachers and the disproportionately male high schoolteachers, who previously made much more.²⁵ In this context, conservatives started to argue that higher education disturbed traditional gender norms by encouraging women to remain single and to reject marriage and motherhood.

At the same time, public awareness of queerness increased. The flourishing gay and lesbian bar scene of the war years also drew public attention to queerness, while on top of this, Alfred Kinsey's research on sexuality in the 1940s and 1950s attracted widespread attention: in 1948 his and his

²⁰ Clifford, *The Good Gertrudes*, 164.

²¹ Blount, *Fit to Teach*, 13, 15, 21.

²² Blount, 70.

²³ The movement of women into paid work in the 1930s and 1940s marked a "seismic shift" in the US economy, according to historian Dorothy Sue Cobble. By 1950 nearly one-third of all women were in the paid labor force. See *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 12.

²⁴ Cobble, 3–4.

²⁵ John F. Lyons, *Teachers and Reform: Chicago Public Education, 1929–1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 104–5.

colleagues' *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* sold almost a quarter million copies, putting it on the best-seller list for months.²⁶ Kinsey's study revealed that one-third of men had achieved orgasm from sexual contact with other men. Then in 1953 Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, which revealed that 19 percent of women had experienced deliberate sexual contact with other women by the age of forty.²⁷ In this latter study, Kinsey and his research associates even speculated that women who "had homosexual experiences and who expected to continue with [them]" were widely represented across occupations but that "professionally trained" women were overrepresented in this group because they had been "preoccupied with their education . . . and . . . in subsequent years had found homosexual contacts more readily available than heterosexual contacts." The report highlighted teachers as among these women who not only had gay experiences but also expected to continue to have them.²⁸ This complex set of factors—from women's increased workforce participation and involvement in activism for women's rights to queer subcultures and the increase of public knowledge about homosexuality—led the public to denounce same-sex desire as psychologists and politicians increasingly pathologized homosexuality, and gay teachers felt the impact. After World War II California passed legislation, for example, requiring police to report any school workers arrested on a morals charge to school districts.²⁹ The backlash against gay rights became particularly virulent in Florida in the 1950s and 1960s, when the state legislature systematically identified and fired gay and lesbian teachers.³⁰ As Blount asserts, this backlash "effectively changed the image of unmarried women teachers from that of virtuous individuals to that of menacing deviants who should be kept out of the classroom."³¹ Whereas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries teaching was queer because of a disproportionate concentration of lesbians in teaching, by the mid-twentieth century the reasons teaching could be considered queer evolved as the public started associating single women teachers with lesbianism and school boards embarked on a backlash to dequeen teaching. It was this context that led to the repeal of school district policies prohibiting teachers from being married. As a result, between 1940 and 1960 the proportion of single women in teaching in the United

²⁶ Marie-Amelie George, "The Harmless Psychopath: Legal Debates Promoting the Decriminalization of Sodomy in the United States," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 2 (May 2015): 237.

²⁷ Blount, *Fit to Teach*, 85–86.

²⁸ Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Paul H. Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company, 1953), 446–47.

²⁹ Blount, *Fit to Teach*, 99.

³⁰ Karen Graves, *And They Were Wonderful Teachers: Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), xi–xii.

³¹ Blount, *Fit to Teach*, 65.

States declined from 69 to less than 30 percent.³² Now women teachers were supposed to be married—to men—to model appropriate behavior for their students.

By the 1960s and 1970s the connection between teaching and queerness had become reinforced in new ways. Gay and lesbian teachers created new queer work subcultures rooted in activism to defend their rights on the job in the face of homophobic attacks by the political Right, and teaching became queerer when more men took up positions in K–12 education. Because of the women's and gay liberation movements, occupations reserved for one gender began to open up. As Miriam Frank and Anne Balay have demonstrated in different contexts, beginning in the 1970s women began entering occupations previously reserved for men in larger numbers, such as construction and work in the steel mills. As Frank notes, these women were often “dyke baited”—they were viewed as a threat to the gendered order and automatically suspected of lesbianism.³³ The men who moved into K–12 teaching in the 1970s including similarly disrupted norms around sexuality and gender in the workplace and helped to reinforce teaching as queer work.³⁴ That teaching had become primarily a field for woman was justified, after all, with arguments about women's alleged innate skills in caring for and guiding children. Men who worked in predominantly female professions were very often presumed to be gay, as Phil Tiemeyer has found for flight attendants. Because society deemed this work “servile ‘women's work’ or ‘colored work,’” male flight attendants were considered “gender misfits and suspected homosexuals.”³⁵ Male schoolteachers faced similar prejudices. From the mid-twentieth century on they were expected to fill only specific niches associated with manliness in education: in K–12 teaching, this meant coaching, vocational instruction, and administration. They were also expected to be married so as to ward off the stigma of homosexuality.³⁶ Nevertheless, leaders of the Christian Right such as Anita Bryant and John Briggs started to suspect that many male teachers were gay, and in the late 1970s Bryant and Briggs led homophobic attacks on gay and lesbian teachers.

³² Blount, 78.

³³ Frank, *Out in the Union*, 24–26. For an in-depth look at gays and lesbians in the steel industry, see Anne Balay, *Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Steelworkers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

³⁴ In 1960 men made up 16.6 percent of the K–12 workforce, whereas in 1970 they were 32.8 percent of teachers. Clifford, *Those Good Gertrudes*, 31. By 1980 29.2 percent of K–12 teachers were men. See Bruce Chapman, director, Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (US Department of Commerce, 1981), <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1981/compendia/statab/102ed.html>, accessed May 31, 2019.

³⁵ Tiemeyer, *Plane Queer*, 2–3.

³⁶ Blount, *Fit to Teach*, 21, 81, 84. On the history of men and the teaching profession, see Paul H. Mattingly, *The Classless Profession: American Schoolmen in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT AND QUEER WORK:
TARGETING GAY AND LESBIAN TEACHERS

The newly galvanized public presence of the Christian Right in the late 1970s provides crucial background for the emergence of policies like the Briggs Initiative in California. Anita Bryant's crusade against gay rights in Dade County, Florida, in 1977 was a launching pad for campaigns against gay rights in cities and states across the United States. Bryant was a singer, a Christian fundamentalist, a runner-up for Miss America, and a spokesperson for the Florida Orange Juice Commission. In 1977 she led the backlash against the Dade County Metro Commission, which had passed an ordinance protecting residents against discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations based on "sexual preference." Bryant formed the group Save Our Children with the objective of gathering signatures to repeal the ordinance through a popular vote. She was successful, and on election day in Dade County, 7 June 1977, the gay rights ordinance was repealed by a vote of 69 to 31 percent.³⁷ Bryant and her supporters placed heightened emphasis on the need to remove gay and lesbian teachers from the schools. This was, in part, a reflection of the historical intersection between queer identity and teaching. That some teachers were queer workers—lesbians and/or women who were nonnormative participants in family structures, and men who were working in what had been for decades a feminized profession—was part of what made them vulnerable to attacks based on the supposed dangers they posed to children. In Dade County, activists on the Christian Right decided to name their organization Save Our Children out of concern that the county's gay rights ordinance would force local schools to hire gay teachers.³⁸ Bryant pronounced, "I don't hate homosexuals! But as a mother, I must protect my children from their evil influence."³⁹ Bryant insisted, "Homosexuals cannot reproduce—so they must recruit. And to freshen their ranks, they must recruit the youth of America."⁴⁰ Although Dade County's gay rights ordinance outlawed discrimination against gays and lesbian in general, the threatening presence of gay and lesbian teachers in the schools proved the most compelling.

