

December 2, 2024

Report on the Experience of Attending the ILGA World Conference in Cape Town, South Africa

By Danni Fitzpatrick

The International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) was founded in 1978; 46 years ago. The main chapter, ILGA World, is an international body which participates at the United Nations on a variety of tasks. ILGA ensures that their members, members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, are included in international law, and helps them lobby their governments for improved human rights. ILGA also advocates for 2SLGBTQIA+ members' issues at the Commission on the Status of Women, and provides education to members on how to be strong advocates and activists. ILGA recognizes the role of trade unions in the fight for equality, and is an organization which seeks to strengthen global solidarity.

ILGA has several regional chapters as well. These include North America & Caribbean (NAC), Latin America & Caribbean (LAC), Europe, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. French and Dutch speaking Caribbean nations affiliate with the North America chapter, while Spanish speaking Caribbean nations affiliate with the Latin America chapter. The various regions hold their own conferences every few years, with ILGA NAC taking place in Barbados in March 2024, and ILGA Europe taking place in Romania in October 2024. ILGA Asia will take place in Nepal in February 2025.

The ILGA World Conference is held every two or three years, in a different country each time. The host country is elected at the prior conference, and is based on several factors, including local sponsorship from community organizations. This year's ILGA World Conference in Cape Town, South Africa was the 31st iteration, and was hosted by Iranti and Gender DynamiX. Iranti is a human rights organization based in Johannesburg, South Africa, with a focus on advancing the rights of LBQTI persons in Africa. This is a women-focussed organization; hence the acronym LBQTI: lesbian, bisexual, queer, trans, and intersex. Gender DynamiX is the first Africa-based registered public benefit organization to focus on trans and gender diverse communities.

The ILGA World Conference had not taken place in Africa in 25 years, having been hosted in Johannesburg in 1999. It has never taken place in any other African country. This is important to note, because Africa is home to 27% of all countries and 17% of the global population. This year's World Conference in Cape Town saw the highest attendance ever recorded at an ILGA conference, by a large margin: more than 1,400 people. At least 40% of attendees were from African nations. This is clearly the result of the conference location making it more accessible to attendees from those nations. Their participation in this conference is crucial, not least of all because half of all nations which still criminalize homosexuality are located in Africa.

Other recent ILGA World conferences include Long Beach, USA in 2022 and Wellington, New Zealand in 2019 (which Unifor also sent delegates to).

The ILGA World Conference in Cape Town, South Africa took place from November 11 to November 15, 2024. This included two days of pre-conferences, many different educational sessions and panels, three days of the main conference which included plenaries, general meetings, and elections, as well as a closing ceremony and gala. Prior to November 11, other educational sessions took place which were likely geared toward ILGA's elected board members. These sessions focussed on the ILO's C190.

Day One – November 11 – Trade Union Pre-Conference

The first day was occupied entirely by the trade union pre-conference. This pre-conference was organized and hosted by the Council of Global Unions' (CGU) LGBTI Coordinating Committee, and this was, to my knowledge, the first time that a trade union pre-conference has taken place at an ILGA conference. It was, in my opinion, the best part of the entire conference, not least of all due to its extreme relevancy to our delegation. This pre-conference was attended by more than 100 participants from unions around the world, including other Canadian unions. The pre-conference was opened by speakers from IUF, Education International, and South Africa's Deputy Minister for Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities, who declared: "unions do not exist without LGBTQI+ people."

The first panel was on fighting the global anti-LGBTI backlash titled "Challenges and Successes in Building Support for LGBTI Rights and Equality in the Trade Union Movement." The speakers included Graeme Reid, UN Independent Expert; Jordania Urena Lora, ITUC; Kim Vance-Mubanga, Egale Canada; and Maddy Northam, CPSU Australia. The panel was moderated by Michelle Mosupye, FEDUSA South Africa. This panel called for trade unions to create safe and harassment-free work environments, and to recognize that harassment causes psychological harm, necessitating proper mental health supports. Maddy Northam noted that equality is union business; unions were instrumental in the fight for marriage equality in Australia in 2017. Northam also noted that Public Services International (PSI) successfully moved to add an LGBTQI+ observer to their executive board.

