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Protest targets conference at Hyatt

Gay-rights, union groups rally at downtown hotel

By [Tanya Mannes](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Nelvin C. Cepeda / Union-Tribune

Gay-rights activists and union members rallied yesterday at the front entrance of the Manchester Grand Hyatt. The American Historical Association was holding its annual conference at the hotel, despite a boycott.



Photo by Nelvin C. Cepeda - Union-Tribune

Sean Bohac (left) and Kelsey Hoffman greeted each other after meeting at the rally yesterday outside the Manchester Grand Hyatt Hotel on Harbor Drive. Gay-rights groups are boycotting the hotel.

Waving signs reading: “We All Deserve the Freedom to Marry,” more than 200 gay-rights activists and union members representing hotel employees rallied outside the Manchester Grand Hyatt on Saturday in the latest protest over the owner’s support for a ban on gay marriage.

The protesters banged on drums and waved rainbow flags while chanting “Boycott the Hyatt — Check! Out! Now!”

The rally targeted the American Historical Association, which decided to hold its annual conference this week at the Grand Hyatt despite an ongoing boycott.

About 4,000 association members — a tweedy mix of college professors, history teachers and librarians — are attending the conference that organizers decided to hold rather than pay steep cancellation penalties.

Some conference participants joined in protest on Saturday. One was Joseph Varga, 46, assistant professor of

labor studies at Indiana University, who showed his support for the boycott by wearing a sign around his neck reading: “Angry queer historian.”

While other groups — including the Association of American Law Schools in January 2009 — have responded to the boycott by scaling back or canceling activities at the Hyatt, the history scholars saw the gay-marriage issue as a chance for discussion.

Convention organizers created sessions on various aspects of matrimony, including how its definition has changed over time.

Marie McDaniel, 30, from the doctoral program in early-American history at the University of California Davis, said she regretted that moving the conference elsewhere wasn't an option.

“I think that while many historians are in support of (the boycott), it would hurt them more than the hotel,” she said, “so they decided to do what historians can do, which is increase dialogue.”

McDaniel said she gave a presentation on intermarriage in the 18th century, showing the evolution of attitudes about such unions. For example, she said, German Lutherans used to marry only within the faith, but eventually some married Anglicans and “that was no longer seen as so awful,” she said.

The Manchester Grand Hyatt has been the subject of a boycott since developer Doug Manchester, who is a Roman Catholic, contributed \$125,000 to the campaign for Proposition 8, the successful ballot initiative that banned same-sex marriage in California.

Kelly Commerford, director of marketing for the Hyatt, said the ongoing protests are “more of a nuisance than anything else.” He said Hyatt is a gay-friendly organization, as shown by policies such as domestic-partner benefits.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups started the boycott. Local unions have their own disputes with Manchester over labor issues at the nonunion hotel, which has 900 employees. The unions object to what they describe as excessive workloads for housekeepers; they also want to ensure job security if the hotel eventually is sold.

Commerford contended that the unions just want money, estimating that the hotel-workers union Unite Here would get \$2.2 million a year in dues if the hotel were organized. He said the workers don't want a union and

noted that the housekeepers have a 4.5 percent turnover rate, much lower than the industry average.

Cleve Jones, who works with Unite Here and has been active in gay-rights advocacy, said the boycott won't end until certain demands are met, including a public apology from Manchester and labor concessions.


“The solution is for Mr. Manchester to sit down with the community,” Jones said. “There is no one single demand to end the boycott.”

Manchester says on his Web site that he is “sorry for the pain and conflict I have caused” and that he is not anti-gay.

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