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Historians Reject Proposed Boycott

January 5, 2009

Scholarly meetings over the next few years can be expected to feature numerous panels on gay rights, gay marriage and family law, and not just because these are hot issues in American society. The American Historical Association on Sunday became the latest scholarly group to reject a push by members to boycott a hotel or city tied to the movement against gay rights -- but members rejected the idea only when an alternative idea was presented involving numerous sessions at the 2010 meeting.

The historians' vote was similar to moves by the National Communication Association and the [American Political Science Association](#), which stuck with planned locations but pledged to add programming to assert their opposition to anti-gay measures. The [Association of American Law Schools](#), while not calling off a contract with a hotel at the center of the controversy, is scheduling official events for its meeting this week at an adjoining hotel.

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The hotel in question is also the headquarters hotel for next year's AHA meeting -- the Manchester Grand Hyatt, in San Diego. Its owner, Doug Manchester, was a major contributor to the campaign on behalf of Proposition 8, which barred gay marriage in California. Gay rights groups -- along with some labor groups that object to the hotel's treatment of its workers -- have banded together to call for boycotting the hotel, and some academics have said that they would not attend meetings in such venues. The AHA, like most scholarly groups, negotiates contracts for convention hotels years in advance -- and in this case well before the hotel became controversial because of its owner.

[The resolution](#) presented at the AHA's business meeting called for a boycott, stating that "the AHA should hold its annual meetings in venues that uphold the anti-discrimination standards that the AHA expects from academic professionals."

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Arnita Jones, executive director of the AHA, said that under the contract with the hotel, the association would owe \$534,000 for breaking the deal now. The association would also lose another \$181,000 in lost discounts negotiated with the hotel for meeting room equipment and related services, she said.

Nobody at the meeting defended Manchester or Proposition 8, but as soon as the resolution came up for discussion, a proposal emerged to replace it with an alternative. That plan, later adopted instead of the boycott, called for the association to create many special programs about issues related to gay marriage and to place those sessions in the Manchester Grand Hyatt to make a statement against the hotel's owner.

Further, the alternative called for the association to spend up to \$100,000 to support these programs as well as anything necessary to make it possible for people to stay at alternative hotels and to find transportation to and from the Manchester. The job center -- where departments conduct interviews -- is at an adjacent hotel, so AHA officials assured members that job seekers and those doing interviews next year could stay out of the Manchester if they wished.

Some historians objected to the alternative to the boycott, saying that if the AHA leaders really cared, they would have offered the plan before the boycott proposal arrived, and adding that they didn't want to give their money to Manchester.

Barbara Weinstein, a professor of history at New York University who is a past AHA president and who sponsored the alternative to the boycott, said that breaking the contract with the hotel wouldn't help anyone but Doug Manchester. "If we boycott, he gets more money," she said. "He will be getting our money no matter what." But the plan to hold sessions on gay rights issues at the hotel "thumbs our nose" at Manchester without "coming close to bankrupting our association," she said.

One scholar said he wasn't satisfied with this response. "I write about gender and sexuality. I am not going to talk and sit in the hotel of a homophobe," he said.

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Most of the historians, however, accepted the compromise. The vote to replace the boycott with the alternative passed overwhelmingly.

— **Scott Jaschik**

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