³⁷ The Metro Commission represented residents at the county level. See Karen M. Harbeck, *Gay and Lesbian Educators: Personal Freedoms, Public Constraints* (Malden, MA: Amethys, 1997), 39–41, 51. For a lengthy discussion of the Dade County campaign, see Fred Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's Debate on Homosexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

³⁸ Fejes, *Gay Rights*, 94.

³⁹ Letter, "Dear Friend," from the Anita Bryant Ministries, folder: Briggs, box 6, Harvey Milk Papers, San Francisco Public Library, San Francisco, California (hereafter referred to as SFPL).

⁴⁰ Gillian Frank, "'The Civil Rights of Parents': Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant's Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 1 (January 2013): 127.

This success inspired the Christian Right to build support for its brand of social conservatism by waging campaigns to roll back local gay rights ordinances in state after state, most prominently in St. Paul, Minnesota, Wichita, Kansas, and Eugene, Oregon. Between April and May 1978, voters in these cities repealed local gay rights ordinances by large margins—in Wichita by a five-to-one margin and in Eugene and St. Paul by a two-to-one margin.⁴¹

John Briggs's Proposition 6 built on these precedents but upped the ante by moving to the state level in California, one of the most liberal states in the country. His focus on teachers was very much in line with the ideologies of the Christian Right. In the context of the vast cultural and political changes of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the questioning of gender and sexual norms, a socially conservative movement with a large base in evangelical Christianity grew in political influence as it sought to shore up the traditional heterosexual nuclear family. Historian Lisa McGirr emphasizes that this marked a shift in the politics of the Right: "The package of conservative concerns shifted from a discursive preoccupation with public, political, and international enemies (namely, communism) to enemies within our own communities and families (namely, secular humanists, women's liberationists, and, eventually, homosexuals)."⁴² Evangelical churches and grassroots political organizations responded with fury to gay rights activism, which had succeeded in convincing the psychological profession in 1973 to remove homosexuality as a mental illness from the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders* and bringing about the decriminalization of homosexuality in many states.⁴³ By 1979 twenty-four states had decriminalized sodomy, with California doing so in 1975.⁴⁴ Briggs helped to establish Citizens for Decency and Morality in California, "a statewide network of fundamentalist pastors and their congregations."⁴⁵ He and other conservatives seeking to influence public policy could also draw on the influence, deep pockets, and extensive media universe of the newly mobilized Christian Right.⁴⁶

John Briggs modeled his efforts in California on the successful campaign in Dade County, focusing on gay and lesbian teachers and naming his organization California Defend Our Children. He employed what one Dade County gay activist called Anita's "vampire theory" in California: the idea that gay people were child molesters, sought to recruit children to homosexuality, and therefore should be kept out of the public school

⁴¹ Fejes, *Gay Rights*, 173–77.

⁴² Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 15.

⁴³ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 218.

⁴⁴ William N. Eskridge Jr., *Dishonorable Passions: Sodomy Laws in America 1861–2003* (New York: Viking 2008), 200–201.

⁴⁵ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 259.

⁴⁶ Fejes, *Gay Rights*, 102–4.

system.⁴⁷ In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in October 1978, Briggs maintained: "My bill is aimed at preventing a teacher from being put in a favored position to molest a child before he gets the opportunity or she gets the opportunity."⁴⁸ A California Defend Our Children pamphlet claimed that "many homosexual spokesmen freely admit that homosexual activists want absolute freedom to provide examples of 'role models.' In effect, to be legitimized in their perverted lifestyle so they may influence our children to adopt homosexuality."⁴⁹

The fears expressed by Briggs and others on the Christian Right that gay and lesbian teachers would recruit children to homosexuality had deep roots. By the 1940s, as historian Estelle Freedman has demonstrated, psychologists had promoted the notion that people learned to be gay in childhood due to environmental factors, particularly direct recruitment by adult gay men who were sexually interested in minors. Dr. J. Paul de River wrote in his book *The Sexual Criminal*, for example, "All too often we lose sight of the fact that the homosexual is an inveterate seducer of the young of both sexes . . . [and] he must have degenerate companions and is ever seeking for younger victims."⁵⁰ Though the focus was on gay men, in the 1950s and 1960s the Johns Committee in Florida used similar arguments about recruitment to investigate and fire lesbians as well, claiming that "homosexuals are made by training rather than born."⁵¹ By the mid-1970s, social conservatives had insisted that the problem of child pornography was intimately connected to the dangers that gay men posed to children. As the media reported on individual cases of child molestation and child pornography, it often referred to "homosexual molesters," though the media did not similarly refer to rapists as "heterosexual." In the spring and summer of 1977, CBS's *60 Minutes*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, among other media outlets, ran stories about child pornography. Historian Fred Fejes emphasizes, "Often a major element of these stories was an exposé of man-boy sex, a relatively new and highly sensationalist element in the story on pornography."⁵² These reports reinforced spurious beliefs in a nonexistent link between gay male identity and child sexual abuse, which increased opposition to gay men teaching young children.

In Dade County, Save Our Children took advantage of the anti-child pornography panic to publicly link homosexuality to child molestation.⁵³

⁴⁷ Fejes, 118.

⁴⁸ Robert Scheer, "A *Times* Interview with John Briggs on Homosexuality," *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1978.

⁴⁹ Pamphlet, *California Defend Our Children*, folder: Briggs Unsorted, box 2, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁵⁰ Estelle Freedman, "'Uncontrolled Desires': The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960," *Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (1987): 103-4.

⁵¹ Frank, "The Civil Rights," 144-45.

⁵² Fejes, *Gay Rights*, 91-92.

⁵³ Frank, "The Civil Rights," 146.

The leaders of California Defend Our Children were once again inspired by these tactics, and in September 1978 John Briggs very publicly denounced Larry Berner, a gay second-grade teacher in Healdsburg: "We've got to be crazy to allow homosexuals who have an affinity for young boys to teach our children."⁵⁴ Though Briggs claimed that his decision to fight to get Proposition 6 onto the California ballot in November 1978 was motivated by his religious beliefs, it was also clear that he was politically calculating: Briggs hoped that the conflict over gay and lesbian rights would propel him to the governorship. Briggs once said, "Homosexuality is the hottest issue in this country since Reconstruction."⁵⁵ Despite his hopes, however, Briggs came up against a grassroots movement led by activists who tirelessly organized to defeat his attempts to rise to political power on the backs of the LGBTQ community.

THE CAMPAIGN TO DEFEAT THE BRIGGS INITIATIVE

Between late 1977 and November 1978, activists affiliated with the Christian Right waged a concerted campaign to pass the Briggs Initiative, gathering almost two hundred thousand more signatures than required to put the initiative on the California ballot.⁵⁶ According to a Fair Political Practices Commission report issued on 11 July 1978, backers of the Briggs Initiative had spent \$859,487 to ensure the initiative qualified for the ballot. The *Los Angeles Times* reported the next day that Briggs's California Defend Our Children had raised a total of \$883,628 in contributions. In contrast, groups opposed to the Briggs Initiative had only raised \$122,944 and spent \$116,415 during the lead-up to ballot qualification in July 1978.⁵⁷

However, the antigay attacks by the Christian Right also catalyzed a resurgent gay rights movement. In June 1977, after the Dade County vote, hundreds of thousands of people attended gay pride parades across the country. The pride parade in San Francisco attracted a record 375,000 people that year and was more political than it had been the previous year. As parade participants moved up Market Street, they expressed their opposition to Anita Bryant, chanting not only "civil rights is not the solution, what we need is revolution" but also "gay teachers fight back!"⁵⁸ In November 1977 Harvey Milk became the first openly gay man elected to

⁵⁴ McMillan, "Briggs Points."

