

“Hardhats May Be Misunderstood”

The Boycott of Coors Beer and the Making of Gay-Labor-Chicana/o Alliances

ABSTRACT Drawing on organizational records, the progressive press, and oral history archives, this article explores the development of a multiracial, coalition-backed boycott of Coors beer in the 1970s and 1980s. It focuses on the boycott’s expansion from a localized labor dispute in the San Francisco Bay Area to a national, politicized campaign. It argues that the Coors boycott and its array of backers, representing labor, Chicana/o, queer, black, Native American, and leftist circles, demonstrate the vibrancy, creativity, and evolution of activism in the decades following the civil rights movements. Instead of seeing the move to coalition and consumer movements as conservative, this article identifies the Coors boycott as an example of ongoing grassroots efforts to forge solidarity and oppose business conservatives and the New Right. **KEYWORDS** Coors beer boycott, Morris Kight, Harvey Milk, California, Chicana/o, gay and lesbian, coalition politics

In December 1977, fifty-eight-year-old Morris Kight spilled his thoughts on coalition-building efforts between the gay and lesbian Left and the labor movement in Los Angeles. An indefatigable and radical activist from the day he moved to California in 1958, Kight’s accomplishments included co-founding the city’s Gay Liberation Front chapter, the Christopher Street West gay pride parade, and the Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center.¹ His attention now turned to an ongoing boycott of a regional brewing company and conservative family of the same name: Coors. In a note to no one in particular, Kight wrote about the boycott and how it had united gay and labor rights activists. Kight commented that he and a friend, Bay Area-based Howard Wallace, “have been grooming labor for a long time, and it’s working. Hardhats may be misunderstood. . . . Maybe this is one of the most unusual

1. Nancy Wride, “Morris Kight, 83; Gay Rights Pioneer in the Southland,” *The Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 2003.

contacts we could make. I am going to work it to a hilt.”² And work it he—and “hardhats” (blue-collar workers and union men)—did.³ Nearly a decade later, Kight listed the boycott of Coors beer as one of the most important events in the history of the gay liberation movement, including it in a proposal for a “major celebration” of the anniversary of the Stonewall riots. In his estimation, the Coors boycott was “certainly one of the most successful in history.”⁴

Though Kight may have oversold its legacy, the boycott of Coors beer stands as one of the most prominent and longest-running consumer boycotts of the late twentieth-century United States. This effort did not start with Kight. Calls to reject Coors initially sounded in Colorado, the brewery’s home state, where activists alleged that the company was anti-union, anti-minority, and deeply conservative. Boycott efforts began with a 1957 brewery workers’ strike and continued into the sixties, when blacks and Chicana/os boycotted as part of a fight against the company’s discriminatory hiring practices.⁵ Over the next two decades, the boycott spread throughout the American West. Bright bumper stickers proclaiming “Boycott Coors!”, “Chicanos Don’t Buy Coors Beer,” and “Abajo con Coors” (“Down with Coors”) zigzagged across freeways from Kansas to California, limited only by the brewing company’s thirteen-state distribution territory (fig. 1).⁶ Leaflets,

2. Morris Kight, Personal Note, December 13, 1977, Folder 2, Box 5, Morris Kight Papers and Photographs, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (hereafter cited as Kight Papers), University of Southern California libraries, Los Angeles, Calif.

3. Blue-collar, unionized men were often called “hardhats,” referencing their on-the-job attire. The term “hardhats” had distinct political undertones, rooted in the 1970 New York City “Hard Hat Riots,” during which nearly two hundred construction workers unleashed their fury on anti-war protesters. Angry, hard-hatted workers became symbols of a hyper-masculine, rightward-moving working class. As such, activists like Kight saw hardhats as antagonistic to their fights for liberation and equality. See Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010), 135–38; Joshua B. Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2000), Chapter 14; and Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 493–95.

4. Kight, “Proposal for a Major Celebration in 1994 of The Stonewall—25 Years After,” 1985, Folder 5, Box 4, Kight Papers.

5. Following activists’ preferred terms, I use the term “Chicana/o” to refer to Mexican American individuals and organizations affiliated with the Chicano movement, a radical and countercultural movement that emerged in the 1960s.

6. Coors cold-filtered, rather than pasteurized, its beer. To ensure its cold temperature, the company limited its distribution and typically engaged in minimal advertising, preferring to rely on the beer’s reputation rather than expensive marketing campaigns. See “Beer’s Just Beer—Unless It’s Coors,” *The National Observer*, December 7, 1974; “Coors to Stay at Home—by Demand,” *The Rocky Mountain News*, April 27, 1975; “Chicanos Don’t Buy Coors Beer,” 1970, Folder 5, Box 10, American GI Forum of California Papers, Chicano Studies Center, UCLA (hereafter cited as AGIF

ABAJO CON COORS

FIGURE 1. “Abajo con Coors (Down with Coors).” Bumper stickers displaying pithy anti-Coors statements extended boycott awareness along western freeways in the 1960s and 1970s. *Image courtesy of Tim Flores Papers, WH1991, Box 5, 48, Western History and Genealogy, Denver Public Library.*

newsletters, and verbal appeals combined labor and racial justice rhetoric with concerns over the Coors family’s growing prominence in the New Right movement.⁷ Brothers Joseph (Joe) and William (Bill) Coors were becoming known for their right-leaning politics, having provided the seed funding for the conservative think-tank, the Heritage Foundation, and a conservative television news station, for example.⁸ And in the mid-seventies, Joe Coors was recognized with back-to-back presidential nominations to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).⁹ The boycott of the family’s beer became a means by which to protest conservatism in the late twentieth century. Indeed, by the eighties, the “boycott Coors” refrain could be heard from coast to coast—only diminishing after the company

of California Papers); and Bumper Stickers, LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco.

7. The New Right is an umbrella term for a grassroots conservative movement that took off in the 1960s, with opposition to taxation and a strong federal government at its center. For more, see Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1995, 2000); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009).

8. The Coors family’s foray into television, Television News Inc. (TVN), was imagined as a counter to liberal media bias and is often considered the predecessor to Fox News. Stanhope Gould, “Coors Brews the News,” *Columbia Journalism Review* (March–April 1975): 17–29; Stephen Isaacs, “Coors Bucks Network ‘Bias,’” *The Washington Post*, May 5, 1975; and Kerwin C. Swint, *Dark Genius: The Influential Career of Legendary Political Operative and Fox News Founder Roger Ailes* (New York: Union Square Press, 2008), 29–75.

9. The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 established the CPB, a nonprofit organization tasked with overseeing the federal investment in public broadcasting. The president appoints members to the Board of Directors and the Senate must confirm nominees.

signed high-profile, million-dollar settlements with protesters, in exchange for an end to the boycott.¹⁰

From the 1960s to the 1980s, as battles over labor rights, access to work, and Coors's politics escalated, union members, feminists, gay men, lesbians, college students, Chicana/os, blacks, Native Americans, and others on the Left allied behind the consumer movement. Groups that may have seemed at odds with one another found themselves united by the anti-Coors issue. Morris Kight had thus joined a broad and diverse consumer movement, which in 1977 *Time Magazine* notably called “a formidable, if incongruous, alliance of activists.”¹¹

In Northern California, for example, beer delivery drivers and members of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters—a blue-collar union of truck drivers, panned as overwhelmingly white, conservative, and corrupt—united with gay activists and Chicana/os around the Coors boycott. Multiracial and unexpected coalitions of “hardhats,” gay activists, and men and women of color stretched nationwide by mid-decade, offering an accessible and malleable means by which activists could find common ground and level critiques at the New Right—of which Coors (both the beer and the family) had become a symbol. Hard-fought efforts to build this coalition, including outreach and affirmative action campaigns, cultivated a movement that bridged the divisions of class, identity, and sexuality and offered a creative means of political protest in a decade in which activism has been described as inert.

This article uses the boycott in California, particularly the developments of the 1970s, as a case study in coalition-building and the evolution of grassroots politics and protest in the late twentieth century. Rooted in the metropolitan West, the boycott encapsulates the emergence of what one historian has called an “unusually creative” politics in the region, both on the Left and the Right.¹² It argues that the Coors boycott exemplifies vibrant

10. “Coors Reaches Business Pact with National Rights Groups,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 1984; “Coors Turns Boycotters into Buyers,” *Advertising Age*, February 27, 1986; and “AFL-CIO Agrees to End Boycott of Coors,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 1987.

11. “Bitter Beercott,” *Time*, December 26, 1977.

12. By the 1970s and 1980s, the American West and, more broadly, the Sunbelt (stretching from the American South to California), cultivated both the New Right and urban, multiracial coalitions. For more on the Sunbelt and the New Right, see Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011); McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*; Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*; and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). For more on “unusually creative” coalitions in the West, see David Farber, “Foreword,” in Jeff Roche, ed., *The Political Culture of the New West*

coalitional activism in this period, in which leaders and participants actively sought to bridge divisions through expansive rhetoric, reciprocal commitments and pragmatism, and a well-defined, politicized opponent. More specifically, the boycott movement and its opposition to Coors illuminate the possibilities (and pitfalls) of mobilizing against the New Right in these decades. This study also brings the literature on coalition-building into the 1970s and beyond, inviting us to further consider the roles of labor unions, gay activists, and affirmative action in multiracial alliances, and highlighting the national influence of localized movements in the urban West.

