

I Knew I Could Do This Work

**Seven Strategies That Promote
Women's Activism and
Leadership in Unions**



INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S POLICY RESEARCH

About this Report

This report was conducted under IWPR's Democracy and Society Program, which identifies and promotes strategies for increasing women's civic and political participation, raising the visibility of women's values and concerns in public life, and ensuring that women's voices are central to politics and U.S. policymaking. Support for IWPR's research on union women and publication of the report was provided by the Berger Marks Foundation.

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Activism and Leadership in Unions

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Introduction: Promoting Women's Union Leadership

“Traditionally in our society, [women have] been at a disadvantage. And the only way to change that is to stand together and have a voice, and make yourselves heard out there.... I think of the union as being for everyone, but it certainly has been a tool for women. It has been a way for women to do better for themselves.”

“I knew I could do [union] work, but ... if I didn't have anybody to say, 'Come on, I know you can do it,' I probably ... wouldn't be where I am now.”

Women are an increasing proportion of union membership, thanks to their higher labor force participation and growing unionization in the jobs they dominate, such as nursing, teaching, and clerical jobs. As of 2004, 11 percent of female and 14 percent of male workers were unionized (Milkman 2007); in all, 44 percent of union members are women (AFL-CIO 2007a). Although women are still a minority of the unionized workforce, the majority of new workers organized over the past two decades has been women, and soon women will be the majority of union members (Bronfenbrenner 2005b, 52-53). In some unions, women already are the majority. For example, as of 2000, women are 60 percent of the American Federation of Teachers. They are 52 percent of members of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), 50 percent of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and 51 percent of Communications Workers of America (CWA; Milkman 2007).

Although women make up a large proportion of union members, they are not well represented within union leadership. Women are only about 21 percent of lead union organizers (Bronfenbrenner 2005). Within top union positions, women are also poorly represented, even in unions with strong female membership. For example, women are 39 percent of top leaders in the AFT and 30 percent in UNITE. They are 38 percent of top leaders in AFSCME, 32 percent in the SEIU, and just 12 percent in the CWA. Based on these numbers, AFSCME has the highest ratio of women's leadership to membership, but in no case does women's leadership match their level of involvement (Milkman 2007).

This report is designed to remedy women's lower levels of representation in leadership by promoting women's activism within unions across the country at the local, state, regional, and national levels. Women's increased activism can lead to higher levels of leadership as they gain the skills, confidence, and networks to embrace positions of authority and break down obstacles to their advancement in union work.

Based on interviews with union organizers and activists throughout the United States, the report explores three main questions:

- What are the main obstacles that discourage women's union activism and leadership?
- How can unions help overcome them?
- How can women's movement organizing better support union women?

Summary of Findings

Overall, women describe six main obstacles to their involvement and leadership:

- Too few women serve at the top of union leadership, where they could serve as role models, support other women's activism, and promote women's perspectives.
- As a more vulnerable workforce, women and people of color have an acute fear of retribution by employers through firing or other tactics.
- Women often express discomfort with public authority and leadership based on an understanding that these are not appropriately "female" roles.
- Unions place inadequate emphasis on the issues, concerns, and priorities of women workers.
- Women have particular difficulties making room for the time demands of union work, especially because of their competing family obligations.
- Women have insufficient awareness of the benefits of unions to their lives as workers.

Unions can pursue the following seven strategies to promote women's voices and leadership:

- Address women's priorities using imagery and language that reflects their experiences—and create ways to find out what their concerns and values are.

- Create and support formal mentoring programs for women.
- Create and support dedicated space for women to address their concerns.
- Put more women in leadership positions, locally and nationally.
- Highlight the importance of women's contributions.
- Provide flexible options for involvement by providing child care and other supports, finding creative times and places to meet, and looking for women's input on these and other strategies.
- Provide training on effective ways to mobilize women.

Women's organizations can better support union women by promoting and pursuing stronger collaborative relationships at the local level.

- To accomplish this, local women's groups can reach out to unions, and local unions can reach out to women's groups.
- National women's organizations can also put additional resources into women's organizing at the grassroots level and encourage local women's organizations to do outreach to union women.
- National labor unions can also encourage their locals to pursue these partnerships.

Why Promote Women's Union Activism?

Women's active involvement in unions is important for many reasons. On a basic level, unions are good for women workers. Unionized women earn 30 percent more than non-unionized women, and union workers have more paid leave and are more likely to have health insurance (AFL-CIO 2007b). And as more and more women work, their wages, benefits, and job characteristics have far-reaching impact on their families and communities. By 2005, 60 percent of women were in the labor force, including about three out of four women with children under 18 (Cohany and Sok 2007).