⁵⁵ Robert Levering, "John Briggs on Gays: Exclusive Interview! The Author of the Briggs Initiative Sounds Off on Homosexuality, Prostitution, Perversion, Adultery and Bestiality," October 5–13, 1978, folder: Found Loose, 2/4, box 2, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁵⁶ Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 378.

⁵⁷ Jerry Gillam, "\$859,487 Spent to Push Antigay Issue," *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1978.

⁵⁸ David Johnston, "S.F. Gay Pride Parade Draws 375,000," *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1977.

the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and in March 1978, with Milk's leadership, the board passed a comprehensive gay rights law by a ten-to-one margin.⁵⁹

The decentralized nature of the anti-Briggs campaign motivated opposition from a wide diversity of gay and lesbian organizations, including dozens of community groups, radical groups like the Bay Area Committee against the Briggs Initiative (BACABI), and more professionally oriented advocates of gay rights, such as Concerned Voters.⁶⁰ In contrast to BACABI, which was run by members of the LGBT community who were very out and proud about their identities, Concerned Voters pushed a moderate political approach. For example, David Goldstein, a founder of Concerned Voters who also owned the gay monthly the *Advocate*, argued in late 1977, "All gay people could help best by maintaining very low profiles. Constructively, we should assist in registering gay voters, stuffing envelopes . . . and keeping out of sight of non-gay voters."⁶¹ Gay men and lesbians who had been organizing in separate political spaces came together in coalition to oppose the Briggs Initiative.⁶² Sally Gearhart, a lesbian feminist, feminist science fiction writer, and professor of speech and women's studies at San Francisco State College, cochaired the United Fund with Harvey Milk, the purpose of which was to raise money for anti-Briggs activism.⁶³ In an interview I conducted with her in 2010, Gearhart recalled that the United Fund raised "hundreds of thousands of dollars" for the anti-Briggs campaign and distributed this money to groups such as Sonoma County Residents against Proposition 6 (SCRAP 6). Both Gearhart and Milk debated John Briggs on television, becoming two of the better-known activists in the anti-Briggs campaign. Gearhart's ability to use her influence as a lesbian professor points to the centrality of queer educators in efforts to defeat the initiative.⁶⁴

Activists also influenced labor unions, many of which were publicly supporting gay rights for the first time, to join the anti-Briggs campaign. Amber Hollibaugh, a leading San Francisco-based activist in the campaign to defeat Briggs, focused much of her time on convincing labor unions to mobilize their membership and resources. In her memoir she recalls going

⁵⁹ Fejes, *Gay Rights*, 186. Also see Lillian Faderman, *Harvey Milk: His Lives and Death* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

⁶⁰ Michael Ward and Mark Freeman, "Defending Gay Rights: The Campaign against the Briggs Amendment in California," *Radical America* 13, no. 4 (August 1979): 15.

⁶¹ Ward and Freeman, 16.

⁶² Pamphlet, *Bay Area Committee against the Briggs Initiative / No on 6*, folder: BACABI, box 1, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁶³ Guide, Sally Miller Gearhart Papers, 1956–1999, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, <http://nwda.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv81757>, accessed February 12, 2014.

⁶⁴ Sally Gearhart, interview with the author, Willits, California, January 12, 2010; press release, June 9, 1978, folder: Briggs Initiative / United Fund box 6, Milk Collection, SFPL.

to meetings of the Teamsters' Union to talk about the Briggs Initiative, commenting that "lesbians don't walk into the Teamsters' Union and speak about lesbians too frequently. We selected places we thought were crucial because we never get into them."⁶⁵ This activism led several unions across the state to publicly state their opposition to the Briggs Initiative, culminating in the Workers Conference to Defeat the Briggs Initiative in September 1978 in the Bay Area, a large conference that included workshops on the rights of gay and lesbian workers. This conference marks a crucial early moment in the merger of queer activism with the labor movement.⁶⁶

As the primary targets of Briggs and his supporters, gay and lesbian teachers understood that their jobs and their lives were on the line, and they thus played a central role in the movement to defeat Briggs. They understood that the passage of the Briggs Initiative would force many of them back into the closet, since it would allow school boards to fire any teacher or school worker who was public about being gay. They also knew that this would have devastating consequences for their students, many of whom were struggling to come to terms with their sexual orientation in a hostile world. In the Bay Area, they formed organizations such as Lesbian School Workers and Gay Teachers and School Workers in the Bay Area, and, particularly in Los Angeles, they successfully persuaded the teachers' unions—at the local and statewide levels—of California to actively oppose the Briggs Initiative.

Gay and lesbian teachers succeeded in encouraging the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in California to actively oppose the Briggs Initiative in part because the union had been primed by the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. By the late 1960s the AFT in California had set itself apart from the AFT nationally. Members of the AFT's national leadership were relatively supportive of the civil rights movement, but they had often taken a hostile stance toward advocates of Black Power.⁶⁷ By contrast, in

⁶⁵ Amber Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 49–50.

⁶⁶ BACABI Labor Committee to "Sisters and Brothers," July 28, 1978, folder 2: Briggs Initiative, box 6, Milk Collection, SFPL; "Schedule," Workers Conference to Defeat the Briggs Initiative, September 9–10, 1978, Private Collection of Ruth Mahaney, San Francisco, California (hereafter Mahaney Collection).

⁶⁷ The best example of this was the Ocean Hill–Brownsville conflict, which took place in the fall of 1968 and pitted advocates of community control of the public schools in New York City, a cause promoted by Black Power activists, against the primarily white United Federation of Teachers, the New York City AFT affiliate. Daniel H. Perlstein, *Justice, Justice: School Politics and the Eclipse of Liberalism* (New York: P. Lang, 2004), 5–6. For more on the Ocean Hill–Brownsville strike, see Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill–Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002). For other examples of teachers' unions clashing with Black Power advocates, see Jon Shelton, chapter 2, "Teacher Power, Black Power, and the Fracturing of Labor Liberalism," in *Teacher Strike! Public Education and the Making of a New American Political Order* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

California rank-and-file union members and AFT leaders tended to be more supportive of social movements even as they became more radical. In January 1969, for example, faculty members in AFT Local 1352 at San Francisco State College went on strike alongside students of color, demanding the establishment of black studies and a College of Third World Studies. In the 1970s feminist teachers in the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) established the Women in Education Committee to institute women's rights within the collective bargaining process, to confront sexism in the public school curricula, and to press the union to actively support the women's liberation movement.⁶⁸ By the mid-1970s teachers had gained the legal right to collective bargaining, sparking widespread unionization campaigns by the AFT and the National Education Association and infusing the teachers' union movement with energy and renewed activism.⁶⁹

The engagement of the AFT of California in movements for racial and gender justice helped to set the stage for the union's support of gay and lesbian teachers' activism against the Briggs Initiative. In the mid-1970s the Gay Teachers Coalition in San Francisco established itself as a major advocate for gay and lesbian teachers, in the process helping to establish a work culture rooted in activism that made it safer for increasing numbers of teachers to openly proclaim their sexual orientation. The group's first meeting in 1975 was attended by about fifteen men. It later grew in size and would include both gay men and lesbians who were "predominantly white," according to member Lynn Levey.⁷⁰ The organization provided both a social and a political space for gay and lesbian teachers. Three of its founding members, Tom Ammiano, Ron Lanza, and Hank Wilson, were activists in Bay Area Gay Liberation (BAGL), the largest gay leftist organization in the Bay Area in the mid-1970s.⁷¹ The Gay Teachers Coalition, which would change its name to Gay Teachers and School Workers

⁶⁸ See Sara R. Smith, chapter 2, "'On Strike, Shut It Down!': Faculty and the Black and Third World Student Strike at San Francisco State College, 1968–1969," and chapter 3, "Bringing Feminism into the Union: Feminism in California Federation of Teachers in the 1970s," in "Organizing for Social Justice: Rank-and-File Teachers' Activism and Social Unionism in California, 1948–1978" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2014).

