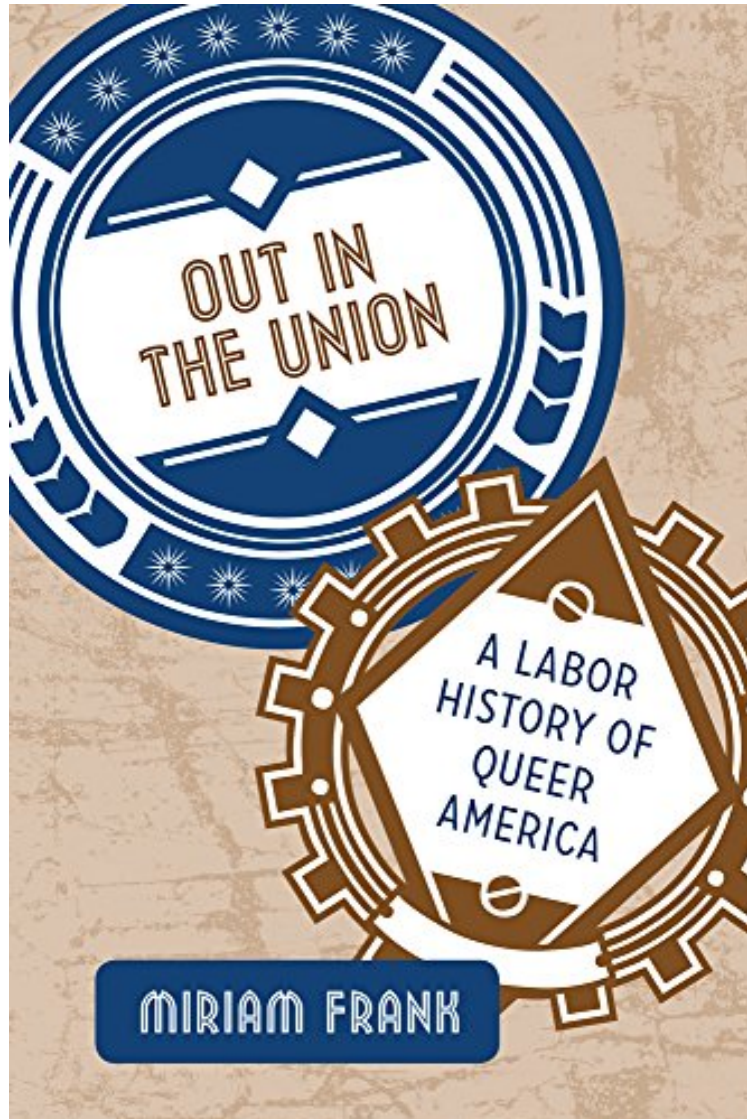


(Free) Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America

Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America

Miriam Frank

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Miriam Frank : Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Frank writes with candor, both about the successful queer-labor alliances and the unsuccessful onesBy B R SandersOUT IN THE UNION, by Miriam Frank, traces the intersections between the gay rights movement and the labor movement in America. The history is drawn largely from interviews with queer labor activists, and Frank quotes them at length throughout the book, giving her work the feeling of an oral history, ethnography or series of case studies. She provides contextualizing information, but OUT IN THE UNION