Promoting women and their perspectives more visibly within unions can benefit them even further by ensuring that their issues as workers are prioritized in all aspects of union work, from contract negotiations and representing individual workers to lobbying and other political work. Because unions shape policy and practice in both economic and political life, having women at the table has broad implications for their well-being, their autonomy, and their rights as workers.

Research also suggests that women are powerful and effective leaders who can benefit unions as a whole. For example, women lead organizers have higher success rates winning certification elections than men do; women of color have the highest win rates of all (Bronfrenner 2005).

Finally, promoting women's leadership in unions can lead to their visible leadership in other areas of public life, including politics, both by encouraging them to expand their personal expectations and goals and by modeling women's leadership.

Methodology and Goals of the Report

This report is based on a series of qualitative, in-depth interviews with 15 union activists from diverse backgrounds across the country. Seven are white, five are Latina, and three are African American. Eight are over 50, five are aged 30-49, and two are in their 20s. Some are professional union organizers, while others are active within their locals (none are staff within national structures). They are involved in three major unions: eight in AFSCME, six in CWA, and one with SEIU. Those who are not professional union staff work as journalists, janitors, clerical staff, horticulturists, interpreters, nurses, and teachers.

The report presents an overview of the obstacles that women say they face in union work and recommendations for strategies to overcome them. In its presentation, the report relies heavily on women's own stories, letting them speak for themselves. This structure was deliberately chosen in response to the women we interviewed. Many suggested that they would benefit from hearing the stories of other union women, as role models for women's leadership and sisters in their work to promote both workers' rights and the perspectives of women.

We hope the report will be used by unions and other groups to develop women's roles as activists and leaders. We also hope that it will increase the visibility and influence of women's voices and involvement in public life.

Obstacles to Women in Union Organizing

Women describe a wide range of obstacles to mobilizing women's activism and promoting their leadership. Some of these issues are common to both men and women, such as fear of retribution by employers, but may be exacerbated by gender. Others, like inadequate representation in leadership, are unique to women and other disadvantaged groups, such as people of color. In every case, they are issues that can be addressed by union strategies targeting women.

Fewer Women at the Top

As women have increased their labor force participation, they have become a greater percentage of union members and activists, but their leadership has not yet trickled up proportionately. As noted above, women do not yet have adequate representation in union leadership.

Putting women in visible leadership positions is extremely important to cultivating a sense of efficacy in and commitment to women throughout unions. Where women have a hard time making inroads into leadership, they are less able to mentor others, serve as role models, or provide expanded supports for women. Women's lack of leadership also sends a signal that unions do not prioritize or value women's contributions and concerns, much less see them as potential leaders.

Participants in our interviews recognize the importance of putting women in positions of leadership.

Women's issues are not going to be addressed if there are no women in the room. Just ain't going to happen. So you put women at the table and they're going to bring the issues to the discussion, but also, I believe, build the discussion equally. They're going to contribute as well to the issues of men because that's what women do.

You want to have the people working with them, and leading them, reflect their group.

At the same time, women see a lack of sustained dedication to promoting women's leadership, particularly in settings that are not primarily made up of women workers. One, for example, told the following story:

One of the girls from my Local was going to run for President of our Local, and she felt pressure from our staff and from other people in the executive board to not run, because a guy was running who has more experience, has been around longer. And she stepped down and decided not to run. The pressure came from the Local, and it was a very interesting situation. I was very surprised.

The importance of modeling women's leadership should not be underestimated. Research in politics, for example, shows that women's candidacies for public office increase women's interest in politics and voting (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). Having women in leadership positions in unions can serve women in a similar way—by sending a signal that union leadership is not just a man's world, that women are an accepted part of union leadership and culture. This can open up the possibilities that other women perceive for themselves.

Fear of Retribution

Another prominent theme articulated by union women is the importance of fear as an obstacle to organizing. Fear is observed by women as they tried to involve all workers, but particularly women and people of color, in union activism. Generally workers are afraid of being fired or subjected to some other retribution at the workplace, and employers often play off those fears.

A lot of people fear for their jobs. That was a really big issue with supervisors, throwing all these lies or intimidation at people. People not having this sense of security in their job, that they could be let go, laid off, transferred out to something else that they didn't really want to do.

There was a lot of fear. Fear of retaliation, and the retaliation was open.... On the grounds crew and the custodial workers, there has always been the threat that they would outsource.... "We could get rid of you." ... People were afraid—if I spoke up, they could do something against me.

I think the biggest obstacle externally is the pervasive use of fear in the American workplace. It's everywhere and it's strong. ... The employers can successfully intimidate workers in many ways. In my own personal experience, I've had a couple of organizing drives, and both times, the employer fired someone.

For women, fear can be connected to a heightened sense of vulnerability in the labor market compared with men.

For some people still, a good threat from the boss will stop anybody from organizing the union.... For women, particularly women of color, bouncing around from job to job—it can be kind of hard to deal with, not knowing if you have another job lined up for you, that you can just walk into somewhere else and get a job.