⁶⁹ Carol A. Vendrillo, "Collective Bargaining in California's Public Sector," in *Collective Bargaining in the Public Sector: The Experience of Eight States*, ed. Joyce M. Najita and James L. Stern (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 141, 145–46. See also Fred Glass, *A History of the California Federation of Teachers, 1919–1989* (South San Francisco: Federation, 1989).

⁷⁰ Lynn Levey, "AFT Supports Bakke," *Unlearning the Lie* 1, no. 2, folder: Gay Teachers and School Workers Coalition, box 1, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁷¹ For an overview of Hank Wilson's life, including his activism in the 1970s, see his obituary: Liz Highleyman, "Veteran Activist Hank Wilson Dies," *Bay Area Reporter*, November 13, 1998. See Emily Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 69; Blount, *Fit to Teach*, 127. Both sources discuss the relationship between Bay Area Gay Liberation and the founding of the Gay Teachers Coalition, including the overlap in membership of key leaders.

(GTSW) in the fall of 1977, announced in its newsletter: "We believe that discrimination against Gay teachers arises as part of a system of sexism, racism, and class oppression that pervades our country."⁷² The Gay Teachers Coalition, a group started by a fairly small number of teachers, would soon be instrumental in catalyzing teachers' activism to persuade their unions to oppose the Briggs Initiative.

In the second issue of its newsletter, distributed in late 1977 or early 1978, the group directly countered the Christian Right's claims that gays and lesbians were dangerous to children: "We have been accused of 'child molesting,' 'recruitment,' and 'trying to influence children's sexuality.' In fact, statistics, observation, and common sense prove that sexuality is not determined by the sexual orientation of the teacher or school worker. In addition, studies show that most sex crimes are committed by so-called 'normal' straight men." The unnamed author and member of the Gay Teachers Coalition argued that attacks on gay people in the schools were used as a diversion from some of the real problems that needed to be fixed, such as "young people being made to feel inadequate and inferior, school administrations that don't relate to the needs of the children, racial violence, the high drop out rate of Third World students, [and] students who can't read." The Gay Teachers Coalition sought "an end to rigid sex role stereotyping" and the "creation of a safe and supportive environment for all children."⁷³ As we can see, gay and lesbian teachers were well positioned in teaching to begin to undo the ideological underpinnings of an educational system with a long history of upholding traditional gender norms, including coerced heterosexuality.

The Gay Teachers Coalition had already achieved some legislative victories in this arena. In 1975, in a precedent-setting victory, they had pressured members of the San Francisco Board of Education to include sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policy, a fight that garnered considerable media publicity and mobilized community activists to defend the rights of gay and lesbian teachers and students.⁷⁴ This struggle enhanced the reputation of the Gay Teachers Coalition in the community, putting the group in a better position to fight against the Briggs Initiative when this

⁷² It is unclear when the group changed its name, but the first issue of its newsletter indicated that it was called Gay Teachers and School Workers: *Gay Teachers and School Workers Coalition Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (August/September 1977), Zobel Collection, Oakland, California. See also "Who We Are," *Unlearning the Lie* 1, no. 2 (n.d.), folder: Gay Teachers and School Workers, box 1, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁷³ "Who We Are."

⁷⁴ The influence of this activism to include sexual orientation in the San Francisco Unified School District's nondiscrimination policy is confirmed in multiple sources: Wilson, interview with Burt Gabler, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, California; Minutes, Regular Meeting of Board of Education of SFUSD, Tuesday, June 17, 1975, Gay Teachers Coalition (SFUSD), Ephemera Collection, Organizations and Groups, GLBT Historical Society; *Gay Teachers and School Workers Coalition Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (August/September 1977), Zobel Collection.

became the primary focus of their work in 1977 and 1978. Members of the group described their work against the Briggs Initiative as providing “living testimony” against antigay legislation: “In the past others, both straight and gay, presumed to speak for us; we will speak for ourselves.”⁷⁵ GTSW viewed the Briggs Initiative not only as an attack on gay people but also as antilabor. After all, the initiative would have negated nondiscrimination clauses and job security protections in union contracts while providing local school boards with more power over teachers and other school workers. To prevent this, GTSW launched a campaign to educate people about the implications of the initiative and to demonstrate to the public that gay teachers did not pose a threat to children. In June 1978 the coalition organized the International Children’s Day Festival at a park in San Francisco as part of Gay Pride Week, and members held various fund-raisers, including the “Queens benefit poetry reading” in September 1978.⁷⁶ According to an anonymous gay teacher and member of GTSW, the organization used its unique role representing gay and lesbian teachers to educate the public that “gay people are not child molesters. We also have to show that gay people are in the schools and that they are good teachers.”⁷⁷

The Lesbian School Workers (LSW) was born out of the Gay Teachers and School Workers sometime in late 1977. According to LSW member Lois Helmbold, this happened very “organically” and was not a “split” resulting from intense infighting and irreconcilable political differences. When the women formed LSW they continued to work cooperatively with the men in the Gay Teachers and School Workers Coalition.⁷⁸ Another member, Ellen Broidy, remembers that LSW formed as a separate organization for lesbians in part because “men took up a lot of space.”⁷⁹ The group ranged in size, increasing from about a dozen in its early days to between thirty-five and fifty members in the months leading up to the November 1978 election as the group concentrated on defeating Briggs. Most of those involved were college-educated, young, and white; many were Jewish, and despite the name of the group, it included some lesbians who were neither teachers nor school workers who agreed with LSW’s political orientation to the anti-Briggs campaign, as well as the urgency of the need to defeat the initiative.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ “Who We Are” flyer, Gay Teachers and School Workers Coalition, March 1978, folder: Gay Teachers and School Workers, box 1, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁷⁶ “Gay Teachers Treat Kids,” *Gazette*, June 21, 1978, folder: Gay Teachers and School Workers Coalition, box 1, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives; flyer, Gay Teachers and School Workers Coalition, “Help Defeat Briggs, a Queens benefit poetry reading for the Gay Teachers and School Workers Coalition,” folder: Gay Teachers and School Workers Coalition, box 1, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁷⁷ “Interview with California Gay Teacher, 1977,” audio (#ACD0671), ONE Archives.

⁷⁸ Lois Helmbold, interview with the author, Oakland, California, September 11, 2009.

⁷⁹ Ellen Broidy, interview with the author, Santa Barbara, California, August 2, 2009.

⁸⁰ Letter to “Friend of Lesbian School Workers,” October 4, 1978, folder: Lesbian School Workers / BACABI 1/6, box 1, Paula Lichtenberg Papers, GLBT Historical Society (hereafter Lichtenberg Papers).

