

# How our union is becoming a first among equals

As three union members prepare to represent Community at July's TUC Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender conference, we find out how they think Community should move its equality agenda forward

**Andy Harvey, Trevor Skingle and Michael Laffan (pictured left) met when they worked together at the UK Coalition for People living with HIV and AIDS (UKC). That's also where they joined Community.**

'We needed help with workplace problems,' explained Michael. 'Bigger unions seemed impersonal and Community seemed more family like – we felt we'd have more contact with senior officials and more say in how the LGBT agenda could develop. We were impressed with what they did to support us during a tough time but unfortunately UKC went under,' added Trevor. 'However, many of our colleagues joined Community and are still members.'

'The UKC had a large lesbian and gay contingent and I think the organising initiative there acted as a springboard for Community,' commented Andy. 'That and its growing diversity are pushing equality and LGBT issues to the fore.'

All three volunteered to attend the TUC LGBT conference. 'It's the UK's largest gathering of LGBT activists so it is vital that Community has a presence and a voice there,' explained Andy. Michael added: 'It's an opportunity to speak to the TUC's general council about the concerns of LGBT workers and what could be done, to meet other LGBT activists and to discuss the progress of anti-discrimination legislation and union policies that aim to progress LGBT rights.'

There has been significant progress over the last few years including: the 2006 Equality Act which outlaws discrimination in the provision of goods and services, 2005 saw the Civil Partnership Act 2005 largely establish equal recognition of registered same sex relationships.

The main piece of workplace legislation was the 2003 Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) regulations protecting lesbian and gay workers against discrimination at work on the grounds of sexual orientation. However research shows that five years on around 55,000 people believed they'd lost their jobs because of their sexuality, nearly half report discrimination at work because of it and around 40 per cent believe it affected their recruitment. And that's not to mention the name calling and subtle workplace harassment that goes on under the 'having a laugh' banner.

Andy said there was a role for the union in 'ensuring that what is agreed in principle is put into practice and that it needs to be done on a day-to-day level by educating employers, reps and workers.' After all, as Trevor commented 'education is more than

just skilling up people to find a new job, it's about educating people about other groups in the community and how they can work together.'

'It's vital that we ensure all parts of the union are able to deal confidently with LGBT issues,' said Andy. 'For example, you may be a gay worker in the manufacturing industry and while your union rep isn't homophobic he may not feel confident about dealing with all your issues. But if reps had specific LGBT training then we'd have better support. Members from different minority groups could play a role in feeding into that training.'

Empowering gay workers to feel comfortable about 'coming out' to workmates, family and friends could be another support role for Community. 'It can be small gestures like reps putting up posters, having leaflets on site or details on the union website to support members who want to come out,' said Michael.

'We need to reach out to LGBT members from within the union and outside it,' he added. 'It would be a powerful statement if there were an LGBT representative on Community's NEC – there are places for women members and members with disabilities why not LGBT members?' Outside the union, all three believe that Community could do more to campaign and lobby government over LGBT issues and wider equality issues, both in the UK and internationally through its links with union federations.

This isn't really an issue relevant to me, you might be thinking. National officer Joe Mann begs to differ. 'Equality is not a minority concern, it matters to us all. We may all face barriers to participating fully in society and, as a union, we must be representative of all our members.' Michael added: 'If we want to attract younger members into the union we need to embrace the equality agenda or there is a danger the union could be seen as a dinosaur, behind the times – which could be very off putting for young people wanting to get involved.'

'An equality agenda is about working with difference rather than getting rid of it,' said Joe. By working with difference there is a chance to try and influence and engage with biases. And that is what Community will continue to do.'

**Community is developing a network of LGBT members to tackle these issues in the union and beyond. For more information you can email: [LGBT@community-tu.org](mailto:LGBT@community-tu.org), [www.andyharveyetc.co.uk](http://www.andyharveyetc.co.uk), [trevor.skingle@hotmail.com](mailto:trevor.skingle@hotmail.com) or [mlaffan@gmail.com](mailto:mlaffan@gmail.com).**

