

## LGBTQ+ Activism and the Labor Rights Movement

*Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America*  
By Miriam Frank (Philadelphia: Temple U. Press, 2014)

Reviewed by Avery Pflieger

*Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America*, offers a uniquely detailed and powerful history of queer labor in the United States. Miriam Frank compiles interviews with over 100 LGBTQ+ workers as well as her personal research, case studies, and lived experience to provide a vivid picture of the experiences of queer people who came out (or stayed closeted) in the workplace, in unions, and in labor-related politics since the 1960s. She uses a storytelling approach to uplift the stories of the many people she interviewed and to thoroughly engage her audience.

Frank, an Adjunct Associate Professor of Humanities at New York University, spent many years researching this book. It follows her first publication, a handbook titled *Pride at Work: Organizing for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Unions*, which she co-authored with her wife Desma Holcomb in 1990. *Out in the Union* book offers rich information for labor activists and queer activists alike, while also keeping an accessible tone that makes it digestible for a wide range of academic and professional audiences. The book is especially relevant in 2023, as several states are passing anti-trans and homophobic legislation. It is important to understand the hard-fought history of LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms as the fight continues well into the 21st century.

Frank organizes the book in three sections: “Coming Out,” “Coalition Politics,” and “Conflict and Transformation.” In the first section, she discusses the breadth of experiences that queer people have when coming out in the workplace or in a union. The chapters in this section discuss harassment and comfortability for queer people in various fields as well as the political implications for LGBTQ+ leaders, board members, and election candidates. She begins with the story of an orphan girl in the year 1900 who took the name Bill, acted as a man, and worked for nine years as a boilermaker. Bill had a successful run and was even elected to union leadership for the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, which was, according to Frank, America’s first hint of gender or sexual variance in a union, let alone a union leader. The story is not unique to Bill; many queer people throughout history have changed their identity in order to fit in at work. Frank discusses many examples of gay men and lesbian women being each other’s dates to work events which their actual partners were not invited to attend. It is very common for gay and lesbian people to keep

their romantic lives very private from their coworkers to avoid risk of negative repercussions.

Part II, “Coalition Politics,” tackles the history of gay-labor alliances at a national and local level. These alliances have been essential in the process of earning legal protections for queer people in the workplace. Queer activists have ensured that gay issues are included in union bargaining. Frank provides the example of Proposition 6 in California, an initiative in the 1970s to fire all openly gay teachers as well as their allies. In response to this proposed legislation, unions, queer organizations, and several other groups came together to champion a large “No on 6” campaign which was ultimately successful. Through time, gay issues have been integrated more and more into union bargaining and grievances. The LGBTQ+ community has made several significant steps through collaboration with unions.

Part III, “Conflict and Transformation,” highlights groundbreaking gay-labor victories and movements. It discusses AIDS service centers in the 1990s, which were a huge source of employment for LGBTQ+ individuals. However, AIDS service center workers were overworked and underpaid. Their efforts to bargain were undermined by the antiunion consultants that worked with the governing boards. This section is very important because it admits that the road to LGBTQ+ labor rights has not been smooth, nor has it always been successful. Generally, Frank seems to prefer sharing successful steps toward equality, but there have been many obstacles on the path toward it, and those obstacles have also shaped the movement and changed the way that activists go about demanding change now. This section also begins to discuss the progression of gay-labor relations in the 21st century, concluding with optimistic views on the legalization of gay marriage.

Frank’s book uses anecdotes taken from interviews with LGBTQ+ -identifying individuals. She uses their stories to demonstrate the variety of environments that queer people have faced and endured across history. Some workplaces are inherently more queer than others, and thus some are more accepting and comfortable than others. For example, construction jobs tend to be very male dominated, yet they attract lesbians. In these kinds of jobs, a practice referred to by Frank as “dyke-baiting” is very common. Women in these positions are often all mocked and sexualized for

being gay, whether or not they are actually lesbians. In some cases, lesbians are accepted into the “brotherhood” dynamic of the workplace, and in other cases, they are sexualized and discriminated against. Frank also discusses jobs that naturally attract more gay men, naming Barneys in New York City as the “gayest union workplace ever.” She discusses the queerness of the workplace as well as their strong union efforts to win benefits, which were very successful. In 1996, they easily won same-sex partner benefits because so many of the union employees, who were essential to the operation of the business, were gay.

Frank argues that LGBT activism and labor politics did not easily go hand in hand from the beginning because the LGBTQ+ liberation movement has such a strong emphasis on individual expression, spontaneity, and informal community-based organization whereas labor unions are much more strict, formal, and conventional. However, the two movements found common ground and strong alliances were formed that have allowed for important wins in both queer and labor rights in the past several decades. She discusses the Coors boycott of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, and how queer and ethnic minority groups came together to combat employment discrimination. The protests were eventually very successful and in 1987 Coors negotiated a truce with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). In the 1990s, Coors formed several connections in the queer market and to this day has a close relation with queer communities. Throughout the book, Frank continues to give examples like these: ways in which queer activists have taken action through union membership and protests to demand their rights and benefits. The history of queer people in labor is long and complex but has become a powerful partnership that forces policy change against discrimination.

Her use of personal interviews as the basis of the book is a critical part of the reader’s experience. The shared stories, which Frank cites consistently throughout the book, are very engaging and offer an informal and friendly tone to the reader. Colloquial language and slang are used regularly in order to accurately represent the interviewees’ experiences. With that, the nature of this book is not empirical. It is not based on statistical analysis nor any kind of formal scientific or economic study. Frank’s experience in the Humanities Department of higher education is very apparent in her writing style, as she takes a more artistic approach than a technical one.

The use of informal language and slang could be very jarring to people outside of the LGBTQ+ community or to anyone otherwise unfamiliar or uncomfortable with reading about queer culture so openly. Frank’s interviewees openly discuss sex, slurs, and other experiences that are considered taboo to some audiences, and Frank did not exclude those elements from her retelling. For some readers, this book is a step outside of their comfort zone. Frank seems to be writing for a queer audience who to some degree already understands many of the nuances behind various slurs and harsh language as well as queer sex culture. Readers who do not

fit that description stand to learn a lot from *Out in the Union*, though they may encounter a few shocks during the process.

As Frank is a white cisgender queer woman, it is inevitable that her perspective is biased by her personal experience with queerness, which differs greatly from the experiences of people with other identities, especially non-white and transgender people. Although her thorough interviews with diverse LGBTQ+ workers help her to provide a multifaceted summary of queer labor history, the book still takes a predominantly white perspective. The book could benefit greatly from more racial minority voices. It also doesn’t go very in depth about class issues, which are a very prominent issue among the LGBTQ+ community. Race and class relate very strongly to the topic of this book because discrimination and activism are both inherently intersectional. Just as queer issues are not isolated from labor issues, race and class are also entangled with the two. If she touched on these issues more, her book would be persuasive to a much wider audience.

Ultimately, Frank’s book provides a powerful and inspiring history of queer voices and experiences in the labor movement. She underlines the unique struggles that queer workers face and the creative ways that they overcome them, while also shining a light on the tight connections between queer communities. It is a mostly anecdotal book and thus reads very differently than a standard academic history. It is not necessarily an all-encompassing history, but it is an emotionally gripping one. Queer audiences will find something to connect to in this book, and all labor activists stand to benefit from reading about the queer perspective on labor rights. Beyond being an informative resource about the intersection of the queer and labor rights movements, *Out in the Union* is an inspiring tale of the strength of queer communities across the past several decades.

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