The politics of LSW were politically similar to the philosophies of GTSW, though one important distinction was LSW's opposition to Proposition 7. On the ballot at the same time as Proposition 6, Proposition 7—which overwhelmingly passed—greatly extended the prison terms for people convicted of murder, as well as the number of circumstances for imposing the death penalty.⁸¹ In opposing Propositions 6 and 7, LSW's politics were more closely aligned with those of gay and lesbian activists of color, who were much more likely to actively oppose both initiatives than were white gay and lesbian groups.⁸² In fact, in the fall of 1978 the San Francisco-based Third World Fund criticized white gay and lesbian anti-Proposition 6 groups for not also speaking out against Proposition 7, asserting that the “bond of solidarity is seriously hampered when gays . . . fail to be sensitive to the human and civil rights threats of the minority community.”⁸³ Members of LSW felt it important to speak out because Proposition 7 was likely to exacerbate the disparities in prison sentencing and the imposition of death sentences on poor people and people of color.⁸⁴

In their efforts to defeat Proposition 6, members of Lesbian School Workers primarily focused on education and fund-raising.⁸⁵ For example, on 23 April 1978 they sponsored the Women's Potluck in Oakland to raise awareness, and the following month they premiered a play, *Loving Women*, as a fund-raiser.⁸⁶ Members of LSW also spoke at anti-Briggs forums, including one in June 1978, alongside a speaker from the gay caucus of Local 2 of the Culinary Workers Union and Yvonne Golden, a high school principal who was a member of the Black Teachers' Caucus.⁸⁷ Jan Zobel and Ellen Broidy, members of the group, debated Briggs on a San Jose television program. Broidy remembers that “there was little pretense of rational thought on his part. . . . The demagogue of fear came across loud and clear.”⁸⁸ In 1978 LSW worked together with Gay Teachers and School Workers to organize demonstrations outside radio and television

⁸¹ Rob Javers, “Prop 5 Foes Set State Spending Record,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 1, 1978.

⁸² Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 89–91.

⁸³ Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 131; flyer, “Speculation on Gay,” *News Notes*, Third World Fund, Fall 1978, folder: Briggs, box 2, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁸⁴ Pamphlet, Lesbian School Workers, *Vote No on 6 & 7*, folder: No on Briggs, box 1, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁸⁵ Broidy interview; Helmbold interview. Both Ellen Broidy and Lois Helmbold confirmed in my interviews with them that LSW focused on education and fund-raising.

⁸⁶ Lesbian School Workers, “Women's Potluck” flyer and “Walk-a-thon,” October 14, 1978, and flyer, “Upcoming Events,” folder: Lesbian School Workers, box 1, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁸⁷ Flyer, “An Anti-Briggs Forum,” June 21, 1978, folder: Briggs Unsorted, box 2, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁸⁸ Broidy interview.

stations that were airing shows featuring John Briggs.⁸⁹ A central part of LSW's strategy against the Briggs Initiative was showing a slideshow that described Proposition 6 as a consequence of the rise of the New Right and underscored the dangers inherent in the Right's targeting of not just gays and lesbians but also people of color and women, reflected most immediately in right-wing efforts to pass Proposition 7. This was so central to their activism because their political critique of the New Right set them apart from other anti-Briggs organizations that chose to focus exclusively on defeating Proposition 6. Lesbian School Workers, in other words, understood the urgency of defeating Proposition 6 but also recognized the long-term dangers of the rise to political influence of the New Right, which was setting its sights on rolling back the rights of marginalized groups in general. The slideshow script, authored by members of an LSW subcommittee, asserted that Senator John Briggs was pushing Proposition 6 in order to shore up "rigidly defined . . . sex roles." It then urged people to organize and vote against both Propositions 6 and 7.⁹⁰ The Lesbian School Workers showed the slideshow to a wide range of audiences, including schools, unions, and community groups.⁹¹ For example, they showed the slideshow at the Workers' Conference to Defeat the Briggs Initiative in San Francisco in September 1978 and a month later at the People's Cultural Center, also in San Francisco.⁹² LSW member Lois Helmond commented about the slideshow, "We would show that as a mechanism of initiating discussion and getting people to talk."⁹³

Gay and lesbian teachers also came together to form the Gay Teachers of Los Angeles (GTLA) in 1976. Formed with the goal of combatting discrimination based on sexual orientation in teaching, the membership of GTLA was initially made up mostly of gay men, who appear to have been largely white. However, by the fall of 1977, the organization's newsletter, the *Cheery Chalkboard*, noted that about one-quarter of its subscribers were women.⁹⁴ A GTLA flyer described the goals of the organization: they sought to be a source of information for the teachers' unions and local school boards about issues facing gay teachers; to "help eliminate the myths many associate with homosexuality and the oppressive attitudes and

⁸⁹ Blount, *Fit to Teach*, 148.

⁹⁰ Lesbian School Workers slideshow (#2003-26), GLBT Historical Society.

⁹¹ Lesbian School Workers slideshow and script; Helmbold interview; flyer, Lesbian School Workers, "Upcoming Events," folder: Lesbian School Workers, box 1, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁹² "Schedule," Workers Conference to Defeat the Briggs Initiative, September 9–10, 1978, Mahaney Collection; flyer, "Help Defeat 6 and 7," folder: Lesbian School Workers / BACABI, box 1, Lichtenberg Papers.

⁹³ Helmbold interview.

⁹⁴ *Cheery Chalkboard*, October 1977, folder: Cheery Chalkboard, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives. All subsequent references to this newsletter were also found in the same folder.

actions these myths have lead [*sic*] to"; "to point out how anti-gay attitudes are very much a part of the sexism and racism in our society"; to support "sexual minority studies" in colleges and high schools; and to coordinate efforts with the Gay Teachers and School Workers in San Francisco and other communities.⁹⁵ Beginning in 1977, the GTLA began to prioritize activism against the Briggs Initiative. For instance, in July 1977 Gary Steel, a gay professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and GTLA member, debated Briggs on a local television station, Channel 28.⁹⁶ The *Cheery Chalkboard* continually informed readers of Briggs Initiative-related developments, including that, on 18 October 1978, the Los Angeles United School District had adopted a resolution opposing Proposition 6.⁹⁷ GTLA sent about fifty letters to local teacher and administrator groups to persuade them to oppose the Briggs Initiative, and GTLA president Norman McClelland was a plaintiff in a lawsuit to prevent the initiative from getting onto the ballot. The lawsuit, which ultimately failed, argued that the Briggs Initiative should be barred from going on the ballot because it fundamentally violated the free speech clause of the First Amendment of the US Constitution.⁹⁸

The strategies of GTLA and GTSW converged in one significant way: both organizations concentrated on influencing the teachers' unions, while the Lesbian School Workers largely focused its energies on community organizing. According to an anonymous member of GTSW speaking about the group's late 1977 organizing against the Briggs Initiative, "In working with the unions here in the city, which is where we have the most leverage right now, we've made a major effort to unify, form a united front, with the caucuses both in the [California Teachers Association] and the AFT, which included Asian teachers' caucuses, a black teachers' caucus, which has been a very forceful element here in the city for years . . . and the Latino caucus."⁹⁹ Members of the coalition decided to reach out to these other groups not only because "they are more progressive than the general elements of the union" but also because the coalition thought it was important to do outreach to traditionally marginalized communities in their effort to increase opposition to the Briggs Initiative.¹⁰⁰

In their opposition to the Briggs Initiative, teachers' unions in California tended to stress a politically moderate message that sharply contrasted with the gay rights rhetoric of gay and lesbian activist organizations. A letter that was signed by several AFT leaders and circulated as an anti-Briggs flyer

⁹⁵ "Goals of GTLA" flyer, folder: Cheery Chalkboard, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

⁹⁶ *Cheery Chalkboard*, August 1977.