It seemed to me that more men would get angry, [and they] have more of a tendency, “I want to go find another job.” They have that ability, whereas the women would try and hang in there and try to improve what was there, versus getting fed up and leaving.

Thus many union women see gender as adding to a perceived lack of security among workers. This adds to fear of the consequences of involvement, and it can be an additional obstacle to women becoming active in unions.

Discomfort with Conflict and Public Roles

Many interviewees say that they were initially hesitant to join their unions—and to take on leadership roles—because of their discomfort with public roles. This fear is often tied to wanting to avoid confrontation and conflict, both of which are common within union work.

I tend to be introverted and I’ve had to overcome that to talk to people. I’m not too good at expressing what I’m thinking or trying to deal with issues. Say we were talking to somebody, and they had a reason why they weren’t in the union—I wouldn’t argue. I don’t like confrontation.

I’d say the main obstacle is fear of speaking out, and taking risks.... I think there’s a lack of self-worth. You know, like, “We can’t get this. Because we’re not—we don’t have enough standing, socially, politically. We don’t have the power to get that, because we’re not valued.”

I still have this political fear of trying to persuade people, you know? I don’t know what it is but I just am not comfortable trying to persuade people. I don’t feel like I’m well enough versed to explain my side of it and have all the answers for arguments people might put up.

Many times I'll talk to women and almost with a sense of shame they'll confess to me, "When I get really upset I cry, and I don't want to cry in front of the boss." When I was the shop steward in the workplace, if I saw the first sign of a quivering lip or anything that indicated to me that a woman that I was in a meeting with was going to cry, I would say, "Hey, let me take a break and come back to it." It's one of those things, it's the way women get socialized as they grow up. It's not okay to be mad when you're a little girl, but it's okay to cry.

[People think that] it's more of a man's place. My future sister-in-law actually said "You shouldn't be doing that. That's your husband's job." ... It's not the first time that I've heard something like that. "Women shouldn't run for office. Women shouldn't be involved in politics. Women shouldn't be lobbying." ... I don't know if it's a fear or maybe women in general don't know that they can be involved, or how to get involved. The other big thing that I noticed is that—especially me, and where I came from and the things that I had overcome—not wanting to step on any toes, and not wanting to piss people off... unfortunately, doing union work, you do that. You make people mad, and you just deal with it and get on with it and apologize later and everyone gets along. But it's not wanting to make waves, and it's not wanting to cause trouble. I think it's very hard for women to do. I think men have an easier time of taking charge.

A few organizers note that women's hesitations sometimes come from their relationships to their families, and particularly their husbands: they want to discuss their union activism with their spouses before agreeing to it. This, too, can reflect a sense of discomfort with authority.

You'd be amazed how often we would hear, making home visits, "Well, I've got to talk to my husband about it." I think only once I heard a man say, "Oh, I have to talk to my wife about it." ... There was one woman that I really worked. I made three visits to this woman, and had to take a long drive with our organizer, to go out and visit in this one particular community.... She was ready to sign a card, and she excused herself, and I heard her, and I knew she was a widow. She went in the back and she talked to her son. She came back and she didn't sign the card. She was going to benefit in every aspect [of the new contract]. But I think we still have a lot

of women out there who fear thinking for themselves. They need a second opinion, whether it's son, husband, or just some other male figure in their family.

To deal with this lack of comfort and confidence, organizers suggest that women need to change their view that they do not have an appropriate and effective role to play in public life. This means encouraging women to promote their own concerns and to take risks on their own behalf.

Neglected Priorities as Workers

Women activists also observe that women workers sometimes bring different concerns and values than men to their work and union organizing, and that those concerns are not always given the same attention as traditionally “male” issues. In many cases, of course, women’s issues overlap with men’s: both men and women want higher wages, better benefits, opportunities for advancement, and job protections. In some areas, however, women have distinct concerns.

Benefits and Pay

Among women who responded to the 2006 AFL-CIO’s Ask A Working Woman survey, 97 percent of respondents said that they were “very worried” or “somewhat worried” about the high cost of health care. Nearly as many (95 percent) women responded that they are “very worried” or “somewhat worried” about the rising cost of living. Concerns about retirement affect 88 percent of women, while the high cost of higher education concerns 87 percent. And when women were asked an open-ended question about what members of Congress must understand about working women, the most frequent responses concerned issues of pay, health care, equality, child care, and retirement (AFL-CIO 2006).

In our interviews, we heard similar opinions. Health insurance is of paramount concern, particularly as workers have been asked to cover higher proportions of premiums and as women are more responsible for the financial stability of their families. Policies allowing flexibility at work and family leave are also priorities for women. As breadwinners living within changing family structures in the United States, women and men increasingly need supports for taking care of their children and elderly parents. This is especially important to single mothers, but certainly not exclusive to them.

