

The Virtual Union Hall

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The Internet and email have revolutionized the way trade unionists communicate in the United States and around the world. I do not use the word "revolutionized" lightly. Others have waxed eloquent about its potential for organizing new workers into the Labor Movement. In my capacity as communications coordinator for several contract campaigns I have used web pages, email, and chat rooms to mobilize workers engaged in collective bargaining struggles. But, these examples point only to the obvious utilitarian aspects of Internet technologies.

For hundreds of thousands of people, the Internet has become a refuge, a place to share ideas and be yourself, where all the ignorant and hateful "isms" of our society become irrelevant. Not surprisingly, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) persons, people with disabilities, and other marginalized communities were among the first large constituencies of the Internet.

LGBT people are likely to use the Internet more frequently, for longer periods of time, and conduct more online financial transactions than their heterosexual counterparts, according to the results of a recent survey by Harris Interactive. These findings were part of a larger study about consumer behavior and attitudes of adults related to Internet use. The survey was conducted online between January 11-15, with 2,525 adults responding, of which 137 people (6 percent of the total sample) self-identified as LGBT.

Within the Labor Movement, these communities have turned the Internet into a virtual union hall, a safe space where strategies are developed, actions are debated, elections are conducted, and resolutions adopted, where those among us who have been left out and isolated can fully and freely participate as equals, where our work schedule, even our time zone becomes irrelevant. Our virtual union hall is where those among us can simply "hang out" with our colleagues in the struggle and "carry on" about anything from world events to Labor issues to home recipes. As in any union, there are members content to enjoy their relative security. But there are also those others who prefer to push the envelope to expand the benefits, broaden the agenda, raise the consciousness, and increase the membership. In his 1999 book *CyberUnion: Empowering Labor Through Computer Technology*, Arthur B. Shostak describes the "Cyber Union" as one that aggressively takes

advantage of the enormous potential of new technologies and the Internet. Clearly, many activists are ahead of their unions in this regard. Pride At Work, the AFL-CIO's newest constituency group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) workers, fits the CyberUnion model.

Because LGBT workers have been so maligned in our society, many of us gravitated toward the Internet's relative anonymity as a safe vehicle to reach out to others in our community.

It follows that LGBT unionists, many of whom have felt unwelcome in their own unions, used their comfort and skills with computer technologies to organize online. It is ironic that from the isolation of the closet emerged one of the nation's most sophisticated and powerful political forces. Pride At Work members use these technologies to mobilize previously shut out members to fight for equal rights, equal compensation, and access to union leadership.

There are hundreds of examples of how Internet and email have facilitated the development and growth of Pride At Work. Most of our communications are electronic. We rely almost exclusively on listservs, web pages, and email to conduct our business.

However, unlike many labor organizations, our group has become accustomed to a more freewheeling discourse of issues and ideas. Top down or one-way communication from the leadership to the members is not an option at Pride At Work. This is just the way we like it, and the fact is, having built the organization this way, there is no turning back now.

IDEAS, DISCOURSE AND DEBATE

During the 2000 Presidential election cycle, many lively discussions were generated over so-called third party candidacies. A significant number of liberal to radical-left members emerged to challenge the conventional wisdom of Labor's endorsement of Democratic Vice President Al Gore.

Not surprisingly, heated email debates ensued between unionists supporting Gore and those supporting Green Party candidate Ralph Nader. As the polls narrowed to razor thin margins and it became clear that Nader votes could tip the scales toward Republican George Bush in certain areas, both side searched for a compromise. Much press was generated on the phenomenon of vote swapping initiatives that played out on the Internet as a result of these debates. Pride At Work members actively participated in this exchange of ideas and votes.

A Green Party member from Seattle forwarded an article he found endorsing Nader to members of the Pride At Work executive board. An

angry reply from a member in Washington, DC was sent to all recipients of the original email along with several others. This exchange escalated into a full-blown debate within Pride At Work as the recipient list grew and more people felt compelled to add their own views.

Ultimately, a consensus emerged. The election of Bush could spell disaster for both the LGBT and Labor movements. At this point, many of those in safe districts, such as Washington, DC, agreed to vote for Nader to help garner the ten percent vote needed to earn the Green Party matching federal funds. Those in less safe districts, such as in the mid-west or south, agreed to vote for Gore.

Another, issue that generated equally heated discussions among unionists followed the controversial U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*. In its 5-4 ruling on June 28, 2000, the Court allowed the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) to exclude gay youth and adult members.

Given the history of close ties between the Labor Movement and the BSA, the Courts decision represented a terrible dilemma. However, the reaction from Pride At Work and the larger LGBT movement came swift and clear.

The BSA policy was roundly condemned. This issue, even more than the presidential election contest, would test the limits of solidarity among unionists. Although the leadership at the AFL-CIO was inclined to distance themselves from the controversy, it swirled around them. Could the Labor Movement remain silent and hope to sustain credibility in the civil rights community?

To read the rest of the article, purchase the [CyberUnion Handbook](#). Look for it at www.cyberunions.net