⁹⁷ *Cheery Chalkboard*, November 1978.

⁹⁸ *Cheery Chalkboard*, September 1977. The lawsuit launched by a travel agency called It's Funny Going Places to prevent the initiative from going on the ballot ultimately failed. See the report in "Bid to Bar Ballot Measure Fails," *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 1978.

⁹⁹ "Interview with California Gay Teacher, 1977."

¹⁰⁰ Helmbold interview.

emphasized that teachers should be judged on their “job performance” rather than their “private lives.” In this letter, teachers’ union leaders, including James Ballard, president of AFT Local 61, which represented public schoolteachers in San Francisco, Judy Solkovits, vice president of United Teachers Los Angeles, the union representing teachers in Los Angeles, and Raoul Teilhet, president of the CFT, expressed fear that the Briggs Initiative might “pave the way for the firing of workers by other employers based on any differences in life styles or political views.”¹⁰¹ The CFT State Council echoed these views in an anti-Briggs resolution passed in 1977 that stated that California state law “protects the privacy of persons to live their personal lives as they see fit.” School districts already had the right “to dismiss a teacher whenever it can be shown that the teacher’s conduct poses a threat to pupils.” This was a direct refutation of the claim of Briggs supporters that the initiative was necessary to protect schoolchildren from the sexual predations of “homosexuals.”¹⁰² While unequivocal in their opposition, then, union leaders in this case did not base their disapproval on an explicit defense of gay rights. Perhaps in their effort to convince nongay teachers to vote against the Briggs Initiative, teachers’ union leaders decided to use language highlighting that the Briggs Initiative was a broader assault on civil liberties and the right to privacy. This way, straight teachers uncomfortable with homosexuality or opposed to gay rights might see in the Briggs Initiative an attack on their own rights rather than merely a political attack on their gay coworkers.¹⁰³ Similarly, in its newspaper, the *San Francisco Teacher*, AFT Local 1961 editorialized that the Briggs Initiative was an attack on the “private lives” of teachers that threatened to give excessive power to school boards to investigate and fire teachers and would become the “first salvo in an intensive nationwide assault on the rights and liberties of all.”¹⁰⁴

The members of GTLA consistently prioritized their work within United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) over nonunion projects because they realized that the union could be a powerful vehicle to promote gay and lesbian

¹⁰¹ Flyer, BACABI Labor Committee / No on 6, folder: Bay Area Committee against Briggs, box 1, Briggs Collection, ONE Archives.

¹⁰² “Gay Rights,” *California Teacher* 21, no. 2 (November 1977), Labor Archives and Research Center (hereafter San Francisco Labor Archives), J. Paul Leonard Library, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California (hereafter Leonard Library).

¹⁰³ In *The Closet and the Cul-de-Sac: The Politics of Sexual Privacy in Northern California* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), author Clayton Howard discusses debates over the right to privacy around the question of gay rights. He points out that in 1977 43 percent of Californians, in their reply to a survey, said that gays and lesbians should be “tolerated, but only if they don’t show their way of life,” while only 17 percent of Californians thought that gay men and lesbians should be “approved of by society and allowed to live their own homosexual lifestyles” (283–84). On the eve of the campaign against the Briggs Initiative, then, appeals to the right to privacy clearly had much more support among straight-identified people than did an explicit defense of gay rights.

¹⁰⁴ Editorials, *San Francisco Teacher*, April and October 1978.

rights. In February 1977 the UTLA board of directors unanimously passed a gay rights policy, and in March the UTLA House of Representatives voted 95 percent in favor of issuing a statement: "UTLA supports the rights of teachers to fair treatment regardless of sexual orientation or lifestyle. UTLA believes in a policy of 'live and let live,' a policy which is the essence of a free people."¹⁰⁵ As part of their efforts to organize within the teachers' unions, ten GTLA members attended the May 1977 California Federation of Teachers (CFT) convention in Los Angeles, where they set up a table with members of the San Francisco Gay Teachers and School Workers, the first "openly gay" presence at a CFT convention.¹⁰⁶ This activism by gay and lesbian teachers, coming as it did the year before the campaign against the Briggs Initiative, laid the groundwork for the teachers' unions to join the campaign to defend gay rights by defeating the Briggs Initiative.

The precedent for CFT activism in defense of gay and lesbian rights was set in 1969 and 1970 at CFT conventions, where Morgan Pinney, a member of AFT Local 1352 at San Francisco State College, was one of the most vocal advocates of gay rights in the union.¹⁰⁷ At its convention in Los Angeles in December 1969, the CFT adopted a landmark gay rights resolution. The resolution called for the establishment of a "vigorous life and sex education program at all school levels which explains the various American life-styles," and it insisted on "the abolition of all laws or other governmental policy which involves non-victim sexual practices." The resolution denounced the effects of police harassment on gay people, concluding that "the self-hate caused by the system's oppression is the most hideous result" of antigay discrimination. When some of the CFT's 250 delegates initially laughed during the convention floor discussion about gay rights, Pinney declared that he was talking about "nothing less than murder." After his speech, AFT Local 1928, representing student workers at San Francisco State College, led the convention delegates in a standing ovation.¹⁰⁸

At the CFT convention in 1970, delegates passed a second gay rights resolution, though not without some controversy. The resolution that passed, "Counseling the Homosexual Student," included plans to draft a pamphlet to be distributed to fifteen thousand CFT members.¹⁰⁹ After a three-hour floor fight, delegates passed the resolution. In an article entitled "Fireworks at CFT Convention" and published in AFT Local 1352's

¹⁰⁵ *Cheery Chalkboard*, March 1977.

¹⁰⁶ *Cheery Chalkboard*, March 1977, May 1977, and December 1978.

¹⁰⁷ Pinney was a professor of accounting at San Francisco State College until he was fired for his participation in the faculty strike in solidarity with black and Third World students in 1969. For a story about him, see "Illegal Dismissal Violates AFT Pact," *Daily Gater*, March 10, 1969, San Francisco State College Strike Collection, Leonard Library.

¹⁰⁸ AFT Local 1352 Press Release, n.d., folder 2, box 1, Tim Sampson Collection, San Francisco Labor Archives.

¹⁰⁹ Morgan Pinney, "Fireworks at CFT Convention," AFT Local 1352 newsletter, January 25, 1971, folder 19, box 1, Sampson Collection, San Francisco Labor Archives.

newsletter, Pinney described CFT president Raoul Teilhet's criticism of this resolution, which contributed to the conflict over passing the resolution. As Pinney put it, Teilhet claimed that he could not organize teachers "with a thing like that in the platform." These CFT resolutions on gay rights in 1969 and 1970 represented early moments of convergence between gay activism and the labor movement. Several years would pass, however, before the CFT and other unions became more proactive in the defense of gay rights, as witnessed by the union's involvement in the anti-Briggs campaign.