The second panel was on fighting for LGBTI rights and equality in the global south. Speakers included Mbali Sabela, COSATU South Africa; Joel Simpson, SASOD Guyana; Gisele Adao, CONTAC Brazil; and Dominador III H Carunungan, AMOSUP; Philippines. This panel was moderated by Keturah Johnson, AFA-CWA USA. Both of these panels highlighted the large role that trade unions have historically played in the advancement of human rights, as well as reminded us that that role isn't finished yet. It was noted that unions largely fund important government lobbying, and that this work requires the "3 Ms" – money, mass, and mobilization.

After lunch, the pre-conference continued with a workshop on freedom of association, occupational safety and health, and the right to a workplace free from discrimination. This workshop aimed to provide tools for building support for LGBTI rights in the trade union movement, and focussed heavily on the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 190, which was adopted in 2019 and calls for an end to violence and harassment in the world of work. This workshop included speakers Nina Benjamin, Labour Research Services South Africa; Robin van Rensburg, SACCAWU South Africa; and Michael Craig, UNISON UK. It was moderated by Michele Kessler, UFCW USA. One of the top messages was that education is key, and collaboration with other organizations provides strength.

Finally, the pre-conference concluded with reflections and action points to take into the ILGA World Conference, with a discussion facilitated by Gina McKay, CUPE Canada; Kimalee Phillip; CLC Canada; Marvellous Tawomhera, ZCHWU Zimbabwe; and Darienne Flemington, UNISON UK. Kimalee Phillip noted that Ottawa will be unveiling a monument next year recognizing Canada's "queer purge" from the end of the Second World War into the 1990s.

This pre-conference was one of those experiences that re-lights your internal flame of motivation and activism. It was inspiring to hear how much work unions around the globe have been putting into the fight for 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, especially since unions have been historically, and sometimes still are, associated with a very white, cisgendered, heterosexual existence. Nonetheless, as pointed out in particular by delegates of UNISON UK, trade unions have been in this particular fight for 2SLGBTQIA+ rights for decades. One of the key ignitions of this joint fight was the 1980 UK coal miners' strike under Margaret Thatcher.

Day Two – November 12 – Lesbian Pre-Conference

Each day of the conference presented several choices. The choice on day one was obvious. The choices on day two became a little more nuanced. Day two offered pre-conference sessions with the following focuses: disability, trans, bisexual, youth, lesbian, sex work, UN, and the Commonwealth Equality Network. As I was the only woman in our delegation, I chose the lesbian pre-conference. It made sense for us to divide and conquer, so to speak. I was pleasantly surprised by this pre-conference, which immediately opened with the acknowledgement that the space was not closed to trans or gender diverse individuals.

The first session in this pre-conference focussed on the Global Lesbian Coalition (GLC). This session was moderated by Thuli Mjwara, SADC; and Godiva Akullo, FARUG. The speakers were Jean Chong, AFLN; Zhanar Sekerbayeva, Anora Network; Dragana Todorovic, EL*C; Cristina Gonzalez Hurtado, LESLAC; Thato Thinyane, SADC; and Gloria Mutyaba, FARUG. The session discussed the typical "minority" existence of groups that focus on lesbians. They tend to be overshadowed by organizations run for and by gay men. This is what led to the creation of the Global Lesbian Coalition – a group which aims to expand the reach and amplify the voice of lesbian organizations by having them join together across borders.

My favourite speaker on this panel was Dragana Todorovic, who works with the EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community. She previously worked with the Equal Rights Association; and LABRIS, the lesbian human rights organization of Serbia. She spoke passionately about the benefits of global solidarity and cooperation in achieving common goals.