ACTIVISM AND POLITICS IN THE SEVENTIES

In a 1977 piece entitled “Bitter Beercott,” *Time* cast the Coors boycott as “incongruous” because it flourished in the midst of what many perceived as a crisis of the Left. Contemporary commentators wrote of “collective sadness” and derided the 1970s as a stagnant, “Me” decade.¹³ After the militancy and social movements of the 1960s, activism and solidarity seemed to vanish, replaced by inane bumper stickers, as one *New York Times* columnist bemoaned.¹⁴ Internal disagreements, state surveillance, and police violence had weakened the New Left, Chicana/o, and Black Power movements. Economic downturn, fueled by the oil crisis of 1973 and distrust of elected officials (especially post-Watergate) led many to feel powerless and impoverished. In this context, from the mid-seventies onward, labor unions moved rightward, union density declined, and working-class alliances fractured, to be superseded by racial and sexual identity politics.¹⁵ Some histories of this period have perpetuated narratives

(Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), ix; Shana Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform, 1941–1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

13. Michael Harrington, “A Collective Sadness,” *Dissent* 21 (September 1974): 486–91; Tom Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York*, August 23, 1976; and Peter Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982).

14. Francine du Plessix Gray, “Seventies Drop-Ins,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 1977.

15. While union membership reached its peak in 1979, at 21 million, union density winnowed, dropping from 24.2 percent to 20.5 percent between 1974 and 1980. Gerald Mayer, *Union Membership Trends in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service 2004), 10–12; and Lyle Scruggs and Peter Lange, “Where Have All the Members Gone?: Globalizations, Institutions, and Union Density,” *The Journal of Politics* 64, no. 1 (February 2002): 134.

of declension, framing the post–civil rights era and the 1970s as cursed by an “incapacity of dissent” amid a “triumph of conservatism.”¹⁶

In these histories, the vibrancy and pragmatism of the multiracial Left is in danger of being overlooked. Coalition-building seems strange or impossible, yet recent scholarship has opened up new debates over the nature of activism from the late sixties onward, illuminating the ways in which activists, especially in communities of color, turned to electoral and coalitional politics. Protest did not simply disappear but, rather, adapted. Recent scholarly works have underscored new forms of pragmatic, interracial organizing in California, Texas, and the Southwest in the 1960s and early 1970s. This scholarship presses us to appreciate the myriad efforts to maintain and revitalize activism in the midst of divisions—struggles that were long in the making and sometimes abandoned in favor of community-based politics and priorities. The Coors boycott, bringing together gay men, lesbians, hard-hatted Teamsters, and radical Chicana/os, is another such effort. This article thus extends these scholars’ models of studying cross-class and multiracial coalitions into and beyond the 1970s as means to further revise our understanding of activism, labor, and politics in this period. Additionally, this study of the boycott sheds light on how reactions to the rise of the New Right motivated creative, multiracial leftist alliances.¹⁷

The first part of this article examines the rise of such a coalition in Northern California in the early 1970s, using it as a lens upon the failures and successes of unlikely alliances. San Francisco and the Bay Area provided the backdrop—and thriving activist milieu—for an expanding and radicalizing Coors boycott

16. For more on the 1970s, see Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*; Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal & the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Reuel Schiller, *Forging Rivals: Race, Class, Law, and the Collapse of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Bruce J. Schulman and Julian Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

17. See especially: Lauren Araiza, *To March for Others: The Black Freedom Struggle and the United Farm Workers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Brian D. Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Emily Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Gordon Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960–1974* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

coalition. The second half of this article emphasizes that this was not a one-off consumer campaign. By the mid-1970s, particularly after Joe Coors's nomination to the CPB, the boycott in the Bay Area linked itself with national political debates and anti-New Right organizing. And as Morris Kight's musings indicate, these boycott alliances strengthened and expanded for at least another decade. The Coors boycott was neither isolated nor unusual but was instead part of a changing landscape of activism, solidarities, and grassroots strategies.

THE TEAMSTER BOYCOTT OF COORS, 1973-1975

The anti-Coors movement in Northern California originated with beer delivery drivers and Teamsters. At the end of a three-tiered delivery chain—stretching from breweries to interstate haulers and contracted distributors across the West—drivers were responsible for transferring beer from warehouses, or “barns,” to local bars and restaurants. In the Bay Area, Teamsters Local 888—a union that negotiated a master contract with multiple beer distributors, setting regional wages and working conditions—represented drivers, most of whom were white men. In the summer of 1973, Local 888 and beer distributors, reportedly led by Coors, reached an impasse in contract negotiations. On June 26, nearly eight hundred drivers and members went on strike, leaving their beer-filled trucks for picket lines. That same day, strikers called for a boycott of Coors beer.¹⁸

The Teamsters' boycott looked much like countless labor boycotts that preceded it; typically, labor boycotts were meant as temporary supplements to strikes and additional pressures on an employer's bottom line. They were often confined to labor circles, promoted at union meetings and in the pages of union publications, on “Don't Buy” lists.¹⁹ Yet Local 888's boycott, echoing

18. “An Anti-Union Program,” *The Northern California Teamster*, July 1973; “Beer Drivers Fight Back, Challenge NLRB Elections,” *The Fifth Wheel*, October–November, 1973; and “Chronology of Coors Strike,” 1975, Folder 4, Box 6, Bob Barber Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University (hereafter cited as Barber Collection). On distribution, see Duncan Baird Douglass, “Constitutional Crossroads: Reconciling the Twenty-First Amendment and the Commerce Clause to Evaluate State Regulation of Interstate Commerce in Alcoholic Beverages,” *Duke Law Journal* 49, no. 6 (April 2000): 1619–62. On race in the Teamsters, see Dan LaBotz, *Rank and File Rebellion: Teamsters for a Democratic Union* (New York: Verso, 1990).

19. On the labor boycott, see David Scobey, “Boycotting the Politics Factory: Labor Radicalism and the New York City Mayoral Election of 1884,” *Radical History Review* 28–30 (1984): 280–325; and Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

earlier Colorado-based boycott efforts, challenged labor boycott traditions.²⁰ Caught up in a wave of rank-and-file militancy nationwide and building upon a local history of strong labor-civil rights alliances, Local 888 and its leaders transformed their boycott into a coalition-backed, leftist movement.²¹

At first, the Local's reliance on the boycott was born of necessity, as Bay Area Coors distributors led an anti-union offensive. Within the first months of the strike, it became clear that distributors had no intention of settling the dispute. Employers, such as Tom Louderback, who held the Oakland Coors distributorship, hired replacement drivers and outfitted them with clubs and guard dogs. Hoping to weaken Local 888 piece by piece, distributors also held decertification votes in which replacement drivers could oust (or decertify) the union as their representative. Strikers responded by picketing barns and following their replacements on delivery routes—and violent stand-offs between strikers, replacements, and guards ensued. The union's leaders also focused on amplifying boycott appeals, particularly on their picket lines encircling liquor stores in the Bay Area. Bates Hylton, a mustachioed “leading militant” and strike picket captain, took the lead here, proposing consumer-oriented “shop-ins at the stores.” “TO THE CONSUMER ONLY,” read picketers’ signs, “PLEASE DO NOT PURCHASE OR CONSUME COORS BEER SOLD AT THIS ESTABLISHMENT.” Local 888 aggressively pushed the boycott, calling on fellow working-class consumers for support. The boycott, however, faltered as distributors convinced retailers to ignore efforts and courts slapped boycotters with injunctions for secondary boycott activities.²² As such,

20. On the origins of the Chicana/o boycott of Coors, see: Neil Foley, *Mexicans in the Making of America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 186–90; Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 177–80; and Zaragoza Vargas, *Crucible of Struggle: A History of Mexican Americans from Colonial Times to the Present Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 363.

21. The San Francisco Bay Area has served as an incubator for the labor movement (especially dock workers), Black Power, Latina/o activism, and student and gay and lesbian radicalism. See: Araiza, *To March for Others*; Hilary Botein, “Labor Unions and Race-Conscious Housing in the Postwar Bay Area: Housing Projects of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union and the United Autoworkers,” *Journal of Planning History* 15, no. 3 (2016): 210–29; Chris Carlsson, ed., *Ten Years That Shook the City: San Francisco, 1968–1978* (San Francisco: City Lights Foundation Books, 2011); Hobson, *Lavender and Red*; and Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). On national labor militancy, see Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow, eds., *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below in the Long 1970s* (New York: Verso, 2010).

22. Boycotters’ activities were restricted under the 1947 Taft-Hartley and 1952 Landrum-Griffin Acts, which outlawed secondary boycotts (efforts to stop third parties from doing business with a targeted company) and “hot cargo” campaigns (in which union members refuse to handle

successes were sporadic across Local 888's territory. The boycott may have been strong in San Francisco, for example, but in the East Bay, retailers restocked Coors immediately after pickets left—and the beer sold well.²³

Seeking to restructure and revitalize the boycott as a last-ditch effort in the fight against distributors, Local 888 brought in a local labor leader to help. Forty-one-year-old Allan Baird, appointed boycott director, was a born-and-bred San Franciscan, a Korean War veteran, and the president of the city's newspaper drivers' union. Baird was also a longtime resident of the Castro District, a working-class San Francisco neighborhood that was, by the 1970s, becoming a predominantly gay area. Acquaintances often remarked that Baird did not fit the Teamster mold, lacking the bulk and brashness of a stereotypical union man. Instead, he was a soft-spoken musician, intellectual, and supporter of minority and gay rights.²⁴ Once appointed boycott director—and with the help of a skinny, balding newspaper deliveryman and fellow Teamster, Andris (Andy) Cirkelis—Baird began appealing to other Bay Area activist and consumer groups.²⁵

In 1974, after six months on strike, Baird and Local 888 members surveyed a patchwork landscape of wins and losses. Drivers in three barns were no longer unionized and at least a dozen more decertification votes loomed, while still others had returned to work. All of Coors's delivery drivers remained out on strike. To support those still off the job and to take aim at Coors, Baird

boycotted products). See "The Secondary Boycott—Now More Than Ever," *The Fifth Wheel*, Fall 1973; Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 167–96; and Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road to America's Wal-Mart Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 212–13.