As the campaign against the Briggs Initiative heated up in the spring of 1978, GTLA took the initiative to convince the CFT to take action. At the CFT's annual convention in May 1978 McClelland led the first-ever workshop on the issue of homosexuality in education: "Is Homosexuality Catching? The Gay Teacher, Reality vs. Myth." With the help of both gay and straight people from UTLA, GTLA members also successfully persuaded about 250 CFT delegates to wear black armbands with a pink "stop Briggs" triangle during the convention.¹¹⁰ GTLA members also coordinated with the Gay Teachers and School Workers of San Francisco to obtain support from San Francisco AFT Local 61 for a resolution supporting gay rights and opposing the Briggs Initiative. The resolution read:

Whereas gay men and women have for many years been victims of both overt and covert discrimination; Whereas recently gay educators have been directly maligned and threatened with a witch hunt and purge commonly called the Briggs Initiative; Whereas much of the discrimination against gay men and women teachers comes from non-gay co-workers because of their lack of knowledge about sexual minorities; Be it resolved that the CFT support and encourage all of its locals to include sexual orientation as a non-discrimination category in all future contracts and that the CFT support and encourage the inclusion of curricula on sexual minorities in all counselor and teacher training and credentialing programs.¹¹¹

While, as we have seen, the CFT had previously gone on record in support of gay rights in general, this time the organization was actively encouraging its locals to negotiate for gay rights and to include curricula on "sexual minorities" in teacher and counselor training programs.

Though it was community-based queer activism that was primarily responsible for mobilizing opposition to the Briggs Initiative across the state, ultimately leading to its defeat, gay and lesbian educators did manage to convince the CFT to actively take part in the anti-Briggs campaign. The CFT's activism against the Briggs Initiative included taking part in a lawsuit to prevent the initiative from getting on the ballot, publicly endorsing and sponsoring educational events and protests against the Briggs Initiative,

¹¹⁰ *Cheery Chalkboard*, June 1978, December 1978.

¹¹¹ *Cheery Chalkboard*, June 1978.

and donating money to the campaign to defeat Briggs.¹¹² Judy Solkovits, who often spoke out against the Briggs Initiative as a CFT representative, remembers she both spoke on a 5:30 a.m. radio program and attended a large protest against the initiative at a park in Hollywood at which Harvey Milk also spoke in October 1978. Solkovits campaigned against the Briggs Initiative in part because she felt that it was her responsibility as CFT vice president, but she also emphasized that she had a personal commitment to the issue.¹¹³ CFT president Raoul Teilhet also appeared repeatedly at protests against the Briggs Initiative. In June 1978 he spoke before a crowd of 250,000 gay rights demonstrators in San Francisco, announcing, "We are here today to demonstrate to the John Briggs and Anita Bryants in our society that we do not intend to permit the stench of fear to return to California public-school classrooms."¹¹⁴ This extraordinary CFT activism placed the union at the vanguard of labor activism for gay rights in the 1970s, a relatively early example of a union going beyond passing resolutions at conventions and meetings to publicly promote the rights of queer workers.

The AFT, the CFT's parent union at the national level with a membership of five hundred thousand, also publicly opposed the Briggs Initiative, though somewhat more tepidly than the CFT.¹¹⁵ Though the AFT leadership had issued a policy statement opposing the Briggs Initiative in October 1977, controversy over passage of resolutions on gay rights emerged at the August 1978 national AFT convention in Washington, DC.¹¹⁶ The GTLA leadership supported two gay rights resolutions at the convention: one opposing the Briggs Initiative, and the other in support of the GLTA-supported resolution adopted at the CFT convention in May 1978. According to the GTLA's newsletter, the AFT leadership had "pre-arranged to sabotage both resolutions." Instead of supporting the GTLA resolutions, the AFT passed a resolution that restated the AFT's 1973 policy statement "supporting the rights of teachers to conduct their private lives without harassment" and presented an objection to the Briggs Initiative without an explicit reference to gay rights or discrimination.¹¹⁷ A GTLA spokesperson provided a critique of these developments in the organization's May 1978 newsletter, remarking that "the leadership of the AFT appeared to be afraid of gay teachers' rights. They were especially opposed to any use of the words 'gay,' 'homosexual,' or 'sexual orientation' in any resolutions. . . . [T]he AFT has given us closet support only, instead of open support."¹¹⁸

¹¹² Judy Solkovits, interview with the author, Northridge, California, August 9, 2009.

¹¹³ Solkovits interview.

¹¹⁴ "Stop Briggs, AFT Leaders Urge," *California Teacher* 21, no. 1 (October 1978).

¹¹⁵ "Teachers Union Opposes Prop. 6," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 25, 1978.

¹¹⁶ For the policy statement, see Blount, *Fit to Teach*, 138.

¹¹⁷ May 1978 AFT Convention Proceedings, American Federation of Teachers Collection, series XIII, folder 4: Proceedings, box 50, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

¹¹⁸ *Cheery Chalkboard*, September 1978.

The Californian branch of the AFT, urged on as it was by gay and lesbian teachers, was much more willing than the national organization to promote a version of unionism that supported gay rights. The AFT leadership's reticence likely had much to do with the personal opinions of its president, Albert Shanker, who played a dominant role in the union's politics, serving as president from 1974 until his death in 1997.¹¹⁹ Asked to advocate for gay rights in his role as president of the New York City-based United Federation of Teachers (the local AFT affiliate) in 1975, he had reportedly retorted that the issue was too divisive for the union to take a public stance.¹²⁰ Ten years later, in 1985, in the midst of the AIDS epidemic devastating the queer community, Shanker had not changed his tune, asserting that the issue of gay teachers was too marginal and controversial to merit the AFT's support. Shanker even criticized the National Education Association for its support of gay teachers, arguing that the NEA should spend its time advancing causes of greater interest to its membership and "not in conflict with the values of many Americans."¹²¹ Though Shanker's views did not, of course, represent the views of all national AFT leaders, his role as a leader of the ruling Progressive Caucus and the president of AFT allowed him to exert significant influence within the union, empowering California members, including AFT Local 61 president James Ballard, in their refusal to support the more progressive resolutions of the 1978 AFT convention.¹²²

Though the AFT in California was relatively progressive on the issue of gay rights in relation to the rest of the American labor movement in the late 1970s, it too placed greater emphasis on economic issues affecting a majority of the workforce, as evidenced by the extensive involvement of the union in the campaign to defeat Proposition 13. Proposition 13, which voters overwhelmingly passed, established a constitutional amendment limiting local property taxation to 1 percent of market value, which had the effect of drastically reducing the tax base and cutting funding for public education and other social services. In the leadup to the election, CFT president Teilhet proclaimed: "Proposition 13 is the most insidious threat to the economic welfare of public education in general and teachers in particular that has ever been advanced in the state of California."¹²³ This was a considerably stronger statement than those the organization issued in defense of gay teachers. The CFT's disproportionate support for Proposition 13 is further evidenced by countless articles published in its newspaper, *California Teacher*, over several months leading up to and even after the June 1978 election, which resulted in its passage—far more articles

¹¹⁹ Richard D. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battle over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 374.

¹²⁰ Blount, *Fit to Teach*, 124.

¹²¹ Harbeck, *Gay and Lesbian Educators*, 243.

¹²² *Cheery Chalkboard*, September 1978.

¹²³ "Massive Campaign to Defeat Jarvis," *California Teacher*, April 1978.

than were published in opposition to the Briggs Initiative.¹²⁴ In contrast with the level of union involvement in campaigns against Proposition 13, and despite general union support for the anti-Briggs campaign, it was not the union leaders but gay and lesbian activists in the community, including teachers, who led efforts to quash policies that would have discriminated against gay teachers. Even though the general level of union support for these initiatives represents a political landmark for queer labor activism, the teachers' unions still had a long way to go on the issue of gay rights.