The most important issue facing women workers is benefits, because we have a lot of single parents out there, and they want [to be able to] take their children to the doctor and dentist and get their eyes taken care of. Pay is top, because like I say there are single parents, and they want to be able to have job security, to know that that job is going to be there, and to be able to sustain their family. ... Benefits for their family is number one. Men don't look at benefits as much as they do as job security.

Whereas 20 years ago everyone was worrying about trying to take care of their kids at home because they were sick, now it's taking care of their parents. That's just enormous. I can think of three women on our executive board—I'm sorry, four women— that are taking care of their parents, either one or both of their parents after work daily.... So that's a huge thing, trying to figure out how to assist them in taking care of their families and not losing their seniority.

The other thing that we dealt with last year was the flexibility in our leave time. With people that have children, if you have to take somebody to a doctor, a dental appointment, you don't want to have to take a half of a day to do that. If you can take it in hourly increments, then that is so much easier.

It is especially women in single households that would have a very, very difficult time. We have health insurance, but what people don't realize is that not everybody has the health insurance because people can't afford [the premiums we have to pay]. Some people do not carry the health insurance for themselves. They carry it just for their children. Some families are on Medicaid because the wages are so low—it's sort of like Wal-Mart.

Most of these issues are specific concerns related to women's combined roles as workers and family members. In general, the activists we interviewed argue that women workers have a broader sense of the links between our home and work lives.

I think women understand better some of the issues that affect us in the workplace, and how it affects your home life, your quality of life at home. Men look more at like the nuts and bolts issues: salary, health insurance. Women will look at, why should I have to work three jobs to support my family? Men tend to be more like, okay I've got to do this. They just think that's the way it's got to be, whereas women are like, it shouldn't have to be like that.

Unions, particularly those dominated by women, have played important roles in campaigns for issues like family leave (Milkman 2007). Our interviews suggest that unions should sustain or even increase their emphasis on these kinds of benefits in order to engage women workers.

Pay Equity

Pay equity is also a common concern articulated in our interviews. This is an issue outside the traditional priorities of unions, but women workers understand that they are often paid less than their male colleagues.

There's still a pay disparity, and there's race disparity, particularly when it comes to merit. The base salary may be the same because it's contractual, but particularly in our industry we're seeing that men more regularly get merit increases, and more. The other problem is advancement. We're still struggling to get women promoted. We're still struggling to get women into typically male-dominated positions.

For our union, [women are in] the least paid and the lowest positions, and so they're the ones that I feel like we're fighting for the most... When you're talking about a living wage, then those are the people we're talking about.

Activists suggest that unions could pay increased attention to issues of pay equity, particularly within individual workplaces, by conducting studies of women's and men's wages and then developing plans to address existing inequities.

Respect for Women Workers

The activists in our interviews also point to a set of issues that get at how women workers are treated. Many express concern about the level of respect given workers, and particularly women workers, as something that unions can help support. Organizers note that women seem to be particularly concerned with achieving a sense of dignity and autonomy in the workplace—sometimes more than with issues of pay—perhaps because respect is more often denied them.

Men tend to focus on just the economic value of the job.... Men often complain that they aren't advancing quickly enough or that there's no place to advance. Women tend to focus less on money as the benchmark, but whether they feel like they are respected, and that their work is valued.

Sometimes a lack of respect for women and their work is shown in fairly blatant ways.

I think in the area that I work, [we're] still really lesser valued because [we're] women.... I really don't think of myself as a person with a chip on my shoulder and attitude, but I absolutely and definitely feel that if I were a man, I would be perceived completely differently—you know all about the "bitch," the aggressive women versus the strong man. You know, it's really palpable.... I definitely think that people who do the work that we do are undervalued in general, for a whole series of reasons, and one of them is that they're women, primarily women... [and] we're mostly minorities, and we serve poor and minority communities.

It was pretty disheartening in the beginning because it was all women... The way we were treated [by our employer] really was outrageous, and we just thought we can't stand for it... We weren't powerful legislators and we were not part of the white male authority.... There was even one [boss] who said, "[You] are nothing but well-dressed wetbacks."

Just not too long ago, I was at a meeting. The employers were talking about the master contract that covers a lot of staff and union officers who are primarily women. One of the men on the employer bargaining team kept asking about part-time work. Finally I said to him, "What's your issue here?" He was kind of beating about the bush. I said, "What is it that you want to do that you feel the contract won't let you do? What's at the heart of what you're talking about?" Astonishingly, the thing that came out of his mouth was, "Well, you know, we'd like to get a part-time college student to work in the office, because we've got a couple of gals down there who are in their 50s, and if we could get some young good-looking gal in there to give the guys an interest in coming down to the hall." I said, "You're talking about using an employee as bait to get guys to come to the hall?" I mean, that was his issue. I couldn't believe it. Myself and one other woman in the room, and after the meeting, she and I put our heads together and kind of fell on each others' shoulders and said, "Oh my god, we've got a long way to go, don't we."