The next session focussed primarily on “lesbians in politics.” There were several excellent speakers, including Magui Fernandez Valdez, Frente de Todos, Argentina; Zhanar Sekerbayeva, Anora Network, Kazakhstan; Rituparna Borah, Nazariya, India; and Jessica Stern, US Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons, USA. The session was moderated by Thuli Mjwara, SADC, South Africa; and Godiva Akullo, FARUG, Uganda. My favourite speaker on this panel was Zhanar Sekerbayeva, who works with Anora Network in Central Asia. Zhanar spoke about her attempt to run for a local government position where she lives in Kazakhstan, a country which does not score highly in the recognition of equal human rights. Although she was not elected, she intends to try again in the future, which is easily inspiring to queer women who live in countries with much higher human rights scores.

Day Three – November 13 – Opening Plenary & Keynote Speeches

Day three began with the first session of the actual ILGA World Conference. This was kicked off by speeches from the two host organizations – Iranti and Gender DynamiX. There was also a video message from Volker Turk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, who reminded us that we’ve been in these difficult moments before, we’ve faced similar obstacles, and we have overcome them. Then South Africa’s Deputy Minister for Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities, Mmapaseka Steve Emily Letsike, gave a keynote speech. Letsike is notably an openly lesbian member of South Africa’s National Assembly, as well as the African National Congress. Prior to her current role, Letsike was the deputy chair of the South African National AIDs Council. She also spoke at the trade union pre-conference on day one.

The next keynote speaker was Mpho Andrea Tutu van Furth, Desmond Tutu’s daughter. She is an Anglican priest, and lives with her wife in Amsterdam. She was notably kicked out of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa for marrying a woman, even after her father had worked tirelessly to increase tolerance and inclusiveness within the church. Her father in fact declared in 2013 that he would never “worship a God who is homophobic.” Tutu van Furth echoed her father’s calls for tolerance and inclusiveness in a world that is seemingly sliding backwards in these regards. Then Julia Ehrt, Executive Director of ILGA, also spoke, reminding participants of the conference’s theme: “Kwa Umoja,” in unity, we rise.

Later in the morning, there was a panel discussion titled “Solidarity Across Movements: Advancing Human Rights in a Global Context.” The speakers included Dr. Alvaro Bermejo, Director-General of Planned Parenthood International; Geeta Misra, Executive Director of CREA; Jordania Urena Lora, Deputy General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation; Lydia X.Z. Brown, American autistic disability rights activist and attorney; and Mohsin Hendricks, world’s first openly gay imam and Islamic scholar from South Africa. This panel was moderated by Luz Elena Aranda, outgoing co-Secretary General of ILGA World.

My favourite moment from this panel was when Imam Mohsin Hendricks spoke about “self-care for the activist,” reminding everyone that if we do not take care of ourselves, we cannot take care of others.

After lunch, there were more choices to be made, as several different educational sessions and panels were running concurrently. I chose to attend the session on “the UPR effectiveness in the face of anti-rights offensives.” I have previously not focussed any of my own work or activism much outside my home province of BC, so this session was very eye-opening for me. There were some excellent speakers, who told of their own efforts to use the UPR to advance human rights in their own countries. The UPR, or Universal Periodic Review, is a mechanism of the UN where member states essentially audit each other every four years. Groups such as CSOs can file complaints about human rights transgressions in their countries, and during the review period, recommendations are made for how the offending country can improve. Unfortunately, the recommendations are optional and non-binding. This session was, nonetheless, important as we witness a surge in anti-rights sentiment globally, including in so-called “leading” nations such as the USA and Canada. This session shed light on utilizing the UPR to influence policy change, foster positive shifts, and combat rights rollbacks. This was one of several sessions which aimed to equip participants with the knowledge and tactics to strengthen future advocacy efforts for LGBTI rights within the UN framework.

