

Civil rights struggles live on in fight for marriage equality

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Guest Columnist

Forty-six years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a 250,000-person march on Washington, D.C. to demand that black people be granted the same rights as white people. At that historic march, Dr. King shared his vision for a different world – a world in which humanity would no longer be divided by ignorance and hatred. On Sunday, roughly 200,000 people followed his example and once again marched on Washington to bring his dream closer to fruition. Drawing inspiration from the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s that prepared the way for the nation's first black president, protesters, many of them young people in their 20s and 30s, arrived from all over the nation to declare that the right to marry whom they choose is a fundamental civil right.

The new generation of civil rights activists, referred to variously as Stonewall 2.0 or the Prop. 8 Generation and represented by virtually every race, spiritual tradition and progressive political tradition, has grown weary of Congress' inability to protect its rights and has decided to take the struggle for equality back into the streets. This shift from traditional lobbying to a mass movement was not greeted warmly by Congress or its lobbyists, including those who claim to favor equal rights.

While the conservatives recycled their usual rhetoric about the "sanctity of marriage," self-proclaimed progressives in Washington have also criticized the younger generation's efforts to mobilize outside of the political establishment.

Barney Frank, the second openly-gay member of the House, vociferously opposed the march, arguing, "I don't want people patting themselves on the back for doing something that is useless. Barack Obama does not need pressure."

Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, urged the march's organizers to support President Obama who, in Solmonese's words, has "the most power to effect change."

Many of the activists in Equality Across America, the organization primarily responsible for coordinating the march, disagreed with Frank and Solmonese's assessments of Obama.

Citing instances such as the Obama administration's decision to defend DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) in court and the president's failure to offer a timetable on his promise to eliminate "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," proponents of equal rights for persons of all sexual orientations decided they were no longer willing to leave their civil rights in the hands of Washington's political establishment.

While many acknowledged the need to continue to pressure Congress to support civil rights reforms, they also discussed other ways to bring the struggle for equality into local communities. Several speakers represented movements for marriage equality in the labor community and posited that the struggle for equal rights should involve the nation's working people because they often suffer the worst effects of discrimination, because labor is the single most powerful force in the nation.

Many of the activists who marched Sunday still plan to encourage lobbying efforts in their communities, but they seem to have more faith in organized labor and other progressive movements than they do in Congress or the White House. This growing support for mass mobilization and labor unions among progressives seems to signify widespread loss of faith in a party that has failed to deliver anything from affordable health care to equal rights for homosexual, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered persons, even after winning the White House and a Congressional majority.

Perhaps the new generation of civil rights advocates is beginning to understand the meaning of Dr. King's observation: "Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle."

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