Because of these kinds of experiences, women look to unions to help provide work with dignity, as workers and women.

Unions have not always done well at responding to women's issues and concerns. According to some activists, both local and national structures are sometimes less willing or able to address the issues prioritized by women, including issues of balance, discrimination, and pay equity. For example, in describing her problems dealing with a lack of respect for women within her work setting, one respondent expressed frustration at the level of supports she receives:

[The union addresses our issues] in the sense that the union fights for the little guy... [but] I don't think there's any awareness of [women's] issues, or really time or resources to address them in any substantive way, or [provide] any kind of emotional or moral support. It's more like they just back us up in the basic fundamental things we're trying to do, and they're open-ended in their long-term support.... We're not very happy with the resources that we get.

Like this woman, many of the activists we interviewed suggest that their unions could do more to prioritize women's concerns. Their perceptions are supported in research suggesting that unions often prioritize men's interests over women's. For example, unions have failed to adequately address issues of discrimination and harassment, which have been primarily cast as individual issues rather than causing collective harm; this approach has kept some unions from more systematically dealing with these concerns (Crain 2007).

Time Demands of Union Work

Another issue with women's union activism is the time-consuming nature of the work. Traditionally, union activism has required long hours and substantial time away from home (Berger-Marks Foundation 2006, Simpson and Kaminiski 2003). For those who are not professional union staff, but rather volunteers for their locals, union commitments come on top of regular working hours. These expectations are more manageable for workers who are single or have non-working spouses—in other words, they are modeled after traditional male workers. It is a less realistic expectation for women, and men, in an era when most women, including mothers, work.

I think a big piece of the problem [for women] is they have their families at home, so they need to go home and help make dinner or pick up children after work or after school. We also have an aging population at our workplace and an overwhelming amount of women are going home and taking care of their elderly parents.

[Because of time demands,] we're always having to recruit from people whose kids aren't too little anymore.

The problem of family responsibilities can make it particularly harder for younger women workers to take part in unions.

I was probably 46, 47 when I started the union and I just turned 50. So my kids are all older, and I was able to take off in the evening or be home late or whatever, and my kids were all okay. I know that if the union had come along at a time when my kids were a lot younger, I might not have been able to be as involved.

Generally, developing ways to accommodate the changing work and family responsibilities of both women and men is an ongoing challenge within union organizing.

Discrimination within Unions

Women also continue to face discrimination within unions themselves. One interviewee, a professional organizer, described her experience:

The things that I've experienced, I wouldn't say that they're out of the norm or would be anything that any other woman wouldn't experience, unfortunately—like not being promoted before white males, when it was my time and I was recommended by two different people to be promoted, and I still wasn't promoted. I had a conversation when I just got my last promotion about being a young African American woman and what that means as far as being promoted and things like that. So we are aware and we are trying to correct the problem but it's basically looking out for ourselves. I mean, occasionally we do get noticed by somebody other than us, being the white male, but you know, we're doing it for ourselves.

There is substantial evidence of this kind of discrimination in other research, including studies indicating that women have difficulty winning leadership positions outside female-majority settings (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 2005). Discrimination remains a problem that unions need to address.

Lack of Awareness of What Unions Do

Research suggests that many women are unaware of the benefits of joining unions (ILO-ICTFU 2001). This was echoed in many of our interviews.

You have to do much more education to [women] than you do to men. Now, men have heard all the myths, so you got to dispel all the myths that they've heard. But women know very little about it.

Women's lack of knowledge of unions may stem from some of the issues identified earlier. For example, if the issues prioritized by unions are less inclusive of women's concerns, or if unions expect heavy time commitments, women may be less willing or able to hear about the benefits of unions to them as workers.

Similarly, women's shorter work histories and concentration in less-unionized professions can mean that they have less exposure to union organizing. In fact, in cases where women worked early in life in union settings, they often saw the benefits for themselves:

When I was a teenager, I had my first union job in Indiana. It was a job in a grocery store. I was a bagger, and those were the good old days when clerks bagged the groceries. I didn't really know anything about unions, but I immediately noticed that this job paid more than any other job I'd had, and also any other job that I'd been applying for. I think I was about 17 at the time. Then I got promoted to the glorious position of produce clerk, and earned even more money, so I guess that was my first introduction to the fact that being in a union had value to it. I definitely noticed a difference afterward, when I moved to another part of the country, and worked mostly retail jobs that weren't unionized.