The final session on day three was another choice – one which highlighted an issue with how the conference was structured. I had wanted to attend the session on “Litigating for Equality, Dignity, and Freedom: Challenges, Successes, and Learnings in the Global Quest for LGBTQIA+ Rights.” However, each session was assigned a different room in the conference centre, some big and some small. The organizers had clearly not anticipated how popular this session would be, and placed it in a small upstairs room, when there were several large halls available on the main floor. Therefore, the session became full to bursting very quickly, and additional participants were turned away to maintain fire code limitations. So instead, I attended the session on “Unveiling Gender Opposition Impacting Trans and Gender Diverse Rights.” This session focussed on the anti-gender movement against trans and gender diverse communities. It was facilitated by Global Action for Trans Equality and Transgender Europe. There was a focus on the role of social media in propagating anti-gender discourse, and connections to anti-LGBTQI religious groups. The session concluded with a workshop based around sharing tools and strategies to combat anti-gender opposition.

At the end of day three, there was a social event at the Ambassador Club called “A Ballroom Celebration” which highlighted the incredible history of the port city of Cape Town at the height of apartheid. This event was hosted by Salon Kewpie, an educational platform at the intersection of photographic archive and ballroom culture. Kewpie was a resident of Cape Town’s District Six and was also a drag queen and gender fluid individual who preferred feminine pronouns. Kewpie worked as a hairdresser, and her salon in District Six became the centre of the queer and drag community of the time. The Ambassador Club, the first stop for sailors, stars, and sightseers docking in Cape Town, was the scene of parties hosted by local queer folks, and was frequented by Kewpie. This was the port of entry for ballroom culture, which was being forged across the ocean in underground clubs in New York City. This event was a very fun and unique way of introducing international attendees to Cape Town’s vibrant queer history.

Day Four – November 14 – Building Solidarity Beyond Identities

Day three began with another plenary session and several keynote speakers, including Symmy Larrat, the Secretary of LGBTQIA+ People’s Rights at the Brazilian Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship; and Menaka Guruswamy and Arundhati Katju, who happen to be a married lesbian couple as well as lawyers at the Supreme Court of India. It is important to note that after Guruswamy and Katju spoke, a member of the audience, also from India, rose to challenge them on their claims, one of the few heated moments of the conference.

Next was a panel featuring Phyll Opoku-Gyimah of UK Black Pride; Artemis Akbary of the Afghanistan LGBTIQ+ Organization (ALO); Sabrina Sanchez of the European Sex Workers Rights Alliance; and Jeff Cagandahan of Intersex Philippines. This panel was moderated by Tuisina Ymania Brown, co-Secretary General of ILGA World. The focus of this panel was intersectionality and fostering inclusion for people of all identities within our communities and movements.

After this, there were more choices to be made. I elected to attend a session on advancing gender-affirming healthcare in hostile environments, followed by a session on International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), which is an internationally recognized occasion on May 17 every year. It was announced that the theme for IDAHOBIT 2025 will be “the power of communities.” The session provided a brainstorming activity on how to engage people in your community to increase awareness of this important day, including by harnessing social media.

Finally, I chose a session on “Civil Society and Trade Unions: Building a Coalition to Fight the Anti-LGBTQIA+ Movement and the Far Right.” This session featured panelists Graeme Reid, UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender; Jordania Urena Lora, Deputy General Secretary of ITUC; Silomo Cele, school principal and member of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU); and Yi-Ting Yeh, attending physician and member of Ditmanson Medical Foundation Chiayi Christian Hospital Corporate Union in Taiwan, which is affiliated with PSI and UNI. Yeh is also the executive director of the Taipei Doctors Union. This panel was moderated by Michele Kessler, Secretary-Treasurer of UFCW Local 1776 and Chair of UFCW OUTreach. This panel focussed on the power of collective action, exploring ways to form strategic partnerships and leverage resources and expertise to build solidarity in addressing hate and discrimination, while promoting inclusivity in the workplace and society. The panelists highlighted common ground shared by trade unions and other civil society organizations, as well as the LGBTQIA+ community, and discussed the unique difficulties they faced.