23. Local 888 Ephemera, 1973, Folder 20, Box 4, Barber Collection; "Union Alliance Hits Coors, Sears," *The Northern California Teamster*, September 1973; "Beer Drivers Fight Back, Challenge NLRB Elections," *The Fifth Wheel*, Fall 1973; "Beer Drivers Fight for Their Jobs," *The Fifth Wheel*, Winter 1973–1974; "We Cleaned 'Em Out—They Gave It Back': A Beer Driver Speaks Out," *The Fifth Wheel*, January 1975; "Editorial: The Decline of Local 888," *The Fifth Wheel*, March 1975; and "Teamsters Local 888," *Weekly Summary of NLRB Cases*, June 23–27, 1975, 25–26.

24. "Gagged Beer Drivers Get Message Across," *The Northern California Teamster*, January 1974; Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 81–83; Dan Baum, *Citizen Coors: A Grand Family Saga of Business, Politics, and Beer* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 116; and Allan Baird, Interview with Miriam Frank, April 11, 1995, Out in the Union: Gays and Lesbians in the Labor Movement, Cassettes 51–52/CD 30, Box 1, Miriam Frank Oral History Collection, OH 039, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University (hereafter cited as Miriam Frank Oral History Collection).

25. "Charges Against Coors," *The Northern California Teamster*, September 1974; "Mail Bag/Letter to the Editor," *The East Bay Labor Journal*, November 1, 1974; "Chronology of Coors Strike," 1975, Folder 4, Box 6, Barber Collection; and "We Cleaned 'Em Out—They Gave It Back': A Beer Driver Speaks Out," *The Fifth Wheel*, January 1975.

and Cirkelis escalated boycott efforts. New appeals, emblazoned on bumper stickers and handbills called on consumers to support Local 888 by turning away from Coors beer altogether. Boycott leaders envisioned a campaign that would transcend a strike-support endeavor to become a broad movement motivated not by necessity, but by conviction and solidarity. “You can empty one store,” Cirkelis explained, “but you need to convince someone not to drive across town to get Coors.” To do so, he and Baird crafted outward-looking appeals, worked to build an innovative and lasting coalition, and linked their local battle with national political debates. Over time, Chicana/o, black, and gay organizations pledged support to Local 888 and integrated “boycott Coors” calls into their own organizing. Their actions signaled shifting organizational approaches in the 1970s, with broad implications for labor, Chicana/o, and gay and lesbian activists from coast to coast.²⁶

MISSTEPS AND FAILURES

Building a coalition around a boycott of beer, however, would be easier said than done. Baird and Cirkelis drove all across the Bay Area, meeting with community groups, merchant organizations, and activist leaders, detailing Coors’s anti-unionism, tapping into existing anti-Coors sentiments, and appealing to working-class solidarity. Baird recalled, “our method . . . was [to meet] with all the communities—we met with Arab [merchants], we met with the Black Panther Party in those days, Huey Newton, Angela Davis, all of those people in Oakland, California.” These appeals largely fell flat, running up against widespread distrust of the white, male Teamsters and the labor movement more generally. Baird and Cirkelis, however, remained upbeat, working sixteen hours a day, seven days a week to build trust and forge alliances between communities of color and Teamsters.²⁷

Their early boycott appeals focused heavily on labor issues—specifically, drivers’ working conditions and unsavory stories from the ongoing dispute

26. “Unions Intensify Coors Beer Boycott,” *The Northern California Teamster*, August 1974; “Unity Curbs Coors’s Picketing Court Ban,” *The Northern California Teamster*, July 1974; and Interview Notes with Andy Cirkelis, June 24, 1975, Folder 4, Box 6, Barber Collection.

27. The Coors boycott largely targeted male beer drinkers rather than housewives, setting it apart from both the United Farm Workers’ produce boycotts and a 1973 price-based meat boycott. See Emily Twarog, *Politics of the Pantry: Housewives, Food, and Consumer Protest in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Interview with Andy Cirkelis, June 24, 1975, Folder 4, Box 6, Barber Collection; and Baird, Interview with Miriam Frank, April 11, 1995, Miriam Frank Oral History Collection.

with Coors. The company's record from Colorado to California, reasoned Baird, spoke for itself—at least to working-class and union audiences. Pamphlets and picket signs cited strikes and discrimination at the Colorado brewery, often insinuating that scabs made and handled the beer. In mid-1974, Local 888 also publicized revelations of violence at the Coors barn in Oakland. Employers' distribution of ice picks and instructions to replacements to incite strikers to violence, recounted in affidavits collected by the Local's attorneys, were used to demonstrate Coors's inherent anti-unionism and threats to public safety. One replacement, who chose to remain anonymous, noted that if Louderback, the Coors distributor, "went to these lengths to fight the union, I'm not sure what he'd do to me."²⁸

The two organizers also reached out to potential non-labor allies: the Black Panther Party (BPP) in Oakland, the Native American Labor Advisory Council, and the United Farm Workers (UFW). Entreaties to these organizations, however, took a different tack than those to union members: Baird and Cirkelis distanced their struggle from the Teamsters and that union's poor reputation, instead emphasizing Coors's discriminatory practices and history. In a special boycott edition of *The Northern California Teamster*, for example, organizers included Spanish-language fliers from Chicana/o boycotters, transitioning from a discussion of Coors's "anti-union program" to the discrimination charges it faced in courts.²⁹ The Bay Area boycott of Coors, as constructed for audiences of color, was not simply a local labor dispute, but rather a fight for men and women (organized or not) of all backgrounds against a malicious company and its contractors. Yet the BPP and backers of the UFW withheld their support, citing the Teamsters' ongoing jurisdictional—and violent—dispute with the UFW over representation of farm workers. The noticeable absence of black and Chicana/o beer drivers in Local 888 was also at issue. Commented Bob Levering of *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, "the union . . . [has] had to counter its lily-white reactionary image in minority communities."³⁰

28. "An Anti-Union Program," *The Northern California Teamster*, July 1973; "Alameda Beer Pacts Signed," *The Northern California Teamster*, April 1974; "Coors Distributor Dirty Tricks Exposed," *The Northern California Teamster*, June 1974; "Charges Against Coors," *The Northern California Teamster*, September 1974; "Union Busting, Racism, and Beer," *The People's World*, October 19, 1974; and "To the Consuming Public," Leaflet, 1974, Folder 3, Box 24, Part 3, United Farm Workers (UFW) Administration Department Files, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University (hereafter cited as UFW Administration Files).

29. "Discrimination," *The Northern California Teamster*, July 1973.

30. Ibid.; "Unions Intensify Coors Beer Boycott," *The Northern California Teamster*, August 1974; "PLEASE DON'T BUY COORS BEER," *The Oakland Tribune*, August 25, 1974;

Baird and Cirkelis resolved to do something about their industry's "long overdue discriminatory employment practices." Noted Cirkelis: "How can you ask a community to help you when your own house is not clean? The boycott was not effective in minority areas because they did not think it related to their interests. Belated as it was," he recognized, "an effort was made to rectify it." These organizers thus sought to address simmering racial tensions in their own union and promote cross-racial coalitions in the Bay Area as they organized the boycott of Coors.³¹

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND COALITIONS

As such, in July 1974 (nearly one year after Local 888 went on strike), boycott leaders and a handful of union members, with the help of UC Berkeley's Center for Labor Research and Education, began crafting an equal employment program. In so doing, the Local bucked emerging tensions over affirmative action, which often set civil rights activists against labor unions on questions of access, equality, and hiring quotas. Local 888 sent the resulting one-page affirmative action proposal to area beer distributors.³² With the explicit goal of hiring "Black, Spanish Surname, Asian American, Native American, and Women" at parity with local populations, the document outlined a training program for applicants, committed to using hiring halls to recruit and hire people of color, and stipulated that any positions that became available within the first six months of a contract would go to non-white applicants. Beer distributors' responses were lackluster, if not hostile, throwing accusations of discrimination back at the Local and, according to Cirkelis, making only a "token gesture towards resolving the minority employment problem" by offering to hire a few black drivers in East Oakland.³³

"Teamster Move for Minorities," newspaper clipping, October 4, 1974, Folder 3, Box 24, Part 3, UFW Administration Files; "Union busting, racism, and beer," *The People's World*, October 19, 1974; Bob Levering, "Trouble on Tap for Coors," *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 16–29, 1974; "Coors in California Accomplishing the Impossible: Forcing Teamsters to Join Chicanos," *The Straight Creek Journal*, December 10–16, 1974; and "'We Cleaned 'Em Out—They Gave It Back': A Beer Driver Speaks Out," *The Fifth Wheel*, January 1975.

31. "Trouble on Tap," *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 16–29, 1974.

32. Established in 1964, the UC Berkeley Labor Center was part of a university-wide initiative on labor and the working class in California. See "The Labor Center Celebrates 50 Years," last modified July 2014, accessed April 1, 2017, <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/about/50th-anniversary/>.