Women may also be less likely to “inherit” union membership or activism from their fathers (because of occupational segregation by sex) or their mothers (because of lower women’s labor force participation and less unionization in “female” jobs, especially in earlier generations). That is, they have fewer role models, especially among women, for union organizing within their family history. Because this path to union activism can be important to exposing workers to the possibilities of union involvement, it can disadvantage women’s involvement. Such lost advantages were most evident when a few interviewees pointed to the importance of their own family legacies to union involvement.

[I chose to do union organizing] because I come from a union family, and I’ve actually seen it work—it has improved the quality of life for my family.

My dad belonged to the Steelworkers and, in Chicago when we were little, the Upholsterers and Casket Makers Union... When I was little, we’d go to Union Hall, a big old building in Chicago, and we always got nice Christmas gifts. They took care of their workers. Like, when my mom had babies they’d come and bring flowers. If somebody died, they would go to the funeral. That was the things that unions did for you. And that’s what I grew up understanding.

In the two cases where women did have mothers who were union activists, this role modeling was particularly compelling for them. In both cases, this relationship also resulted in mentoring support for their union work.

My dad was a Steelworker. And my mom worked at the [school district] for years and was always involved—in fact, was our [local union] President prior to me. She was also on the council executive board, and I took over her spot when she retired. So I kind of grew up with union families.... I still call [my mom] after local meetings and bargaining sessions, and say, “Oh, you’ll never guess what they did today!” or “Listen to what they brought to the table!” or “Has this ever happened before?”

I was one of four daughters. My mother went to work at the phone company after she got divorced. She had not been involved in the union and didn’t get involved right away, but got involved when she realized that the operators, which at that time were predominantly female, in her view and her co-workers’ views weren’t fairly

represented. She also always had said she'd never have a child work at the phone company. I actually applied and didn't even tell her.... Before they called me to take a test or anything, I did tell mom and said, "I'll be a good member, but I'm not going to give my life to the union as you have." Shortly after I got hired in at the phone company, I would see managers do things that I'd think weren't fair or right and just kind of keep my mouth shut. I became a steward and chaired the legislative committee. At some time later, I ran for office, first elected vice-president and then president of our local... But as a kid, right, would be on the picket line when they were on strike. I was certainly around the union, because mother would have meetings in our home, or I would be at the union office and so I certainly was around it a lot. I recognized that it took a commitment... It is contagious.

But these experiences were exceptions. In general, awareness of the benefits of unions for workers, and particularly women workers, continues to pose a problem for their involvement.

Strategies To Encourage Women's Involvement and Leadership

How can unions overcome obstacles to women's activism and leadership? This section describes strategies that can encourage women's involvement and raise it to a more visible and influential level.

1

STRATEGY #1: Address Women's True Priorities

An obvious way to encourage women's union activism is to focus on the issues that are important to women workers. While unions do not always do this, it simply extends a strategy that many activists note is central to success in encouraging activism among all workers: to listen to the concerns of the people you hope to organize.

It's natural to want to be able to convince somebody of how important the union would be for them. But [organizing is really about] learning what their issues are, learning what is important to them. I find in the drive that I'm working on now, some of the things that I thought would be really important to this group are not. There are others, and only through talking with them and listening to them do we start seeing this thread.

Simply put, if unions more visibly listen to women's concerns, and consistently address them, they are more likely to inspire involvement and commitment.

In reflecting women's concerns, it is also important to use language and imagery that resonates with them. This might include, for example, an emphasis on respect and dignity for women's work. It can also include an emphasis on supporting families and providing balance, a theme that was apparent in many of our interviews, quoted both earlier and below:

The most important value to me is family time, and that's the real reason why I started doing this. When I was younger, my mom used to work two jobs, and we were fortunate enough to have a family that would step in when she couldn't be there. But for a lot of people out there like, it's kind of in vain to work two or three jobs to build something up that you never get a chance to see. And then it perpetuates a lot of other

problems in society where you have no after-school programs and no family involvement. And so kids turn to other things that are bad, but it's not out of lack of trying, because their parents are trying to support them at home—they just can't always be there to guide them because they have bills to pay.

I think one of the biggest problems facing women today is family leave. I can remember, I was so happy to be in that union and be covered by a contract finally. But I lived in fear everyday of the school nurse calling me at 11:30 and saying, "Sarah's got a temperature of 103, you have to come get her." How much can you do that? The difference is women typically are the ones that have to go and do that, and men are not. And so women are still, they've got dual professions, they're the glue that holds the household together. They're the providers, they are the nurturing parent and they have a job, and in this day and age where people need to have two incomes. [This is] one of the things that I hope to see negotiated in more and more contracts.

Why do people have to have two jobs? I have so many people in my office—There's two in cashiering that have two jobs. One of them works for Payless Shoe Store. The other one works at night. She leaves here and goes somewhere else so she can make her ends meet.