At the end of day four, there was another social event at the Zeitz MOCAA – the Museum of Contemporary Art Africa. This museum is located in the historic Silo District of Cape Town’s V&A Waterfront and is the largest museum of contemporary art in Africa. There were several different exhibitions, and one of the more interesting ones was titled “A Seat at the Table.” This exhibition was created by 16 teenagers in the MOCAA Art Club, sponsored by the BMW Centre for Art Education, who spent 5 months on the project, reflecting on diversity, community, and selfhood. These social events were organized and sponsored by ILGA World to showcase the rich history and culture of the host city.

Day 5 – November 15 – General Meeting & Closing Ceremony

Day five began with more session choices. I attended “Win with Pride: Democratic Backsliding & LGBTQI+ Representation in Political Parties” and “Resistance & Renewal: Mental Health in the Fight for LGBTQI Liberation.”

The first session, “Win with Pride,” was facilitated by Ari Shaw of the Williams Institute and featured panelists Stefano Fabeni of Synergia; Ulrika Westerlund, Member of Parliament with the Swedish Green Party; Mateo de la Torre of the LGBTQ+ Victory Institute; and Kabowd Mensah of the National Democratic Institute. This session highlighted the connection between eroding democratic norms and institutions and efforts to stigmatise and persecute LGBTQI+ people. Panelists discussed pushing for greater LGBTQI+ political representation in an effort to combat this backslide. The session also highlighted an online toolkit called “Win with Pride” which was developed by NDI and the LGBTQ+ Victory Institute.

The second session, “Resistance & Renewal,” was facilitated by Leslie Wells from the Stephen Lewis Foundation, and included panelists Arnold Ofoimingu of Sexual Minorities Uganda; Kennedy Olango of Mission for Advocacy & Advisory for Young Generations; Lucien Govaard of the Eastern Caribbean Alliance for Diversity & Equality; and Brant Luswata of Icebreakers Uganda. This session had a focus on the ways in which being LGBTBQIA+ increases the prevalence of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, and ways to combat these risks through community building and outreach.

In the second half of day five was the ILGA World general meeting, where members were able to vote on a number of amendments to the organization’s bylaws and constitution, elect several new board members, and vote on the next host country. In a tie-breaker vote, Argentina beat Belgium to be the host of the next ILGA World Conference in 2026 or 2027. In an impressive show of commitment, the vast majority of voting members remained present and engaged right to the end, despite an hours-long delay due to the new voting system being entirely online and the internet connection being strained. When voting finally concluded, there was a diverse closing ceremony which aimed to highlight once more the conference’s theme of unity. The 2024 ILGA World Conference concluded at 6:26pm South African Standard Time on Friday, November 15.

A couple hours later, I attended the absolutely fabulous closing gala party. Attendance at the conference was so high, the closing gala only had space to accommodate 900 people, so we had to collect tickets on a first-come-first-served basis. We sat at a table of other Canadian union delegates and listened to closing remarks from the ILGA board of directors while the incredible staff of the conference centre served dinner. Later, it turned into an all-out dance party.

Conclusion and Takeaways

ILGA is an international body fighting for 2SLGBTQIA+ rights on the world stage. 2SLGBTQIA+ rights are decidedly absent in name from the core international human rights instruments of the United Nations. We have treaties for civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights, ending racial discrimination and discrimination against women, conventions for the rights of the child and against torture and other cruel treatment, protection against forced disappearance, and for the rights of migrant workers and persons with disabilities. But there are very few organizations doing the work that ILGA aims to do: fighting specifically on behalf of 2SLGBTQIA+ people worldwide at the United Nations to ensure that we, too, are included in international law, policy reform, and improved human rights. In this regard, being an active member of ILGA is an important affirmation of Unifor’s commitment to social justice and equality for all of its members, including those in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

There are several ways in which the work of ILGA World and Unifor intersect. These include fighting for policy change, education, visibility, global solidarity, building allyship, and grassroots mobilization.

