

Nancy Wohlforth was the first open LGBTQ person to be an officer of a major trade union in the United States. She was the first to serve on the AFL-CIO's governing Executive Council, and the first to be an AFL-CIO vice-president. Nancy was also a founder and co-president of Pride at Work, the first national organization of LGBTQ union members.

In an interview, Nancy said, "My consciousness as a labor person began when I was really young because my dad was in AFSCME in Wisconsin. He instilled in me a belief in unions being the only way working people get their rights and the need for unions among white-collar employees."

As a student at a Quaker high school in Providence, Nancy volunteered for the 1964 Freedom Summer to register Black voters in the South, at a time when civil rights activists there were being tortured and killed by Klansmen and local sheriffs.

She was involved in the 1968 student uprising at Columbia University—"the best ten days of my life," she told an interviewer.

As a VISTA volunteer in California, Nancy helped organize a massive rent strike in public housing to protest horrendous living conditions—and she was one of the Long Beach 21 who were arrested for protesting Governor Ronald Reagan's cuts in children's back-to-school clothing allowances.

In 1983, Nancy ran for vice-president of Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) Local 3 in San Francisco. At the time, she was a member of the local because of her day job as a pension analyst at the Carpenters' union trust fund. But after hours, she was involved in a members' caucus called A Growing Concern that focused on organizing, plus she was busy supporting 900 Local 3 members on strike against Blue Shield.

Three years later, Nancy was elected by Local 3 members as their senior business rep. Nancy raced around the Bay area managing about 150 contracts. She represented dolphin trainers and elephant caretakers at Marine World/Africa USA, an animal theme park in Vallejo. She represented photography curators and night janitors and everyone in between at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and she represented faculty members of the San Francisco Art Institute.

In a city filled with nonprofits, she organized and then represented frontline workers at homeless shelters and detox centers such as Episcopal Community Services, Good Samaritan, and St. Vincent de Paul.

Many of her members employed at homeless shelters had recently been homeless themselves. Several had steady incomes and benefits—and even owned their own homes—for the first time in their lives because of Nancy and Local 3.

The mainstay of Local 3's membership was clerical workers in union trust funds, union-side law firms, and the union locals themselves.

Eventually Nancy was elected international secretary-treasurer of OPEIU, and became one of the most popular leaders in the union's history.

In 2005, Nancy was elected to the AFL-CIO Executive Council. There, Nancy spoke out for just about every progressive cause that came before the Council.

One was opposition to the Iraq war. Two years before she joined the Executive Council, Nancy had been a co-convenor of US Labor Against the War (USLAW). When it desperately needed a place to operate, she'd given it space in her Washington office. And along with her progressive colleagues on the Executive Council and USLAW itself, she used her influence to support a resolution at the 2005 AFL-CIO convention calling for rapid withdrawal of US troops from Iraq which passed with an overwhelming majority vote.

Never before had the AFL-CIO shown the courage to take such a stand, not even in the depths of the Vietnam war.

Nancy also became the strongest supporter of LGBTQ workers in the history of the Executive Council.

In her own local back in San Francisco, Nancy had battled over and over for domestic partner benefits and non-discrimination language for LGBTQ workers in her members' contracts. She pressed the Executive Council to call on the California Supreme Court to strike down a restriction on same-sex marriage. She co-wrote an op-ed piece in the *Detroit Free Press* supporting benefits for domestic partners of Michigan state employees. She helped win the support of eleven national LGBTQ organizations for an increase in the national minimum wage. And she was a founding mother and co-president of Pride at Work, the AFL-CIO's constituency group for LGBTQ union members.

Nancy also never compromised on the rights of transgender people. In 2007, when the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) was before the House, Barney Frank and Nancy Pelosi—two of the strongest advocates of queer rights in Congress—argued that it would have a better chance to pass if its protections were limited to gay, lesbian, and bisexual workers, and trans protections were dropped.

Nancy would have none of it. The queer community would succeed or fail as one, and the AFL-CIO followed her lead.

In 2013, when the District of Columbia finally allowed it, Nancy married Denice Lombard. She and Denice continued their activism and organizing together until Nancy's death on December 31, 2024. CLUW honors our sister, Nancy Wohlforth!

In Lasting Unity,

Sylvia J. Ramos
CLUW President