When people come to work, they bring everything about themselves with them. The situations that have engaged me are women working as individual workers or groups of people who are really struggling to find a sense of belonging at work, a sense of being valued at work, a sense of being respected at work. It's so central to people because this is their livelihood, this is how they feed their family and house their children. ... Women, yes, they identify themselves with their career and their work. They also identify themselves as mothers or sisters or friends.

These quotes reflect a fundamental reality of many women's lives: juggling the multiple responsibilities of work, family, and community can make activism very difficult. But they also suggest that women bring a sense of community to their union activism. Women see their union work as bettering not only themselves and the lives of their families, but also the overall community, by improving workers' lives and well-being. They have a sense of the interdependence of individuals within their communities.

I started to think, if the university would pay us better and take better care of us with health insurance, we would have more income to spend out in the community. The local paper is aligned more with the

university administration, and there were some local business owners that wrote a letter...in support of the administration, why you shouldn't organize and this and that. Well, they're kind of shooting themselves in the foot there, because it's the university employees that go out and spend our money in the community, and if we don't have it, those businesses are going to suffer.

I do this work because I have an allegiance to my community.... If I have an opportunity to help empower other people, then that in turn is the gift that keeps on giving, and it'll raise us up as a community ultimately.... As a society I believe that that's a responsibility that we hold.

Where unions can emphasize and reflect women's values, including concepts of family, balance, and community, in both the issue focus and framing of their work, their goals and strategies are more likely to resonate with women's concerns. In turn, this can inspire more women to get involved and take leadership.

STRATEGY #2: Create and Support Formal Mentoring Programs



Most of the activists we interviewed can quickly point to a mentor, usually a woman, in their union work. They consider these relationships crucial to their success and sustained activism. Mentoring can be an essential support for women as they negotiate male-dominated union power structures.

I knew I could do the work. But then when you have somebody that's the doing the work, and they are telling you they know you can do it, that just gives you that little extra push to go ahead. Because if I didn't have anybody to say, "Come on, I know you can do it," I probably would have done minimal. I probably wouldn't be where I am now.

I had a couple of wonderful mentors.... I think as folks have for them before, what they did for me was to draw out those qualities or those traits that I have, emphasize or help me emphasize my principles, help me work towards actively living my principles.

She's brilliant and I observed her when I first started. I mean I kind of came in—and I compare it to a baton race—you know how the runner runs up next to you and gives you the baton? That's kind of how I got involved into this, it's like I already had to start running and somebody handed me the baton and there I was, and [she] is already in the race.

She was an organizer here. She was awesome. She would say, "Now you have to go and say this." "I don't think I can do that." "Yes, you can. I know you can. You just do this and do that, and I know you." ... [She encouraged me to talk to a powerful person at my employer], and I was so scared, my knees were trembling. My knees were trembling. I could feel my knees going ta-ta-ta-ta-ta. But she said, "I'll sit right by you, and you tell them what we need here." And I did it. I don't know how I did it, but I did it.

Recognizing the importance of mentoring programs, women organizers often try to mentor others.

People need to be brought along... [and] have their contribution recognized... The two women who were left with me on the bargaining

team had never bargained before. One hasn't even passed probation at the workplace. They were just tireless fighters and advocates for their coworkers. We got more in that contract than I thought we would... As soon as we got done, I turned to them and said, "I want to tell you both that I learned something from each of you in this negotiation. Everything we got in this contract above and beyond was entirely due to your advocacy," and the passion that they brought to speaking on behalf of their coworkers... I told one of them, "Okay, you're on the short list of people to replace me. If I get run over by a bus tomorrow, your name is on the list."

I try to [mentor others]. I think everyone on our e-board and on my bargaining team, and pretty much everyone at the [school district], has my phone number. Sometimes people just need to call and discuss an issue and get some suggestions on how to deal with it.

Mentoring is most effective at supporting women's leadership if it creates space to explicitly address women's experiences in union work. Conversations around the obstacles and opportunities facing women can help them develop strategies for dealing with (and making the most of) both. They can also provide a sense of emotional support and empowerment in the realization that women's problems are not just their own.

A good deal of mentoring occurs informally, as more senior activists identify potential leaders and develop relationships with them. Professional organizers also provide a more formal type of mentoring, often in the training and agitating they do. In several cases, women activists noted the importance of having women in those roles, for their contributions as role models and their ability to address questions and issues of women workers.

At the same time, most interviewees suggest that mentoring could be more formally and intentionally incorporated into unions, as an ongoing resource for women's leadership.

People that I see have more wisdom or more education, and I'm more than happy to listen to them. But we lack a plan for really mentoring people.