CONCLUSION

On election night on 8 November 1978, many activists who had worked tirelessly for the defeat of the Briggs Initiative came together to watch the election results as they came in, gathering, among other places, at the Market Street headquarters of the anti-6 campaign. When the news broke that the Briggs Initiative had been defeated, with 59 percent of Californian voters rejecting it, the activists cheered, stomped their feet, and poured into the streets to celebrate. San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk used the occasion to urge people to come out to their friends and families, and Professor Sally Gearhart exclaimed, "Not only are we good and true and beautiful, but we have lots of friends," a reference to the majority of Californians who voted against the Briggs Initiative.¹²⁵

Larry Berner, the gay teacher in Healdsburg, California, targeted for public condemnation by John Briggs during the campaign to pass his initiative, was also ecstatic to hear the news, but he nevertheless warned that "just because we won doesn't mean we've eliminated prejudice against homosexuals."¹²⁶ Berner's warning proved prescient: though the Briggs Initiative was defeated, the Christian Right ultimately thrived at the national level and helped to elect Ronald Reagan as president in 1980. John Briggs never became governor

¹²⁴ Proposition 13 was featured in every issue of *California Teacher* from January to November 1978. See "Jarvis Move Would 'Decimate Support,'" *California Teacher*, January 1978; "Joined," *California Teacher*, February 1978 (this article says the CFT joined a state-wide coalition to defeat the initiative); "Profs Give \$10,000 to Nix Jarvis," "Jarvis Called 'Hoax, Fraud,'" and "The Crippling Impact on Schools of Jarvis/Gann," *California Teacher*, March 1978; "Massive Campaign to Defeat Jarvis" and "Cal-Tax Analysis of Jarvis/Gann," *California Teacher*, April 1978; "Kakos Leading S.D. Anti-Jarvis Effort," "United Professors Say Jarvis Layoffs Loom," "Undecided Voters Will Determine Jarvis Vote," and "Voters Switch from Prop. 13 to Prop 8/SB 1—When They Understand," *California Teacher*, May 1978; "Proposition 13 Impact Greater Than Expected" and "No on 13 Campaign: AFT Members Contribute \$135,000," *California Teacher*, October 1978; "Early Layoff Notices Advised" and "Proposition 13: What Does It Mean?," *California Teacher*, November 1978. By contrast, there's one full article, "Stop Briggs, AFT Leaders Urge," about the Briggs Initiative in the October 1978 issue of *California Teacher*, San Francisco Labor Archives.

¹²⁵ Jerry Carroll, "Gay Happy Days Are Here Again," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 8, 1978.

¹²⁶ Carroll.

of California, but he helped to form Citizens for Decency and Morality, a network of fundamentalist pastors and their congregations based in California. The pro-Briggs campaign, despite its ultimate defeat, helped to unite and inspire antigay conservative activists in California and nationally. One of Briggs's supporters, Reverend Louis Sheldon from Anaheim, helped to establish the Traditional Values Coalition three years later, and Jerry Falwell, who had come to California to support Briggs, founded the Moral Majority in 1979.¹²⁷ Both organizations were home to prominent advocates of what were called "traditional values," and their members began campaigns against gay rights that continue to the present day.¹²⁸

Despite these unfortunate developments, the campaign against the Briggs Initiative also made significant strides in promoting queer rights in the workplace. Rank-and-file gay and lesbian teachers and school workers played a critical role in this movement, essentially forcing their union, the AFT in California and nationally, to advocate for gay and lesbian rights. This one event in 1970s California thus set a trend for future discussions of gay and lesbian rights within American unions.¹²⁹

A labor movement that was responsive to their needs was critical for queer workers, since labor unions are in a position to challenge discrimination in the straight-dominated workplace.¹³⁰ Queer people often felt (and continue to feel) silenced at work, fearing that coming out will threaten their job security or lead to alienation at work. Hiding an essential part of one's identity and personal life can have devastating psychological consequences, particularly in cases where antidiscrimination is combined with allegations that an individual represents a threat to children, as is the case for teachers. The actions of labor unions have the potential to drastically reduce the need to remain closeted at work. Union leaders who came to the defense of gay and lesbian teachers who were in the Christian Right's crosshairs in 1970s California were acknowledging that being queer is not a private, personal choice; instead, it is a structural reality that can lead to discrimination at home and at work.

The story I have told places workers into queer history and queers into labor history. Gay and lesbian teachers' successful efforts to persuade the AFT in California to actively oppose the Briggs Initiative indicate that workplaces that are already in some sense queer can become productive sites of queer activism. The queer labor activism that began in California

¹²⁷ On Sheldon, see McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 259.

¹²⁸ Sara Diamond, *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (New York: Guilford, 1998), 66.

¹²⁹ For example, in 1983 activists formed the Lesbian/Gay Labor Alliance in San Francisco to marshal support in the gay community for union struggles (Frank, *Out in the Union*, 93).

¹³⁰ Historian Margot Canaday's forthcoming book, *Queer Career: Precarious Labor, Law, and Sexuality in Postwar America*, "takes on the idea that twentieth-century workplaces were part of the 'straight world'—zones in which LGBT people historically disappeared" (<https://history.princeton.edu/people/margot-canaday>, accessed August 7, 2018).

in the 1970s evolved over the next few decades and, combined with efforts elsewhere in the United States to advance the rights of queer workers, influenced national politics, eventually encouraging the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the main labor federation in the United States, to add protections against discrimination based on “sexual orientation” to its constitution in 1983. A major victory came in 1997 with the inclusion of Pride at Work, which advocates for the rights of LGBTQ workers nationally, as a formal constituency group in the AFL-CIO—the culmination of decades of struggle by queer workers within the labor movement.¹³¹ Since the 1980s, queer workers have engaged in various campaigns to unionize businesses in queer neighborhoods, including AIDS service organizations.¹³² They have also successfully pressured their unions to include the needs of LGBTQ workers in contract negotiations, leading to advancements such as clauses prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender expression, or HIV/AIDS status, the adoption of domestic partner and transgender-inclusive health benefits, and queer-inclusive parental leave policies.¹³³ For example, in 2014 United Auto Workers 2865, the union for teaching assistants, graders, and tutors at the University of California, won more all-gender bathrooms. According to union activist Amanda Armstrong-Price, this victory “could be a model for other universities and workplaces so that gender variant workers don’t experience a hostile work environment.”¹³⁴ By harnessing the power of the labor movement—the ability to unionize workplaces, to negotiate labor contracts, and to influence politics through worker mobilization—queer workers in California and across the United States have been better able to defend their rights at work and have found ways of promoting a society that embraces the rights of queer people to live with dignity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SARA SMITH-SILVERMAN is an assistant professor of history at American River College, where she teaches courses on queer studies, the history of the United States, American women’s history, and African American history. Her research focuses on the intersection of labor and social movement history in the twentieth-century United States, particularly the history of teachers’ activism against racism, sexism, and homophobia.

¹³¹ Desma Holcomb and Nancy Walforth, “Fruits of Our Labor: Pride at Work,” *New Labor Forum*, no. 8 (Spring–Summer 2001): 10–11.

¹³² Frank, *Out in the Union*, 148–50.

¹³³ Miriam Frank, “Lesbian and Gay Caucuses in the US Labor Movement,” in Gerald Hunt, ed. *Laboring for Rights: Unions and Sexual Diversity across Nations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 87–102.

¹³⁴ Daniel Gutiérrez, “Historic Win for Labor and a New Direction in the University of California System,” *San Diego Free Press*, April 20, 2014, shorturl.at/nKQ18, accessed June 4, 2019.