33. Local 888 Affirmative Action Letter and Program, September 26, 1974, Folder 1:03, Coors Boycott Collection, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (hereafter cited as Boycott Collection); Nancy Polin, "Anti-racism Fight Targets Coors," *The People's World*, November 30, 1974; "Trouble on Tap," *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 16–29, 1974; Dennis Deslippe,

Though rebuffed, these steps opened up new possibilities for the boycott. Baird and Cirkelis had worked to move beyond superficial alliances and displayed a genuine commitment to reform and inclusion, steps they hoped would bring communities of color into the boycott. Yet this change was not without measured resistance from the rank and file, who expressed concern that attention to building alliances was distracting from the strike itself. An editorial in *The Fifth Wheel* made it plain: “The irony in this situation,” the writers quipped, “is that usually the labor movement could care less about outside support and is scared to death of it when they do get it. Here they’re using it in place of real labor solidarity.”³⁴ Rank-and-file members thus interpreted coalition-building efforts as antagonistic to “labor solidarity.” That said, there was little opposition to the affirmative action plan itself; in fact, most members of Local 888 supported the initiative, even as they distrusted the Local’s leadership. In other contexts, American union members’ support of such programs was rare and marked this coalition as unique.³⁵

Baird, Cirkelis, and their allies began the work of publicizing the affirmative action standoff with distributors through form letters and open meetings. The message was simple: Local 888 was on the side of equity and workers’ rights; Coors was on the side of discrimination and union-busting. But within this message lay a more gripping narrative—that of a Teamsters’ Local willing to reject its union’s history of exclusion, linking fights for labor and racial justice under the call to boycott. Indeed, the Local’s fight for affirmative action and willingness to make reciprocal pledges began the work of transforming the boycott from an exclusively labor-based, instrumental campaign into a solidarity-building, expressive movement in which Chicana/o, Native American, black, and gay and lesbian Bay Area residents opted to join a community of boycotters. Together, they built a coalition that

Protesting Affirmative Action: The Struggle Over Equality after the Civil Rights Revolution (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

34. “Editorial: The Decline of Local 888,” *The Fifth Wheel*, March 1975.

35. Local 888’s affirmative action program highlights what Dennis Deslippe calls the “longer, more varied history of affirmative action” prior to the 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case (which upheld the University of California’s use of affirmative action in medical school admissions, but struck down the use of racial quotas). Labor liberals—like those in Local 888—initially supported such programs, particularly in cases where union hiring halls were either weak or nonexistent and when plans did not include numerical quotas. Yet by the mid-1970s, in the context of economic downturn, labor liberal opposition to affirmative action programs was refined. Deslippe, *Protesting Affirmative Action*.

surprised many, offering a means of power in the face of anti-union, deregulatory, and conservative forces.³⁶

SUCSESSES AND GAY SUPPORT

Positive responses to Local 888's "step to rectify the Teamsters' record on the hiring of minorities" brought new supporters into the boycott fold. For example, Dan Amerson, chairman of the Native American Labor Advisory Council, wrote to Cirkelis: "You may rest assured that your efforts to seek out the aid of the Native American . . . will be received in a spirit of resolve and warmth." Amerson also penned a letter to Bill Coors, pressing the brewing executive on the question of affirmative action. Given the popularity of Coors beer in communities of color, Amerson noted, Coors would do well to sign on to the program. In response, Coors dodged the issue, blaming discrimination on distributors and, moreover, describing affirmative action as mere "window dressing." Coors's letter made for a compelling leaflet for Bay Area boycotters, driving home the company's unwillingness to take seriously the problem of discrimination.³⁷

Baird also looked to forge an alliance with the burgeoning gay and lesbian community and movement in his neighborhood, the Castro.³⁸ Baird actively welcomed new gay neighbors and, ever the organizer, saw opportunities in his changing neighborhood. After threatening to muster gay support for the boycott in a 1974 meeting with one of the Coors brothers, Baird reached out to Harvey Milk, a local "hippie-looking type" camera storeowner. He asked Milk, as "the spokesperson for the gay community," to endorse and publicize the Coors boycott. Milk agreed—with stipulations, demanding beer delivery jobs for openly gay men and women. Baird took on the challenge, adding gay men and lesbians to Local 888's affirmative action campaign.³⁹

36. Letters of Support, 1974–1975, and Ralph Fields, Affidavit, November 1974, Box 3, Juan Federico "Freddie Freak" Miguel Arguello Trujillo Chicano Movement Collection, Colorado State University-Pueblo Archives (hereafter cited as Trujillo Collection); Local 888 Affirmative Action Letter and Program, September 26, 1974, Folder 1:03, Boycott Collection.

37. Dan Amerson to Cirkelis, September 20, 1974, Folder 2, Box 3, Trujillo Collection; Amerson to Bill Coors, September 23, 1974, Folder 3, Box 24, Part 3, UFW Administration Files; Coors to Amerson, September 30, 1974, Folder 20, Box 4, Barber Collection.

38. By the 1970s, nearly a third of the Castro's businesses were gay owned and, as such, the district became a hub for the gay liberation movement. For an overview of the movement's history in San Francisco, see Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 17–31.

39. Baird, Interview with Frank, April 11, 1995, Miriam Frank Oral History Collection; Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, 83–84; Baum, *Citizen Coors*, 116.

Milk was especially keen to join the boycott effort. Not only did he enjoy “the symbolism of tying gays to the conservative Teamsters union,” as his biographer later noted, he saw the boycott as an opportunity to put the gay community’s economic power on display. Milk proved to be highly effective at drumming up support for the boycott, calling upon relationships he had forged during his politicking (running, and losing, multiple times for city supervisor in these years). Milk organized Bob Ross, publisher of the *Bay Area Reporter* (*B.A.R.*), and Wayne Friday, a local bartender and columnist, on the boycott; they in turn mobilized bartenders, bar owners, and readers of their publication.⁴⁰

Another gay activist rose to prominence in the boycott coalition: the young, verbose, and handsome Howard Wallace, who learned about the boycott through his own work with radical labor organizations in San Francisco. Wallace was particularly excited by the prospect of combining class and sexual politics in boycott activism, which complemented the work he and a friend, Jane Sica, were engaged in as they founded the leftist Bay Area Gay Liberation (BAGL) in 1975. Wallace eagerly used his connections and the incipient BAGL to promote the boycott of Coors beer.⁴¹

Wallace, Milk, and other gay leaders used pragmatism, outrage, and forward-looking appeals to galvanize gay bar owners, beer drinkers, and activists.⁴² Not only would support of the boycott bring jobs to their community, they reasoned, it would also generate reciprocal support from labor. “If we want others to help us in our fight to end discrimination we must help others,” noted Milk. “There was no hesitation in the hand that was offered to the gay community. One union has made a request for help. . . . It may be hard for many gays to go to the help of the union. But it is a union that has

40. Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, 83–84; and Harvey Milk, Draft: “Gay Economical Power,” 1970s (n.d.), Box 9, Series 2d, Scott Smith Collection, 1919–1935, Harvey Milk Archives, James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library (hereafter cited as Milk Archives).

41. Howard Wallace, Interview with Frank, April 8, 1995, Miriam Frank Oral History Collection; Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 99; Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 79–84.

42. Gay bars were central community spaces for gay men and lesbians, thriving from the 1940s onward. Into the 1970s, especially in San Francisco, they were also hubs of organizing and gay politics. See Elizabeth A. Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950–1994* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

admitted it has been wrong in the past on issues.” Milk and Wallace also invoked Coors’s discriminatory record, from its rejection of the affirmative action plan to the brewery’s use of polygraph tests in the hiring process, which asked applicants about their sexuality and sexual history. “That’s all we needed,” remembered Wallace of the polygraph: “It united us.”⁴³

The gay boycott “took off very rapidly,” said Wallace. “BAGL pushed it, Harvey pushed it . . . you had these militant activists really get out there and they hit the bars, you know. . . . And say, ‘hey, get rid of that shit!’” Owners of gay bars and establishments, many of whom were members of the San Francisco Tavern Guild, terminated contracts with the local Coors distributor. The Rocky Mountain brew became a rare sight in Bay Area bars, replaced by broadsides and bumper stickers, often bilingual, from the Castro to the Mission District (fig. 2).⁴⁴

In the late months of 1974, an organization dedicated to the affirmative action fight also emerged, making the push for equity central to the Bay Area boycott. The “Ad Hoc Committee Against Coors Beer for Affirmative Action,” loosely linked to Local 888, brought together minority, labor, and student leaders in the Bay Area. Acklin Thibeaux, director of the San Francisco-based Apprenticeship Opportunities Foundation’s Affirmative Action Program, chaired the Committee’s first meeting. Among the attendees were representatives from the Bayview-Hunters Point Manpower Development and Affirmative Action Programs (from the largely black neighborhoods of the same name), the Chicana/o Mission Youth Coalition, Local 888, and the gay activist community. Milk kept notes in the margins of his copy of the meeting agenda, capturing the mood at the Committee’s first gathering: “we are all victims of the SAME oppression” and “we are so brainwashed by the system that we are the best salesmen of the system,” he scribbled. At the meeting’s heart were politicized and symbolic appeals to set aside racial, ethnic, class, and sexual divisions to fight Coors. To fight Coors was to fight “the system” and to stand in solidarity with workers and activists across the region. “We are all working for the same thing,” jobs and equality, noted Thibeaux. “If

43. Milk, Draft: “The Teamsters Ask the Gay Community for Help!,” 1974, Box 2, Series 1, Milk Archives; Wallace, Interview with Frank, April 8, 1995, Miriam Frank Oral History Collection.

44. Wallace, Interview with Frank, April 8, 1995, Miriam Frank Oral History Collection; Frank, *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 78–79.



FIGURE 2. This bilingual broadside from the Bay Area boycott movement speaks to the heterogeneity of the coalition in the mid-1970s. The poster also figures prominently on the set of the 2008 film *Milk*. Image courtesy of Tim Flores Papers, WH1991, Oversize Folder, Western History and Genealogy, Denver Public Library.

we do not support one another,” added Cirkelis, “we are doomed to the very system that puts the Nixons in power.”⁴⁵

The progressive press—from California to Colorado—reported excitedly on expanding boycott alliances. Journalists from *People’s World* in Berkeley to

45. “Trouble on Tap,” *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 16–29, 1974; Milk, Notes: “Ad Hoc Committee Against Coors Beer for Affirmative Action,” Box 2, Series 1, Milk Archives; Milk, “The Teamsters Ask the Gay Community for Help!,” 1974.

