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'Call in gay' in Utah? You could be fired

Protest today » Activists hope to change that as anti-Prop 8 backlash continues.

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Utah lesbians and gays who join a national movement and skip work today by "calling in gay" are risking their jobs. Besides missing a shift in a slumping economy during the holiday season, employees can be fired in the Beehive State simply for being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT).

Equality Utah, as part of its Common Ground Initiative, is hoping the Legislature changes that in 2009 by making it illegal -- in a bill sponsored by Rep. Christine Johnson, D-Salt Lake City -- to dismiss workers because of their sexual orientation.

"There certainly is that risk" of being fired for calling in gay to work, said Mike Thompson, executive director of Equality Utah. "Consideration for employment or promotion in the workplace ... should be based on performance and not on a person's sexual orientation or gender identity."

Melva Sine, president of the Utah Restaurant Association, said she is familiar with today's "Day Without a Gay" work stoppage, but her industry isn't expecting a significant problem with absenteeism.

"Those who do have jobs feel fortunate," Sine said, adding that she does not think an employee would be at risk for termination for coming out as gay. "A good employee is an asset, and it doesn't matter what other types of affiliations they have."

Today's "Day Without a Gay" -- scheduled to coincide with International Human Rights Day and modeled after similar protests by Latino immigrants -- is the brainchild of Sean Hetherington, a West Hollywood comedian and personal trainer, and his boyfriend, Aaron Hartzler.

The couple learned that a few gay-rights activists were calling for a daylong strike to protest California voters' passage last month of Proposition 8, which reversed a state Supreme Court decision allowing gay marriage. They decided it would be better if people performed community service instead of staying home.

But not all gay-rights activists are signing on.

"It's extra-challenging for people to think about taking off work as a form of protest, given that we are talking about people who may not be out [as gay] at work, and given the current economic situation and job market," Jules Graves, 38, coordinator of the Colorado Queer Straight Alliance, told The Associated Press. "There is really not any assurance employers would appreciate it for what it is."

For Utahns willing to skip work today, four groups in Salt Lake City, Logan and Park City are offering volunteer opportunities. At the Utah Pride Center, they can tie white, "marriage equality ribbons," assemble "safer-sex kits" to help prevent HIV/AIDS or share a personal story of discrimination that could be used to bolster Equality Utah's Common Ground Initiative.

LIFE, a Utah State University gay-straight student club, plans a silent protest in Logan, Join the Impact Park City will hold a food drive, and Salt Lake City's Atticus Circle encourages gay and transgender people to write a letter, asking a straight friend, neighbor or colleague to take a public stand for gay rights.

"There will be some people who will take this to that length" of missing work, said Valerie Larabee, executive director of the Utah Pride Center. But others, she added, can show their support by doing community service after work, attending Salt Lake City's International Human Rights Day festivities or participating in Sunday's LGBT Town Hall meeting.

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The Associated Press contributed to this story.

LGBT Town Hall Meeting

» **What:** An informational and strategy meeting to discuss the efforts of various LGBT groups, including Equality Utah and the Utah Pride Center. There will be time for attendees to share questions, suggestions and complaints.

» **Where:** Tower Theatre, 876 E. 900 South, Salt Lake City.

» **When:** Sunday, noon to 2 p.m.

Today's protest

For more information, visit <http://daywithoutagay.org>.

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