

Shane Enright: LAGER (Lesbian and Gay Employment Rights). LGSM (Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners). Gay issues and Trade Unions. Section 28. London Lesbian and Gay Centre.

SHANE ENRIGHT

Clare (C) interviewing Shane (S)

Extract 1: Track 1: 26.14 – 30.14

LAGER (LESBIAN AND GAY EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS)

S: John Saunders was a caretaker in a Scottish school who was sacked because of the prejudice of parents about his risk to children and the employment appeal tribunal upheld that it was reasonable for the employer, in this case the local authority, to act on the prejudices of the parents, even where, it could be demonstrated in this tribunal, those prejudices were not based on fact. So it set a terribly dangerous precedent. So against all of that background, and against the background of being active in my union and being concerned about worker's rights, a number of us came together from law centres and from union activism to establish something called LAGER. Lesbian and Gay Employment Rights, and this was in the days when the GLC was doshing out vast amounts of money to supposedly progressive causes, sometimes without any due diligence whatsoever. And so we applied to set up a project to promote lesbian and gay employment rights and ... and once that was confirmed that we were going to get the funding, I um, resigned from the founding board, subsequently applied to be an employee in LAGER, and became the founding employee of LAGER ...

C: Brilliant.

S: And this was in 1983.

C: And where was that based?

S: LAGER was based in Southbank House in Vauxhall, which is where it remained for the following 16, 17 years, however long it existed, and as soon as I got into LAGER as an employee, so I was a founder ... one of the ... they employed two lesbian workers and two gay workers, and we were autonomous, and so I was one of the gay founding employees in LAGER. As soon as I got into LAGER immediately a series of pretty critical problems came up, and that was a fundamentally different philosophical conceptual view between the lesbians and the gay men. The erm ... my ambition, supported to some extent by my fellow gay worker, was to say "What we need to do is to change the power of relationship in employment so that workers have more power so that they can assert their power rather than be reliant on the patronage of the employer, and the way in which you shift that balance is through trade unions. Trade unions are the vehicle by which workers can assert their rights, and therefore, to the extent that trade unions aren't taking LGBT rights seriously, what we need to do is to support changes in the Labour movement, in the Trade Union movement in order that trade unions bring their considerable resources to defend their lesbian and gay members in the same way as they'll defend other members." At that point the trade union movement was at its zenith, yeah? Thirteen million.

C: This would be mid '80s?

S: No, no '81, we're talking, no '83. '83. Trade union membership peaked in '79, still a phenomenal force. So my whole approach was to support lesbian and gay men who were self-organising in their own unions to first find their confidence but then find their voice to press for changes in policies and resources and um, approach within the trade union movement and that's what I was also doing in my own union, bearing in mind because I'd come from a branch that was unusually progressive I had a safer space than I knew some of the print-workers and bus-workers had when they were doing the same.

Extract 2: 40.38 – 45.52

LGSM. ACCEPTANCE OF LESBIANS AND GAY ISSUES WITHIN THE UNIONS. SECTION

C: At what point did the unions sort of go from tolerating these random gay and lesbian groups to actually understanding the cause?

S: A lot of focus has been placed on, you know, the story that you see in *Pride*, the movie. So, and that ... narrative is a linear narrative. It goes as follows: During the miner's dispute these isolated radical lesbians and gays went to the pits, formed a relationship with the pit communities, a consequence of which the National Union of Mineworkers, then a big union, decided that it would back lesbian and gay rights at the TUC, and in the Labour party, and as a consequence of that the Labour party adopted a policy, and as a consequence of that there was a shift in attitudes. Now, I think that ... there's nothing wrong with that story, and I was part of the LGSM - except that it's incomplete, because I think that the radical change didn't come from a bunch of gay liberationists, and bear in mind I'd been one, somehow having a dialogue with completely isolated different communities. I actually believe it came from all the work that had been done within the unions by people that were lesbian and gay shop stewards. People like myself who had been busy organising in the voluntary sector and bringing a lot of people into the union, by our sympathetic allies, often the women's officers in unions, um, and by the sort of confidence building autonomous lesbian and gay groups that were set up within unions. If you can see moments of transition, I'd say there were two. One was around 1980, when the first public sector unions adopted policies in support of gay rights, and by the way, it was only lesbian and gay rights in those days ...

C: Which big unions were they? Do you remember?

S: NALGO – huge. Public sector. COHSE the health union, a huge public sector, um, and NATFE which was the union of teachers. So public sector, public sector, public sector, public sector. And then the second big shift happened in 1989, and I'm proud to say I was part of that, and that was when the first male-dominated manual trade union adopted a policy of lesbian and gay rights, other than the NUM. The NUM policy had come from a very particular experience, and that was when the Transport and General Workers Union, with 1.8 million members – dominant union in the docks, dominant union in the bus industry, dominant union in auto manufacturing, dominant union in food processing, dominant union in agriculture, adopted a policy in support of um, lesbian and gay rights.

C: And what led them to do that?

S: Well, I moved the resolution, and the resolution was ... was ... had come from a sort of rank and file network of progressive trade unionists that were spread around the country, so we got a lot of branches behind us. The slogan of our conference that year was very helpful for me, it was "Stronger because we care." But it had also happened in the context in which um, we'd just had the start of Section 28, um, and the teaching unions were in uproar about Section 28. That was in '88, wasn't it? So we just ... we'd just had that. We'd also had the situation where the John Saunders case that I'd mentioned earlier, this 1979 or thereabouts, industrial tribunal precedent had been used to sack a variety of other straight workers. No connection to sexuality, you know? One guy was sacked because he was epileptic, on the basis that the prejudice that someone had about being epileptic, you know? So what had happened you know was that clever trade unionists were able to see not only was there this assault coming from Thatcher on the working class as a whole, and the miners had been defeated, and we'd had Eddy Shah in Warrington before and we were about to have the Wapping dispute and all the rest of it, but also the ... the Tories, they would argue, were very cynically exploiting prejudice against homosexuals to create and undermine people's solidarity and people's rights.

So I think that with just a ... um, and there was a "We've got to be in it together." There was that sort of mood in the movement at the time. So I think '80s ... the public sector unions laid the groundwork, then, you know, '89 Transport and General Workers Union, and then a whole bunch of other unions followed like ... like dominos.