El Tecolote at San Francisco State University marveled at the diversity of boycotters and the Teamsters' push for affirmative action. Bob Levering of the *Bay Guardian*, for example, detailed the "unusual" boycott alliance. Uniting behind charges that Coors was racist, anti-union, and anti-environment were "Chicano and Latino groups, the United Farm Workers, Asian-Americans, blacks, and native Americans," he wrote. *The Straight Creek Journal* in Denver reprinted Levering's piece, adding a new, more gripping headline: "Coors in California Accomplishing the Impossible: Forcing Teamsters to Join the Chicanos." The press also spotlighted the boycott coalition's successes in reducing Coors's sales in the region—by nearly 5 percent since late 1973.⁴⁶

Yet such enthusiastic headlines and pieces do more to illuminate expectations than reality. By December, only a few months had passed since Local 888 launched its affirmative action campaign and some alliances were slowly developing. Many activists, however, delighted in any hint of coalition, or means to build power in the face of "the Nixons." Amid political and economic crises in the early 1970s, in which class solidarity began to fracture along ethnic, racial, and gendered lines, many on the Left longed for a revival of the New Deal coalition and 1960s-style marches and movements. The Coors boycott offered a glimmer of hope, relying on creative, non-traditional organizing. Journalists, however, often focused on white, male union leaders like Baird and Cirkelis, praising them for outreach to communities of color but muting the long history of Chicana/o boycotts as well as the support of Milk, Wallace, and many gay bar patrons. The enthusiastic praise for this coalition obscured some alliances, erased the labor and voices of important actors and non-consumers, and glossed over prior tensions within the boycott coalition.⁴⁷

This sanguine attitude was not limited to the press. Coalition members and boycott leaders also saw immense potential in their fight. Baird and Cirkelis began describing the boycott in lofty terms, claiming to have innovated a completely new form of consumer activism. "There are no pickets, no signs and no-one needed to go from store to store . . . the consuming public is

46. "Union Busting, Racism & Beer," *The People's World*, October 19, 1974; "Trouble on Tap," *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 16–29, 1974; "Anti-racism Fight Targets Coors," *The People's World*, November 30, 1974; "Coors Beer Boycott News Release," December 4, 1974, Folder 20, Box 4, Barber Collection; "Coors in California Accomplishing the Impossible," *The Straight Creek Journal*, December 10–16, 1974; "La Lucha Contra Coors," *El Tecolote*, December 20, 1974; "Coors Beer Boycott Continues: Sets New High for SF," *The Sun Reporter*, December 21, 1974; "Coors Beer Boycott Effective," *Northern California Teamster*, December 1974.

47. "Trouble on Tap," *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 16–29, 1974; Milk, "The Teamsters Ask the Gay Community for Help!," 1974.

so aware these days that they appreciate this method of boycotting” read a press release. Baird and Cirkelis believed this “innovative” word-of-mouth boycott was making headway due to a growing awareness of the coalition itself, as well as the ease with which someone could join the cause. The best and most committed boycotters, added the press release, were “minorities, consumers under twenty-five years of age and the gay community.”⁴⁸

Notwithstanding such exaggerations, the coalition stood on an ever-expanding foundation of active organizational and individual commitments. Throughout 1974 and 1975, letters and resolutions of such support piled into Local 888’s mailbox in San Francisco. Most arrived from representatives of friendly unions, community centers, activist groups, and campus organizations, revealing hubs of boycott support and consumers’ specific reasons to give up Coors beer. Letter writers cast their boycott commitments as consistent with their own values and demonstrative of a willingness to stand in solidarity with others against racism, anti-unionism, and homophobia. Authors also made rhetorical links between their own non-consumption and broader political priorities. The boycott, for supporters, was becoming not so much about pressing for enumerated labor demands but, rather, a means of making visible and strengthening ties across the boundaries of identity politics.⁴⁹

BEYOND LABOR: COALITIONAL BOYCOTT NARRATIVES

Messages that arrived from labor and working-class organizations largely focused on Coors’s anti-union record and the threat it posed to all workers. For these supporters, a win against Coors would resonate widely and bolster other battles against anti-union businesses and politicians. Pledging their support in this battle, thousands of Bay Area bartenders sent pledge cards to Local 888, for example. Rank-and-file Teamsters from Texas to New Jersey followed suit, donating a few dollars each to the anti-Coors cause.⁵⁰

Many proclamations of support also cited the Local’s affirmative action campaign and demonstrated goodwill for people of color as motivation to

48. “Coors Beer Boycott News Release,” December 4, 1974, and Interview Notes with Andy Cirkelis, June 24, 1975, Folder 4, Box 6, Barber Collection. On the boycott tool, see James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Lawrence Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

49. “Boost Boycott Support as Coors Sales Dive,” *The Northern California Teamster*, April 1975.

50. John F. Crowley to Cirkelis, January 6, 1975, and Santa Clara County, AFL-CIO, to Affiliated Locals, January 9, 1975, Folder 2, Box 3, Trujillo Collection.

reject Coors beer. “Our principles are common,” Diana L. Marin, chairperson of the Mission Hiring Hall, wrote to Cirkelis. “We too believe in Affirmative Action to promote Equal Opportunity.” From the Union Women’s Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) in Berkeley, coordinator Joyce Maupin also wrote of her organization’s unanimous support of Local 888, especially for its “progressive steps” toward affirmative action.⁵¹

Native American activists, after conversations with Dan Amerson of the Native American Labor Advisory Council, also lent support to the affirmative action push and boycott, focusing on Coors’s poor record of employing Native Americans in Colorado and California. Letter writers from the Antelope Indian Circle, the American Indian Movement (AIM), and the American Indian Council of Santa Clara County called upon the Local’s pledge to reciprocal solidarity, noting that they hoped Local 888 would lend support to their own fights for equality and justice.⁵²

The Black Panther Party, which had previously declined to throw its weight behind the boycott, also offered its backing. David G. Du Bois, the BPP’s official spokesperson, detailed “the unanimous action of the Central Body of the Black Panther Party to fully endorse and support Teamsters Union 888” in a letter to Cirkelis in May 1975. Du Bois focused especially on Coors’s “refusal to deal fairly with Black workers and with the Black community.” The BPP was thus prepared to engage with the union and support the boycott as needed.⁵³

At the same time, tensions between the union and Chicana/o activists—which had centered on Teamsters’ violent dispute with the UFW—began to diminish. Local 888 repudiated its International union’s actions and actively engaged Chicana/o boycott narratives and accusations of discrimination at Coors. As a result, Baird and the UFW’s attorney, Jerry Cohen, exchanged phone calls and expressions of mutual support for both the Coors boycott and the UFW’s campaigns against anti-union growers of grapes, lettuce, and other produce. Those writing on behalf of Chicana/o organizations, from the Bay Area Venceremos Brigade to La Raza Information Center in San

51. Diana L. Marin to Cirkelis, January 28, 1975, Folder 20, Box 4, Barber Collection; Joyce Maupin to Cirkelis, January 7, 1975, Folder 2, Box 3, Trujillo Collection.

52. Amerson to Cirkelis, September 20, 1974, Ira Hoogler to Cirkelis, April 1, 1975, George Martin to Cirkelis, 1975 (n.d.), and George W. Woodward to Cirkelis, March 17, 1975, Folder 2, Box 3, Trujillo Collection; “Boycott Against Coors Beer as Minorities Protest Discrimination,” *Wassaja: Voice of the Indian (A National Newspaper of Indian America)*, January–February 1975.

53. “On the Line: Bad Beer,” *The People’s World*, March 22, 1975, Folder 18, Box 1, Barber Collection; and David G. Du Bois to Cirkelis, May 6, 1975, Folder 2, Box 3, Trujillo Collection.

Francisco, also made sure to distinguish between Local 888 and other Teamsters, positioning the Coors boycott fight as complementary to the UFW's boycotts. Ernestina Z. Garcia, Vice-President of the Confederación de la Raza Unida in San Jose, lauded the Local for its "high regard for all human beings and we are honored to endorse them."⁵⁴

Additionally, many boycotters narrated their support of Local 888 as consistent with the long-standing Chicana/o fight for access and equity at Coors. Frobén Lozada, chair of the newly created Chicano Studies Department at Oakland's Merritt College, affirmed his boycott commitment as such. "Coors beer has always left a bad taste in the Chicano community because of its consistently racist practices," wrote Lozada. "I also commend your local," he added, "for its assertive direction in the affirmative action area which I know can only have very positive and beneficial effects with respect to the Chicanos and other ethnic groups." The Santa Clara County chapter of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), as well as the national American GI Forum (AGIF), echoed Lozada's historicized boycott narrative in their declarations of support.⁵⁵

Chicana/o radicals, especially college students, tied their support to an understanding of the boycott as an important part of a Chicana/o activist identity. From the outspoken Freddie Trujillo at CU-Boulder to Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) chapters at UC Riverside and Loyola Marymount, students called upon fellow Chicana/os to recognize Coors as their enemy. A letter to the Colton, California, *El Chicano* made this clear, noting, "it is morally wrong for Chicanos to support those who discriminate against fellow Chicanos," and trumpeting the "practice of boycotting, picketing, etc. as positive vehicles to eradicate racism." Another piece, printed in *Sedition*, *El Mundo*, and *La Razón Mestiza*, reminded Chicana/os that Coors beer was "fermentado con la sangre de Chicanos," or brewed with the blood of Chicana/os. To drink Coors was to betray one's community, one's blood; to boycott was to defend and take pride in that identity.⁵⁶

54. Felicia Gustín to the Coors Boycott Support Committee, 1975 (n.d.), Regina Sanchez to Cirkelis, April 7, 1975, Regina B. Anaya to Cirkelis, March 5, 1975, and Ernestina Z. Garcia to Cirkelis, March 20, 1975, Folder 2, Box 3, Trujillo Collection.