largely defers to the activists who pushed their movements forward. As such, the book is deeply personal and specific rather than comprehensive. This is not a book that provides a dry and complete overview of queer-labor activism, but instead is a love letter to the victories and efforts of the people who lived that activism. The book opens with the story of a trans man in a steelworkers union at the turn of the twentieth century. From there, the book leaps forward to cover how the emergent gay rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s was embraced (or not) as the labor movement sought to reinvent itself as manufacturing jobs moved first out of pro-union states and then out of the United States altogether. The hidden histories of queer workers prior to the 1960s are sparse in the text, emerging as context or as discrete moments in the interviewees' lives. Prior to *OUT IN THE UNION*, I was familiar with Frank's work through *Pride at Work*, a pamphlet my own union used to better understand how and why to organize the QUILTBAG folks in our own ranks. This was years ago, back when I saw myself as a straight ally (back before I was out to anyone, even myself). The ethos of *Pride at Work* continues here: this is a book about organizing. The economics of unionization are supplanted by a blow-by-blow description of how various workplaces were or were not organized into unions. Frank remains an organizer at heart, and much of the book is devoted to recounts of how labor was able to use the particularities of an emerging queer activist culture to gain new ground or make new allies. In the case studies she presents which range from bus drivers to auto workers to AIDS crisis workers she uses organizing terms freely. Her target audience, clearly, are queer organizers out on the front lines, which necessarily limits the accessibility and audience of the book, which I think is a shame. It may find its audience out there in the front line, but from my experience working as a labor organizer there is little time to read even relevant and potentially useful books. Reading *OUT IN THE UNION* was, for me, a particularly reflective and personal experience. Like many of the interviewees, I struggled with my own sexuality as I worked as a labor organizer. Fraught memories of coming to terms with my queerness are inextricably tied to the rollercoaster highs and lows of the organizing campaigns I worked for. Two regions which feature prominently in the book are southeast Michigan and Colorado respectively why I, myself, was a campaign organizer and where I live now. Reading this book made me miss working in unions. It made me remember how hard that work is, and how necessary. It made me reflect (in a prescient and timely way given certain conditions current in my workplace today) on my discomfort living as a queer and unorganized person in a right-to-work state. I feel vulnerable, and even more so as a gender nonconforming queer individual. I feel vulnerable, like the people Frank records, and I want to fight back like they did and still are. Frank writes with candor, both about the successful queer-labor alliances and the unsuccessful ones. Some were unsuccessful because the old guard of union leadership typically straight white men in the skilled labor trades struggled with creating space for and valuing the efforts of their queer brothers and sisters. Some were unsuccessful because a common source of oppression bonds communities together; Frank cites the climate in AIDS clinics where queer management overworked and exploited queer workers, but the workers viewed straight union agents as suspicious interlopers. Frank uses the crossover of queer activism and the labor movement as a way to begin talking about class within the queer community. She points out more than once that queer people have always existed among the working class and in unions. She points out that being queer does not prevent managers from exploiting their workers. I was glad she used this lens throughout, but I wish she had taken it further. The book reads I believe unintentionally as very white. A handful of the interviewed activists are people of color, but most are white queer people. Given the layers of vulnerability queer poor workers of color face, it would have been a better book if race and class had both been discussed in relation to queer workers. In the epilogue, Frank cites the need for the labor movement to utilize queer immigrant workers to help reform immigration laws, but this is posited mostly as an aside. *OUT IN THE UNION* ends with an epilogue tracing how the support of unions has helped marriage equality legislation get passed in multiple states. Frank uses this as a call to arms and a call to action to increase queer-labor joint activism. And while I appreciate that, I wish she had gone further. Marriage is not the only economic issue facing queer workers. Trans* workers are extremely vulnerable, often fired and rarely hired. I am, admittedly, less impressed or enthralled by the marriage equality movement, especially given that the fight has played out in legislative venues rather than in the workplace or on the streets. But, then again, most labor fights these days play out that way.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars
By Oliver L. A really interesting take on an aspect of both labor and queer history that is commonly overlooked.
0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Out in the Union: LGBTQ workers fight for dignity by Miriam Frank
By Ken Nash
Book review Out in the Union: LGBTQ workers fight for dignity
Frank interweaves hundreds of vignettes and her oral histories of rank-and-file workers in retail, construction, telephone, postal, civil service - including DC 37 - and other fields to bring alive their complex struggles for survival on the shop floor level
Miriam Frank begins her new book "Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America" with the story of Bill, an early 20th century St. Louis woman who lived her life as a man, hiding her sex and sexual orientation. Working as a locomotive engineer repairer, she even was elected secretary of her union. Like Bill, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) workers for most of the last century hide their true selves from their bosses, coworkers and union coworkers, always testing the waters to see who it was safe to trust in a culture dominated by sexism and homophobia. Frank interweaves hundreds of vignettes and her oral histories of rank-and-file workers in retail, construction, telephone, postal, civil service - including DC 37 - and other fields to bring alive their complex struggles for survival on the shop floor level. Change accelerated in 1969 with the

Stonewall Uprising, when police invaded a gay bar in the West Village and "Queer America" fought back. A new period of militancy propelled a gay pride movement that extended to giving support to LGBTQ workers fighting for pride at work and to form caucuses and committees in their unions, like DC 37's LAGIC, to make changes at work. LGBTQ workers often fought alongside civil rights and other labor insurgents, which invigorated a conservative labor movement. Increasingly, gay union leadership emerged such as Judy Mage, a leader in the 1965 Welfare Workers strike and Mary Kaye Henry, now president of SEIU. They won crucially important contractual victories to protect themselves against harassment and discrimination, especially important given the lack of federal legal protections; domestic partner benefits and AIDS education. Increasingly LGBTQ workers demanded respect in the workplace, and for their unions to fight for their rights at work and in society at-large. This strengthened both the labor and gay rights movements. NYU Prof. Miriam Frank was one of the most popular teachers in the Cornell Union Womens' Studies program at DC 37. In telling the story of the LGBTQ workers struggle she uses her teaching skills to weave together multiple stories illustrating their amazing progress in the labor movement and beyond. But she also points out that much work still needs to be done, especially in strengthening anti-discrimination legislation and transgender rights. Ken Nash, DC 37 Education Fund Library, Room 211, www.dc37library.org- See more at: http://www.dc37.net/news/PEP/7_2015/lgbtq_dignity.html#sthash.aIFkG0ZA.dpuf

Out in the Union tells the continuous story of queer American workers from the mid-1960s through 2013. Miriam Frank shrewdly chronicles the evolution of labor politics with queer activism and identity formation, showing how unions began affirming the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender workers in the 1970s and 1980s. She documents coming out on the job and in the union as well as issues of discrimination and harassment, and the creation of alliances between unions and LGBT communities. Featuring in-depth interviews with LGBT and labor activists, Frank provides an inclusive history of the convergence of labor and LGBT interests. She carefully details how queer caucuses in local unions introduced domestic partner benefits and union-based AIDS education for health care workers-innovations that have been influential across the U.S. workforce. *Out in the Union* also examines organizing drives at queer workplaces, campaigns for marriage equality, and other gay civil rights issues to show the enduring power of LGBT workers.

About the Author Miriam Frank is Master Teacher of Humanities at New York University.