

Whatever Happened at the End-Up?



An account of queer workers at a gay bar in San Francisco organizing in the IWW. From [Tsunami #1 \(March 1995\)](#). Photo via [tumblr](#).

Queer Wobblies fired for organizing at the End-Up, a gay bar in San Francisco's South of Market district, are pleased to announce a recent victory in that case. Rather than face trial on Unfair Labor Practice charges at the NLRB, the End-Up bosses instead paid a modestly large amount to each Fellow Worker with a pending case in exchange for our dropping charges.

This is ironic in that our original grievances with the End-Up weren't about wages -- rather, they were about discriminatory hiring and firing practices, arbitrary firings, job security and some measure of control over the conditions in which we worked. When presented with a contract for negotiation, the End-Up bosses instead fired us, and we proceeded over the next several months to picket the deliveries during the day and the clubs at night. Management denied union involvement in the local press even as they retained a top-notch union-busting law firm and enjoined our recognitional picketing in federal court. Months later we filed our charges at the NLRB, and years later the bosses handed us the recognition of an out-of-court settlement.

The real victory at the End-Up, however, is that queer workers organized to fight back within our own community. As a ruling caste, gay establishment bosses simultaneously maintain a stranglehold on the community's resources while simultaneously proclaiming that "we're all family." Fiercely anti-union, gay bar owners also publish the local gay papers and own the boutiques in "our" neighborhood, where sometimes we get to work.

Many queer people come to this "gay Mecca" as refugees of the communities they left behind. Those under 18, often fleeing abusive homes and schools, commonly find that the only form of support available to them from the community is a job as a hustler or a ticket back home to get "fixed." Queers who are old enough to hold "real" jobs in the community once they get here find \$5-an-hour jobs, \$20 sets of freedom rings and rents that are among the highest in the country. A job in the community seems ideal at first because for many, it's the first time that they are accepted, and even an asset, in public. The honeymoon never lasts long, and neither do the jobs.

The situation is one in which the strengths of the IWW really shine through. The gay ghetto, and not just in S.F., is often very much like an industry in community clothing, a place in which the commodity produced and consumed is identity itself.

The unmitigated gall of homophobic bigots is matched in a very odd way by the bosses of the gay ghetto. Bashings and discrimination keep people fleeing to communities of identity in urban centers like San Francisco, in the hopes of building lives with some measure of freedom and safety. That means lots of new people, all the time, without pre-existing roots in the community and desperate for work to boot. It keeps wages low. It keeps people scared to rock such boat as there is, to talk back, or step out of line, for what such workers have to lose is their very sense of self.

Of course, when at last such workers are pushed too far they do talk back, an outgrowth of a feeling that develops over time of enfranchisement as a queer worker in a queer workplace in a queer community. Such workers are simply fired. The business unions, when they'll even approach a queer workplace, are smeared and marginalized by gay bosses as "straight" encroachment on the queer community's hard-won power of self-determination, such as it is or isn't. Often the organizing practices of business-style trade unions mesh nicely with the bosses' lies. Still many trade and other business-style unions have flourishing queer caucuses. But the gay-district businesses are overwhelmingly "union-free environments."

All of that is starting to change, however, and the End-Up struggle remains prominent in a new wave of organizing in both queer and other communities of identity. Most notably in San Francisco, the workers at the S.F. AIDS Foundation have been involved in a protracted, and public, unionization struggle with management there. The bosses at SFAF, while certainly hostile to the union and its organizers, have been very open to the idea in public, which is historically highly unusual. The labor contingent in the local Queer Parade in June has grown from six people in 1992 to hundreds last year.

The End-Up struggle was special in its particular kind of scale -- that of sheer tenacity! We picketed, worked the press and generally did whatever we could to bring pressure to bear on the bosses there for four months before even getting around to the NLRB. With the recognition of Teamsters' Joint Council #7 behind us, we stopped the liquor deliveries to the End-Up with our picket line. When scabs were employed to go get the beer with a U-Haul, we switched our pickets to the various clubs that occur in the bar at nights. In this way, we leafleted thousands of people in a highly-controversial, but safe and friendly way. (We never boycotted the clubs, just the bar itself. Though that makes for a weak boycott, it also makes a very clear and articulate point about what's really going on!) With a little press and a little outreach thrown in ... well, we didn't get our jobs back. But the local queer bosses sure have to think twice about fucking with unionization! Also, we have the added satisfactions of a large and growing contingent of self-identified queers in the IWW, the ongoing, radicalizing effects of our stand at the End-Up in queer communities, and ... oh yes! We made the bosses pay, too!

One of the most enduring lessons for me as an organizer at the End-Up was that victory doesn't have to be total to be really, really effective. Our approach, despite all the picketing, was to treat the situation more like a springboard than a barricade. This has been and continues to be a winning strategy. Had it been perhaps a more traditional picket line, in which everyone who crossed was a scab scab scab, we would have impressed maybe a dozen lefties in town, but no one else. Instead, our leaflets articulated the ideas of queers as workers and reached literally thousands of people who could take any inspiration gained wherever they chose to. When asked by reporters, "What can people do to support you," rather than a strident line of rhetoric we said "Think about what we're saying, and talk about it. Organize in

YOUR workplace!" and some of that has since happened. Having always approached it with an eye on the long haul, I can say that I look forward to the ongoing situation as it develops in people's ideas and lives, in an immediate sense as well as over the years.

Editor's Note: FW x341697 omitted to mention his generous dispersal of his part of the settlement in the form of Queer Labor Victory Fund. IWW organizers and activists in many different parts of the union send him our thanks and appreciation.