55. Frobén Lozada to Cirkelis, January 28, 1975 and Antonio G. Morales to Baird, May 6, 1975, Folder 2, Box 3, Trujillo Collection; and *The Forumeer: Official Publication of the American GI Forum*, 1975.

56. "Open Letter to the Community," *El Chicano*, February 20, 1975; Clippings from *VIDA* (Loyola Marymount University, MeChA), February 1975, Folder 13, Box 3, Trujillo Collection; "Boycott Coors! Chale Con Coors!," *Sedition*, March 1975; "Boycott Coors!," *El Mundo*, April 23,

In this way, the Coors boycott embodied an important symbolic and community-building role for Chicana/os. Leveling charges of discrimination and immorality at Coors, authors and activists positioned the beer and company as antithetical to Chicana/o liberation. *The Forumeer*, the AGIF's monthly publication, conversely equated the boycott with liberty and patriotism, superimposing the call "DON'T BUY COORS BEER" atop an image of Lady Liberty's torch. Freedom and liberation, in this case, would be won through the boycott. The AGIF also took on Coors in the courts, filing a third-party class-action against "those racists" before the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC). The Chicana/o boycott pressed onward, increasingly linked to a larger set of politicized anti-Coors narratives by the mid-1970s.⁵⁷

Gay boycotters similarly crafted narratives that cast Coors as antithetical to gay, minority, and labor rights. The Ad Hoc Committee and Local 888, by contrast, were progressive and welcoming, championing gay rights and affirmative action. What's more, Baird and Cirkelis made good on their commitments to secure a beer driver position for an openly gay employee. The Local found a position for Howard Wallace as a delivery driver for the San Francisco Pabst distributor. In April 1975, Wallace became the first "out-front gay person" working for a beer distributor in the Bay Area. Though Wallace later shrugged off the significance, since "well, there's always been hundreds of thousands of gays in the Teamsters union," he acknowledged the symbolic impact of the Teamsters bringing in "a gay." His employment presented a bridge between the labor and gay liberation movements. Soon after Wallace got his job, another young gay man, Terry Howe, began hauling Budweiser in San Francisco. As of July 1975, Baird was also working to secure a job for an "out . . . gay woman" driver with an Acme Beer distributor.⁵⁸

In addition to the union's press for new gay hires, Baird and Cirkelis pushed for more forceful anti-discrimination clauses in existing contracts and championed gay rights. "In my duties as a Teamster official," Baird wrote in

1975; "Boycott Coors," *La Razón Mestiza*, Summer 1975; and "Coors Unites Teamsters, Chicanos," *The Colorado Daily*, July 14, 1975.

57. *The Forumeer*, February and April 1975; and *The Forumeer*, "EEOC Taking On Coors Brewing Co.," April 1975, 4.

58. While gay men and lesbians have always been part of the labor movement, many became more outspoken by the 1970s. Notes from Don Miesen, April–July, 1975, Folder 1:03, Boycott Collection; "Gay to Join Teamsters," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, April 19–May 2, 1975; Wallace, Interview with Frank, April 8, 1995, Miriam Frank Oral History Collection; Baird, Interview with Frank, April 11, 1995, Miriam Frank Oral History Collection; Frank, *Out in the Union*.

a press release, “I have seen wide discrimination throughout many communities. I have worked diligently to try and change attitudes, and I feel I have been somewhat successful in challenging the discrimination that existed throughout the years in the Gay community.” Baird and Local 888 publicly supported the California state assembly bill, AB 633, that proposed to extend fair employment protections to gay workers. The union also eliminated gendered pronouns in its Santa Rosa contract, shifting to the gender neutral “employees,” and it added “sex orientation” to non-discrimination clauses in other contracts. Announcing these advances, Baird reiterated his commitment to “work for Gay rights, not only in the City of San Francisco, but throughout the United States of America.”⁵⁹

Boycott support from non-labor communities buoyed Baird and Cirkelis’s spirits. Said Cirkelis: “You had to wage [the fight] with the community, organized, unorganized, minority and majority culture, seek out their groups, lay out the facts before them and obtain their assistance and they will see the validity of the boycott and join in.” As a result, Cirkelis boasted, consumers were happily avoiding Coors beer. Baird echoed this enthusiasm: “Well, the boycott is very much here, and it is stronger than ever before.” By 1975, local Coors sales were down by over 30 percent. “The success of the Coors Beer Boycott,” noted a press release, “belongs to the community organization composed of Third World, all Minority, Gay, Student’s [sic], Women, Political, Labor united and many others interested in the welfare of their fellow human beings.” This was no longer merely a fight for beer drivers’ jobs. Through concrete overtures, the fight of one union had ballooned into a diverse coalition’s campaign for equality and justice.⁶⁰

COORS AND THE NEW RIGHT

While the Coors boycott—and its diverse group of supporters—found a thriving home in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1970s, it was by no means limited to the urban West. Bay Area boycotters also found an audience with leftists nationwide. They were able to do so by making broad

59. Local 888 Press Releases, April 29 and June 17, 1975, Folder 1:03, Boycott Collection; and Baird to Assemblyman John Foran, April 15, 1975, Folder 4, Box 1, Coors Boycott and Strike Support Coalition of Colorado Records Collection, Auraria Library Archives and Special Collections, Denver, Colorado.

60. “Boost Boycott Support as Coors Sales Dive,” *The Northern California Teamster*, April 1975; Baird, News Release, April 3, 1975, Folder 20, Box 4, Barber Collection; Interview notes with Cirkelis, June 24, 1975, Folder 4, Box 6, Barber Collection.

appeals, calling upon the strength of prior boycott coalitions, and engaging in heated, salient political debates—of which the Coors family was at the center. Beginning with a highly publicized nomination fight in 1975, in which brewery executive Joe Coors vied for a seat on the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the Coors name became synonymous with the New Right. The boycott thus became a prominent method of resistance.

The boycott campaign gained a stake in national politics by mid-decade thanks to the growing fame (or notoriety) of the Coors family. Linked by name to the boycotted product, Joe Coors dragged his family's beer with him on his rise to political celebrity. Using his extensive wealth to fund the New Right and, later, vying for prominent positions himself, Joe Coors cemented the beer's negative associations. Boycotters in Bay Area used Coors's political career to magnify boycott calls and recast their coalition as standing on the front lines of a national political battle. The flexibility of the boycott—as individual, collective, local, regional, and national—enabled activists to use it as a political, economic, and symbolic tool. This campaign was not a passive or ineffective one but, rather, an accessible means of building solidarity and mounting a challenge to the New Right, via Coors.

Scholars have often placed Joe Coors in the pantheon of late twentieth-century business conservatives. His tenure as a Regent for the University of Colorado from 1966 to 1972 (during which time he butted heads with the Students for Democratic Society chapter on campus), his personal and financial investments in the conservative Heritage Foundation, as well as his close ties to Ronald Reagan, place him alongside conservative visionaries like Barry Goldwater and General Electric's Lemuel Boulware. Yet Coors was not merely a bit player in the history of the New Right—he financed some of its most prominent figures and organizations and, as a result, became the face (and name) of the movement for many Americans in the 1970s.⁶¹ The link between Joe Coors and the New Right became clear in 1974 and 1975, after he received a nomination to the CPB, the body that oversaw public funding for radio and television. Controversy soon followed. In a highly publicized confirmation hearing, Coors-as-boycotted-product and Coors-as-nominee existed in the same rhetorical space. The company's obstinacy in labor-management relations, noted opponents, rendered the man unfit for public service and, moreover, Coors's status as the nominee of Republican presidents bolstered boycott efforts.

61. Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*; Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*; Self, *All in the Family*.

Richard Nixon nominated Coors in August 1974, in a routine appointment for a minor post—a nomination that Gerald Ford repeated. These presidential nods drew national attention to Coors’s politics. Exposés and reports raised questions about the links between Coors and the New Right. “What once appeared to be separate stories about movements within the right wing,” noted the left-wing *Group Research Report* in March 1975, “are beginning to take on a pattern showing the Colorado brewer . . . taking on an increasing right-wing role.” In May 1975, *The Washington Post*’s Stephen Isaacs published a series of articles on Coors’s influence—financial or otherwise—in conservative circles. Papers nationwide reprinted the series and many readers diligently clipped and saved the articles. “There is an increasing segment in the consuming public,” noted Cirkelis in San Francisco, “that has become aware of Coors’s economic abuses and the potential of its threat to civil liberties as exposed by Stephen Isaacs.”⁶² Many activists and consumers were “uniformly repulsed by the idea of the puritan from Golden gaining another vehicle to practice his heavy-handed repression of opposing views,” added the *Straight Creek Journal*. Throughout the summer of 1975, outrage over Coors’s nomination reached a fever pitch. Joe Coors became one of the most controversial public figures of the year. Indeed, that summer, *People* magazine profiled Coors and his wife, Holly Coors, with the headline: “Reclusive Joe Coors Peddles Beer and Tough Right-Wing Line.”⁶³

By the time confirmation hearings began in September, Coors’s politics were widely known, and a normally mundane confirmation process

62. Nixon nominated Coors to the CPB the day before resigning the presidency; Ford re-submitted the nomination to Congress six months later. “Brewer and Foundation Increase Role in Right Wing & Media,” *Group Research Report*, March 26, 1975, Folder 1, Box 97, Group Research Records, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library (hereafter cited as Group Research Records); Isaacs, “Coors Beer—and Politics—Move East,” “Coors Bucks Network ‘Bias,’” “Coors Backed Unit Seeks Defeat of Hill ‘Radicals,’” “Coors’ Capital Connection: Heritage Foundation Fuels His Conservative Drive,” and “Brewer Pours Millions into Right-Wing Organizations,” *The Washington Post*, May 4–11, 1975; “TVN Network Contract with USIA Is Reported,” *The Washington Post*, June 7, 1975; Local 888 Boycott News Release, June 11, 1975, Folder 39, Box 5, Barber Collection.