Activism and social justice have been in Unifor's blood since before Unifor ever existed. CAW and CEP were some of the most forward-thinking and progressive unions of their time. There are so many examples of this, including early fights and wins for the same-sex partners of members to receive the same rights as opposite-sex partners. And with other social justice units such as the Women's Department being active on the international stage, it makes sense for Unifor to play an active role in this work on the 2SLGBTQIA+ front as well. In fact, these two groups have important work they can do together. The Women's Department does an excellent job of highlighting that trans women are women, but the connections between these groups don't end there.

One of my key takeaways from attending this conference, highlighted even more by its location in South Africa, was that other nations, developing nations, look up to Canada in an incredible way. We are their role model – what they aspire to become. Some international communities may go so far as to claim we are perfect. We know we are far from that, but it emphasizes the need for us to not stop, to not settle for what we have achieved thus far. When we know that others are watching, and we know that we can do so much more, we must continue to work harder. In more than 4 decades of ILGA's existence, we still have 60+ countries where being queer or trans is illegal, and we have so-called democratic and progressive first-world neighbours sliding rapidly backwards on both queer and trans rights and women's rights. We cannot settle for claiming that we are good enough, that we have done enough. The world is literally watching us to set the bar, and we've recently watched that bar slip.

As inspiring as it was to attend the trade union pre-conference, I couldn't help but notice the involvement of so many unions except for ours. We are a dues-paying member of ILGA, but we are also a quiet bystander. As the largest private sector union in Canada, I feel we should be playing a more active role on the world stage. I would love to see Unifor actually partake in the organization and facilitation of future ILGA trade union sessions by fostering a more profound working relationship with the organization moving forward. With so few organizations fighting for 2SLGBTQIA+ rights on the world stage, it is imperative to continue to support the work of ILGA.

As a union, we recognize the importance of the two-way street that is government-afforded rights and union-afforded rights. When we see rights lacking at the government level, we introduce them into our CBAs and enshrine them at the union level, in the hope that government will follow. And when we see rights lacking in our CBAs, even when they exist at the government level, we still bargain for those rights at the union level, lest a change in government suddenly take those rights away. And the taking away of those rights is what we are watching, in real time, with the change of government in the USA and the very real possibility of a change in government right here at home next year.

But as we watch our own government teeter on basic human rights, other nations around the world watch us. And if our government changes for the worse and fails to uphold what we as Canadians have come to take for granted, we cannot let that be an example to our international neighbours. We must be the force that upholds those rights for the 300,000+ Canadians lucky enough to be our members. It is for this, and so many other reasons, that I hope Unifor will continue to play an ever-more active role within global organizations such as ILGA. It was an honour to witness the scale of this global work and solidarity. We are not new to the work of lobbying our government for changes which positively impact our members. We, as a nation-wide civil society organization, have the power to amplify these fights and advocate for change which positively impacts not just our own members, but workers around the world. It is my hope that, in the wake of sending a delegation to this year's ILGA World Conference, we will continue the decades of work of the unions before us and beside us in being a vocal ally and champion of all human rights, not just at home, but globally.

The Spark of Inspiration

At Unifor, we have the power to create space for dialogue and collaboration, to organize workshops, to build awareness campaigns. I have seen all of this work in action in the past, and I sincerely hope that this conference is a catalyst for the continuation and expansion of that work into the future. One area where I believe we could start is not forgetting our history; highlighting all of the monumental wins our founders achieved for 2SLGBTQIA+ members. This is inspired, in particular, by UNISON UK's work with LGSM – Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, which they spoke about in the trade union pre-conference. Organizing and building the union to be bigger, better, and stronger requires educating the people who have no idea what Unifor is, or how it came to be. A campaign which explores Unifor's history can help to achieve just that. Such a campaign would be well-suited to LGBTQ+ History Month in October. This is just one of the many seeds the ILGA World Conference planted in my own mind.

I sincerely thank the National Executive Board for the opportunity to have witnessed such incredible activism on the world stage, and to be so inspired and empowered to continue my own work here at home.

Submitted by Danni Fitzpatrick, Local 111, Chair of the BC Regional Council's Pride Committee