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'We Shall Overcome' Gay/lesbian rights bill fails 18-30 in Council

By Tracy Baim
and William Burks

The Chicago City Council Tuesday voted down the 13-year-old gay and lesbian rights legislation which would have added sexual orientation protections in employment, housing and public accommodations. The vote was 18 for, 30 against, and two aldermen were absent.

After the vote, gays and lesbians, singing "We Shall Overcome," slowly left the City Council chambers, vowing to remember those who voted against the human rights code amendment, and also strongly thanking the supporters of the legislation.

As aldermen left City Hall, those who supported the bill were cheered and anti-rights voters were verbally harassed for their "betrayal" of civil rights.

"While we are disappointed with today's decision, we are not surprised," said Linda Leslie in a prepared statement to the press after the vote. "Every civil rights movement in this country has had its setbacks, some much greater than this."

Hundreds of gays and lesbians and their supporters lined up in the early morning to get seats in the Council chambers. The lower and upper levels were packed with pro-rights people, while about a dozen of the anti-rights protesters (led by Rev. Hiram Crawford) were scattered throughout the chambers.

The actual Council vote, taken late in the day, was 30 against and 18 for (Ald. Dorothy Tillman did not originally vote—she later voted "yes"), with Ald. Miguel Santiago and Ald. Ed Burke absent from the proceedings (Burke had a case in federal court).

Ald. Anna Langford, when casting her "yes" vote, said she did so "proudly." As she was leaving the chambers, she shouted at Rev. Crawford that he was a "sanctimonious bigot." Langford was strongly cheered as she left the Council.

Langford, after her positive support for the legislation, told the media she will be retiring after this year. She said she hopes she gets another chance to vote on gay and lesbian rights before next April.

Coming off a strong community showing at Sunday night's Daley Center rights vigil [see story page 2], gays and lesbians showed their disappointment after the vote, but their resolve was as strong, if not stronger, than ever.

"We are not disappointed with our friends in the Council," Leslie said. "We are proud of their steadfast support. We are proud of Mayor Washington for his clear and consistent backing of our position. The gay and lesbian community will remember its friends, and we will help them."

"Gays and lesbians in this city have emerged united from this struggle. We have come through this with greater resolve, stronger and angrier," she said.

Aldermen Martin Oberman, David Orr, Burton Natarus, Bernie Hansen, and Jerome Orbach each defended the gay and lesbian legislation, while Aldermen Roman Pucinski and Aloysius Majerczyk voiced their opposition, saying it would give special rights to gays and lesbians, while infringing on the rights of parents, schools, and daycare centers.

Oberman introduced the measure, without amendment, to the full Council Tuesday. He said the legislation does not single out "homosexuals, lesbians or bisexuals for special treatment." Instead, he said, it does the opposite, making all citizens subject to the same, fair, non-discrimination treatment. He stressed that it does not advocate or urge any particular lifestyle or orientation, heterosexual or homosexual.

Orr said he views this as a simple issue in terms of civil rights. He said "choosing discrimination should not be protected by the

law," which it is without this legislation. "We are trying to become a more tolerant society," he said.

Natarus said this is a difficult issue, "not an issue designed to bring people together. Every one of us is loyal to one's religion...but you can't mix the two...civil with theocracy. There always has to be a wall, a partition." When religion and law are mixed, he said, it "leads to our downfall."

Several times during the proceedings, gays and lesbians interrupted the session with applause (including on issues relating to the non-partisan mayoral election referendum, which was apparently set back Tuesday when the Mayor's forces voted in other referendums for the November ballot).

Some aldermen who were previously wavering on their support of the bill, including Niles Sherman, Ed Smith, and Marlene Carter, voted against it, saying their constituency was far too against this legislation. Apparently, this was at least part of the reason Santiago did not show for Tuesday's vote, not wanting to commit either way on this issue.

In opposing the legislation, Ald. Soliz, in a prepared press statement issued Tuesday, said Aldermen Gutierrez and Garcia were voting as a "political convenience" favoring Mayor Harold Washington, and their vote was "not a reflection of the Hispanic community," which is "100 percent" based on religion.

"What I can't understand," he concluded in the release, printed entirely in Spanish, "is how they could support this social scum who will negatively effect the future education of our children."

Continuing her statement, Leslie said, "Today marks not the defeat of gay rights in Chicago, but a new beginning in the struggle for those rights."

"Gays and lesbians make up between 10 and 20 percent of this city's population; between now and November, we will register at least 20,000 new gay and lesbian voters—voters who will reward our friends in City Hall, and who will let our opponents know that the time for hatred and discrimination is gone."

"We make a commitment today to every alderman who voted "yes"—not present, not absent, not to table—but a clear "yes" for our rights... Gay rights won't go away. This issue will come back to Council chambers. It'll be a factor in February [when all 50 aldermen are up for election]. It will continue to involve all of us until the city of Chicago has passed a gay rights' bill," Leslie said.

Letter against compromise

On Monday of this week, organizers and members of a coalition of gays, lesbians and bisexuals in favor of passage of the rights legislation presented the City Council and Mayor Harold Washington with a letter bearing more than 350 signatures.

Before the Tuesday vote, other supporters of the legislation appeared to be negotiating possible "compromise" amendments meant to garner more aldermanic votes on the bill. However, a large, vocal segment of the community opposed any compromise, preferring know who the "true" supporters were. In addition, any attempted compromise amendment (outside of something which would define what the phrase "sexual orientation" means) was viewed as placing gay and lesbian protections in a second class position to other civil rights.

The letter against compromise demanded a Tuesday vote on the bill, and it also declared that any attempt by any of the aldermen to amend the bill, to table it, or to send it back to committee "would be considered a vote against us."

Ald. Oberman brought the bill up without any amendments and it was voted on after only about 15 minutes of debate.



Achy Obejas, at Sunday night's candlelight vigil, makes a strong plea for community efforts to unseat aldermen who would vote against us Tuesday. Photos: William Burks



Gay and lesbian rights supporters packed the upper and lower levels of the City Council Chambers Tuesday, with just a handful of anti-rights protesters scattered throughout.

Ald. Smith ward meeting

Ald. Ed Smith of the 28th Ward held a community meeting Thursday, July 24, to discuss the pending civil rights bill. Unfortunately, the vote at the end of the evening was 68 against, 15 for the bill. Smith said this vote would be "part of" his considerations on his vote Tuesday, but that he would be "going out into the community" to further understand where his constituents stand on this issue.

"I am not in office to be re-elected," he had said after the meeting. "I am here to do what's right."

On Tuesday, Smith voted against the bill. The meeting got heated after initial speeches by Chris Cothran, Jim Flint, Ald. Bernie Hansen, and Ed Smith, as well as a man

opposed to the bill on religious grounds.

Opposition during the evening was emotional and based on religious teachings. Two Evangelical ministers stood strongly opposed to the legislation, one presenting a "cured" homosexual young man before the crowd.

Smith said he has never gotten as many calls or visits from constituents as he has on this issue.

Groups endorse gay rights

Despite the opposition of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, the Moody Bible Institute, and some Evangelical and Orthodox Jewish leaders, many Roman Catholic and other religious groups and individuals are endorsing strong gay and lesbian civil rights legislation.

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