63. Pluria Marshall to the Office of President Gerald R. Ford, March 24, 1975, Folder 1, Box 117, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; “Reject the Coors Nomination,” *The Straight Creek Journal*, April 3, 1975; “Coors nomination Slipping Through,” *The Straight Creek Journal*, June 5, 1975; “A Bad Choice for PBS,” *The Boulder Daily Camera*, June 8, 1975; “Coors Believes Reagan the Answer to Nation’s Woes,” *The Denver Post*, July 3, 1975; “Reclusive Joe Coors Peddles Beer and Tough Right-Wing Line,” *People*, July 7, 1975.

threatened to become a spectacle. The Committee's Communications Subcommittee, chaired by Senator John Pastore (D-RI), faced a dilemma over how to approach the nomination. The *Washington Post* reported, in fact, that the Subcommittee had informally asked the White House to withdraw Coors's name in light of the media frenzy. Quipped Pastore, "I would hope in the future the White House could nominate people who are not so controversial."⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the "controversial" nomination proceeded. Coors's hearings, which clearly made some on the Subcommittee uneasy, were scheduled well after those of Ford's seven other nominees. The Subcommittee allotted three days for Coors, whereas other nominees' hearings were expected to last a few hours. From September 9 to 11, senators and the press, as well as supporters and opponents of Coors, hotly debated Coors's politics and reports of discrimination and anti-unionism at his company, giving voice to concerns that many activists across the West had long held about Coors. Dr. William E. Hanks of the Pittsburgh NAACP, for example, cited friends in Colorado to make this point. "We'll never get a fair shake if Coors is confirmed," he quoted a Chicano as stating. "He has not been in tune with the minority community because he's never tried. If he's appointed to the CPB, a title won't make him change." Others feared that Coors's seat on the Board would "simply further racism in public broadcasting." In their testimonies, men and women imagined a chain reaction of extremism, in which Joe Coors's links with conservative organizations, the New Right, and his company's proven discriminatory past would adversely harm public broadcasting.⁶⁵

Most senators on the subcommittee were convinced of the potential danger of confirming a conservative the likes of, as the United Auto Workers' general counsel Stephen Schlossberg put it, "reckless adventurers who are the spiritual descendants of the little old lady in tennis shoes," a reference to Goldwaterites in Southern California. In a vote of eleven to six, the Subcommittee tabled the confirmation. Although he had risen to national prominence largely as a symbol of the New Right, the beer magnate would not take a seat on the CPB. In the process, his company's beer also took on that

64. "First We Had the Beer; Now Coors the Man Is Here," *The Washington Post*, September 9, 1975.

65. "Coors Foe Cites 'Censor' Fear," *The Denver Post*, September 10, 1975; *Hearings Before the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate, Ninety-Fourth Congress, First Session on September 9, 10, and 11, 1975, Joseph Coors, to Be a Member, Board of Directors, Corporation for Public Broadcasting*, 225-27, 248-50, 269-71.

symbolism and opponents transformed their pragmatic struggle into a broader political cause.⁶⁶

Boycotters hit the jackpot with Joe Coors's celebrity, which established a clear divide between the boycott coalition and all that Coors symbolized. Baird and Cirkelis reinforced this symbolism in press releases throughout 1975. "Coors beer sales started slipping, when President Gerald Ford announced he was a Coors drinker. Former President Richard Nixon was also known to drink Coors." Coors was no longer just "the anti-union beer"; it was now also the beer of detested Presidents and the New Right. The Bay Area *Fifth Wheel* put it bluntly: the beer "is becoming a symbol for conservatism, anti-unionism and racism."⁶⁷ To boycott Coors, then, was to not only reject these convictions, but to join a diverse community of activists. Boycott supporters and organizers utilized increasingly radical, capitalist, and anti-imperialist language, emphasizing common experiences of oppression—signaling a radicalization of the boycott. For example, in one of their most insistent press releases, Baird and Cirkelis enjoined:

Discontented workers, students, blacks, browns, and alienated women all seem to be groping for some common cause around which to unite. Thus we are not, and we do not believe there is any reason to be, disheartened. . . . We ask, therefore what you intend to do about Coors and its policies. We of Local 888, along with scores of Labor organizations, minority and community groups throughout our country, have initiated a very effective boycott against Coors beer.⁶⁸

The call to boycott was a call to arms, a proven "effective" tool to counter the New Right. It was, as Cirkelis said, a fight against all that Coors represented. As Coors rose to national prominence, boycott rhetoric radicalized. "Are we going to stand by like sheep," Cirkelis inveighed, "and await our turn to be dehumanized and finally discarded, or are we going to face up to the

66. "Senate Committee Kills Coors PBS Nomination," *Austin American-Statesman*, October 31, 1975; Stephen I. Schlossberg, Draft Testimony, September 1975, Folder 1, Box 96, Group Research Records. For more on the "little old lady" as a reference to right-wing extremists, see William Safire, *Safire's Political Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 395–96.

67. Local 888 News Release, May 6, 1975, Folder 20, Box 4, Barber Collection; "Coors Boycott Gathers Steam," *The Dispatcher*, May 16, 1975; Local 888 Boycott News Release, July 15, 1975, Folder 4, Box 26, Series 3, Centro de Acción Social Autónomo (CASA) Papers, 1963–1978, Stanford University Archives; "Coors Foams at the Head: New Alliance Leads Boycott," *The Fifth Wheel*, August 1975.

68. Local 888 Press Release, June 13, 1975, Folder 39, Box 5, Tim Flores Papers, Western History/Genealogy Department, Denver Public Library.

threat, recognize our responsibility, gather our strength, commit our energies, and do what has to be done, not only to sustain organized Labor's interests, but advance them to benefit the unorganized and consumers as well?" Yet Local 888's eagerness to be in coalition and fight Coors on multiple fronts was not universally embraced. Higher-ups in the Teamsters began to see the union and its boycott as "too active politically."⁶⁹

Indeed, in the summer of 1975, Baird was summoned to the regional Teamsters headquarters, where he was castigated for the Local's ongoing collaboration with the UFW and its newly politicized rhetoric. Teamster leaders alleged that Baird "was breaking ranks" in his political and coalitional efforts, removed him and Cirkelis from their posts, and demanded they cease boycotting. Local 888's boycott of Coors, a flourishing site of rank-and-file rebellion and community activism, thus met its end at the hands of labor bureaucrats. Within the next year, the union itself was dissolved, broken up into other area Teamster locals.⁷⁰

BOYCOTT MOMENTUM AND THE COALITION'S GROWTH

Even without Local 888, the Coors boycott pressed on. In large part, the campaign continued because the union itself had become tangential to the boycott, which had embraced multiple struggles and linked up with national politics. It had become self-perpetuating and survived on word-of-mouth alone, in fulfillment of Baird's vision of an "innovative" kind of boycott. By sustaining a narrative of new alliances, community power, and political urgency, the boycott continued to appeal to union members, activists, and consumers, even without the official sanction of the Teamsters. The boycott of the Colorado beer was quickly becoming a mainstay among the politically active Left, and "beer tastes based on political convictions," were the new, hip thing, wrote one disgruntled consumer in a 1976 letter to *Playboy*.⁷¹

This self-perpetuating boycott was not a passing phase. The diverse coalition of boycotters carried on in their work for nearly twenty more years,

69. Ibid.; Interview with Cirkelis, June 24, 1975, Folder 4, Box 6, Barber Collection; and Local 888 Press Release, July 9, 1973, Folder 14, Box 3, Trujillo Collection.

70. "The Teamsters Drop Boycott of Coors Beer," July 24, 1975, Folder 18, Box 1, Barber Collection; Interview with Cirkelis, August, 1975, Folder 4, Box 6, Barber Collection; "COORS BOYCOTT SQUASHED," *The Fifth Wheel*, September 1975; "Western Conference Dissolves Local 888," *The Fifth Wheel*, June 1976; Baird, Interview with Frank, April 11, 1995, Miriam Frank Oral History Collection.

71. "Bubbling Battle of the Brewers," *Time*, August 18, 1975; "COORS BOYCOTT SQUASHED," *The Fifth Wheel*, September 1975; "Beer and Politics," *Playboy*, April 1976.

using alliances forged in the boycott as springboards for other campaigns. The politicization of the boycott intensified as some of Joe Coors's allies, notably Ronald Reagan, rose to political prominence. The boycott coalition that emerged in the Bay Area was not a solitary example of diverse coalition politics in one particularly activist city, for the coalition expanded and found supporters from Los Angeles to Boston for decades to come.

Morris Kight (who in 1977 demurred that union guys were a bit misunderstood) was behind a lively boycott effort in Los Angeles, which he dubbed the "Pink Triangle Chapter" of the Coors boycott. His aforementioned comment came amid an intensification of the boycott, as unionized Coors brewery workers launched a bitter strike at the company's headquarters in Colorado—a reaction to what they described as repeated human and labor rights abuses. Boycott coalitions continued to flourish and fused rhetoric of solidarity, political threats, and pro-unionism to amplify the boycott call and support strikers. In the gay community, especially in California, boycott narratives from earlier in the decade were recycled and intensified. Harvey Milk continued to insist that the gay and lesbian community's participation in the boycott was not only morally important, but also crucial for growing their own movement:

The point is that if the gay community continues the boycott with the Spanish and labor groups then we will be fighting towards common goals. Ending discrimination. The point is that we will be also building bridges with other groups who in turn will start to fight for our rights too. And more groups may then join the struggle. The time is here when all who are discriminated against in any way should join forces. It's a common battle.⁷²

Their joint efforts made waves. In a 1977 press conference in San Francisco, representatives from Coors brewery workers, the Stonewall Democratic Club, the State Gay Caucus of Democratic Clubs, the San Francisco Tavern Guild, and the Gay Action/Labor Committee together reported that 90 percent of San Francisco's gay bars were still boycotting. In Los Angeles, activists vowed to oust the beer from all gay bars in the city on New Year's Day 1978, promoting the boycott through local pickets and public-shaming of those bars still serving Coors (by one count, thirty-nine). Boycotters reminded readers of the local publication, *Data Boy*, "L.A.'S BIGGEST CLUBS Are

72. Milk, Draft of "Reactionary Beer" Speech, 1977, Box 9, Series 2d, Milk Archives.

Doing Fantastic WITHOUT COORS BEER.” When Studio One, a West Hollywood dance club, pulled out its Coors taps, the company reportedly lost a \$1.25 million account. Striking Coors brewery workers boasted: “the GAYCOTT is still on. The boycott just seems to build and build.”⁷³

Indeed, as it expanded, the boycott remained rooted in diverse alliances and participants and leaders made certain to highlight these links. At the 1981 Christopher Street West parade in Los Angeles, Kight’s “Pink Triangle Chapter” trained volunteers at the Coors boycott booth to emphasize solidarity between the gay and lesbian community, Chicana/os, and labor. If someone were to ask why gay activists were involved in the “Chicano/Latino/Hispano” boycott, Kight advised volunteers to respond: “Because it was right to do so, and because some of us are members of all those groups, since we are everywhere.” And for questions about work with the labor movement, Kight detailed unions’ work in the 1978 Briggs Initiative fight and opined that “we think we should be as loyal as they were, besides their issue is a correct issue.” Armed with these details and answers, volunteers collected over 1,100 signatures in two days. Fifty-five pages of scribbled signatures bear witness to the boycott’s ongoing power.⁷⁴

With Reagan’s inauguration to the presidency in 1981, coalition members continued to share concerns about Coors and conservatism, making boycott work all the more crucial. When Coors expanded its distribution to the Rust Belt, boycott narratives followed and coalitions emerged in new cities. Michigan’s labor and activist communities, for instance, fiercely pushed the boycott when Coors beer entered the state in early 1986. Alongside labor unions headquartered in Detroit and the regional Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), the LGBT group, Michigan Organization for Human Rights (MOHR), spearheaded boycott operations in the city. In late 1985, MOHR convinced Detroit’s City Council to pass a pro-boycott resolution. Craig Covey, MOHR’s director, noted the importance of boycotting Coors—a “symbol of the right wing in the U.S.” “You can let the Coors family know that you don’t support their activities,” he urged Detroit’s *Metro Times* readers, “by simply not ordering the beer in a bar or walking past the

73. “L.A.’s Biggest Clubs Are Doing Fantastic without Coors Beer,” *Data Boy*, February 8, 1978; “Brewery Workers Local 366,” *The Colorado Labor Advocate*, February 3, 1978.

74. Kight Mailgram to the Guinness Book of World Records, June 18, 1981, Folder 2, Box 5, Kight Papers; “Memorandum for Volunteer Staff of Coors Boycott Committee Booth at LA’s Christopher St. West Celebration” and Petition Signature Sheets, June 20–21, 1981, Folders 1:01 and 1:06, Boycott Collection; Kight, “Coors Boycott Leaps Ahead!,” *Stonewall Speaks*, July 1981.

coolers in the beer and party store.” From the University of Michigan–Flint’s boycott declaration to statewide Coors “throw-out” parties, Michigan’s boycott was vibrant and diverse, just as it was elsewhere—and the brewery barely clung to 5 percent of the state’s beer market by 1987.⁷⁵

Stories such as these—of boycott victories and alliances—could be found in nearly every U.S. state by the close of the 1980s. Sustained by political realities, long-lasting commitments to one another, and radical language of solidarity, the boycott of Coors beer proved to be anything but impossible. Coalitional politics thrived under the boycott and exemplified an important, creative, and malleable form of activism—a way to, as Covey noted, show businesses and politicians how one really felt. It seemed, too, that the company listened. In the 1980s and 1990s, Coors invested hundreds of millions of dollars in minority communities, signing “fair share” or profit-returning agreements with Chicana/o, Latina/o, and black organizations, funding AIDS research, offering same-sex partner healthcare coverage, and running advertising campaigns that touted the diversity of their employees.⁷⁶

The Coors boycott—a campaign built on “impossible” ties—highlights important, sustained, and creative activism in and beyond the 1970s. While the move to coalitional politics, like electoral politics, may have been rooted in economic, political, and movement conservatism, it would be myopic to see these moves as cautious or backwards-looking. Participants themselves certainly did not think as much. Instead, they took pride in their boycott and cheered each advance of the boycott coalition as another victory against business conservatives and Reaganites.

The Coors boycott and its energetic supporters, from the fiery Kight to college students in the Rust Belt, thus offer windows on the reshaping of

75. Dave Sickler, Summary of Coors Boycott Report, May 1985, Folder 1, Box 4, AFL-CIO, Region 11 Collection (1952–1987), University of Colorado at Boulder, University Archives; “Coors Brings Beer and Controversy to Detroit,” *Metro Times [Detroit]*, January 22–28, 1986; John Nichols, “FLOC Objection Ends Brewery’s Conference Role,” *The Toledo Blade*, April 23, 1987; UAW Memo on Michigan-Area Boycotts, August 19, 1987, Folder 17, Box 93, Subseries A, Series IX, UAW President’s Office: Owen Bieber Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.

76. Coors executives never openly acknowledged that they were responding to boycotters’ complaints, instead framing themselves as leaders in corporate social responsibility. Opponents saw the company’s efforts as attempts to buy out the boycott coalition. For more on progressive company policies, see “Coors Seeks to Regain Cachet Using \$635 Million Leverage,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 1984; “Coors Becomes Largest Colorado Corporation to Extend Full Benefits for Same-Sex Partners,” *The Rocky Mountain News*, July 8, 1995; G. Christina Mora, *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats and Media Constructed a New American* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), Chapter 2.

leftist activism in the wake of the 1960s. Faced with economic crises, diminishing political clout, and internal divisions, women and men on the Left did not retreat but, rather, moved boldly into coalitional politics. To take a politicized approach to beer preferences (giving weight to purchasing decisions on bar stools and in liquor stores) was to target an opponent and to imagine oneself as part of a vibrant movement. It may not have made as much of an impression as marches or civil disobedience, but the Coors boycott was, for many, an important thing. Like Kight, Wallace, Milk, and Baird, many participants understood the boycott as an innovative means of protest and power-building.

In 1980, political commentator Harry C. Boyte published *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement*. For Boyte, as for boycotters, “grassroots activism” and consumer movements were portents of a new kind of revolt, in which activists and non-activists forged new alliances as a means to “adjust to the new environment of slow growth, inflation, urban fiscal crises, and corporate reaction.”⁷⁷ The Coors boycott, bringing together “hardhat” union members, Chicana/os, gay activists, and other people of color offered just that—signaling new efforts at organizing and resisting the New Right. In this case, the impetus and rhetoric for activism emerged from the multiracial West—indicating that just as Coors took western politics to a national scale, so too did boycott calls in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Denver resonate widely.

Indeed, activism through non-consumption, pragmatic politics, and broad rhetoric proved inspiring and applicable to leftists across the country in the late twentieth century. As one Los Angeles-area postal worker and boycotter, Cheryl Maddow Dowden, later recalled, “people were inspired by the fact that the Coors boycott did go on for a long time. . . . I think that strength carried to other issues in other unions and helped them feel like, well, they can do it, we can do it.”⁷⁸ In urban California, connections made during the boycott fueled vibrant opposition to anti-gay politicians and legislation. From Nebraska to Massachusetts, anti-Coors alliances and arguments were redeployed in protests against Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority and U.S. involvement in Nicaragua in the 1980s.⁷⁹ More broadly, this organizing coincided

77. Harry C. Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), xii.

78. Cheryl Maddow Dowden, Interview with Author, February 9, 2017.

79. See, for example: Morris Kight, Memorandum, March 10, 1981, Folder 4, Box 4, Kight Papers; Eastern Nebraska Socialist Party, “Boycott Coors Beer,” 1987, Folder 23, Box 25, Francisco

with emergent oppositional politics in cities across the Southwest and the West. In Los Angeles, the multiracial coalition that elected Tom Bradley as mayor in 1973 overlapped with boycott activism; and ten years later, Federico Peña's election as Denver's mayor was made possible by a coalition that looked similar to that of the Coors boycott. The anti-Coors movement thus highlights the persistence of coalitional politics in the urban West.⁸⁰

The boycott of Coors beer may also offer lessons for activists in the age of Donald Trump, both in consumer and coalitional organizing. Then, as today, it was not enough to simply tell folks to reject a product—outreach had to be meaningful, reciprocal commitments had to be demonstrated, and public narratives needed to seize upon the boycotted product's name and notoriety. For those today who seek to launch successful boycott campaigns, the anti-Coors movement offers a pragmatic organizing model in which leaders learned from their mistakes, employed inclusive language of solidarity and rights, and engaged with the national political zeitgeist. Activism in the twenty-first century may well require similar tools to press back against the renewed conservative ascendancy, for as Baird, Milk, and others demonstrated, the simple act of rejecting beer can be a simultaneously radical and pragmatic step toward solidarity and political change. ■

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E. Martinez Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico; National Association of Chicano Studies, "Resolution on Coors Beer Boycott," March 1990, Folder 17, Box 1, Eduardo Hernández-Chavez and Ysaura Bernal-Enríquez Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

80. Carlos Muñoz, Jr. and Charles Henry, "Rainbow Coalitions in Four Big Cities: San Antonio, Denver, Chicago, and Philadelphia," *American Political Science Association* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 604–6.