I think one of the biggest problems of our labor movement is we have not mentored. I think this is true all across the board, in every organization—you can get into a role of leadership and gee, now that I'm here this is pretty comfortable. I think I'll stay here a while... So, sometimes in order to keep the power, you don't tell all you know and

don't share all you know... But in the labor movement I think it's a real big mistake because what we have is a whole lot of old white guys, and who do you pass your legacy on to?

Since I've been organizing, I've tried to identify people that would be good in this and try to help them. We have [an] apprenticeship for organizing, a two month program I can recommend someone to go through to see if they are interested in doing this. I've recommended I think two people and both of them have been chosen to do that. So I'm hoping that I'm mentoring them to be more involved in it. But we need more programs where we can mentor people, because I think there's a lot of people out there interested.

Like this last participant, a few activists described the kinds of opportunities that could work for institutionalizing and more actively encouraging mentoring relationships. These programs can serve as models for strengthening mentoring programs in local and national union structures.

We take employees out on leaves of absence and have them come in and work at the union office, so they can see what it's like, so they can learn how to do it. In fact, I've had one woman who's been on a leave of absence for a year. My only disappointment in this mentoring program is that people have wanted to go back to their jobs instead of wanting to stay and work for the union, but what we get out of that is we turn back into the workplace a very trained, knowledgeable leader who has a wide variety of skills.

By implementing these and other mentoring programs, unions can foster the skills and experiences that women need to take on leadership. They can also build networks and relationships among women to support one another.

STRATEGY #3: Provide Opportunities for Women to Strategize Together

Unions can also support women's leadership by providing space for them to address their issues and obstacles as union women. This can be done within training programs, conferences, women's committees, and networks at the local, regional and national levels.

Training and networking are integral parts of union work, among both professional staff and volunteers. In general, women activists say that they benefit tremendously from the training they receive in unions, as activists generally and as women. Whether this training occurs in large regional or national meetings, or in strategy sessions for individual locals, it helps women build skills and confidence in their union work, particularly when it is new and relatively intimidating for them.

The training with the union really helped [with organizing], because they would do practice scenarios, and we'd break off into groups and have to practice approaching somebody about the union. We would go by a bit of a script, but not totally scripted, and then the person you were talking to would have to come up with objections... And after we'd been educated and trained, we'd give an explanation or reason with people. That helped a lot.

We would have organizers from the staff of AFSCME that would work with us, and they were very good in terms of developing leaders.... Whenever there was an issue that came up while we were organizing, we would have meetings around campus, and the organizer at the time was really good. She'd say "Well, what do you want to do about it?" And she'd never let us go away from the meeting without having a plan. "What are you going to do? Not just talk about it, what are you going to do?"... And that's something that we just hadn't had. A lot of people hadn't had any experience and it was wonderful to see people grow in those leadership roles.

In some cases, the training women receive in unions is designed to encourage women's leadership.

[Our organizer] is a very, very strong woman and a very, very strong leader. And I think that she also did focus a lot on getting women

involved and providing training and leadership training for a lot of women, too.... [She] especially did encourage a lot of women's involvement in this, and also throughout the town because she works with the community a lot.

Beyond the basics of union training, providing dedicated space for women can be an important and empowering component of developing women's leadership. While in most cases, unions bring together men and women at their trainings and other programs, some unions have provided settings for women to come together and discuss their concerns. Because of occupational segregation, in other cases women dominate union locals, and this opportunity arises informally. In general, where activists have experienced settings dominated by women, they suggest that it can provide an important space to discuss their issues and obstacles as women.

Because of this tendency for women not to advocate for themselves vocally, to not blow their own horn, I think they feel more comfortable doing that in a group with other women.

I do think that it's important for women to have a place where we can get together and work together—just women to women, because there's no pressure to conform, and we're more likely to brainstorm better and throw out better ideas when it's just women.

We have our women's convention where we bring everybody together, and we talk about the different things that are going on in the locals all over the country. And we talk about how we've managed to handle certain incidents, or issues that came up. I learn from them, they learn from me, and take stuff back. So we have quite a few conferences that we get together and we do those types of things. [I get] new ideas and build an alliance, a coalition with others in other areas.

I can remember being a local president, serving on different boards or different committees, being the only woman. It's not always comfortable, and so I think having time to share those types of experiences and how you've dealt with them, as well as trying to encourage them to stay involved, it's important to do that. In CWA, we have a national women's committee. I think that that helps. Now I don't think that every local does, and so again, sometimes it doesn't get down to the lowest level. We have women's conferences that I think are great, national ones, biannually. I think those are good opportunities for women to get together and network. [There is a school] for Midwest working women.... I met a fellow CWA sister there who was really struggling at

the time, her and her co-workers, with what they believed was inadequate representation from a male-dominated local. I remember telling her, you can change that. Our local used to be that way, but my mother and her co-workers got involved. They'd pack every union meeting. We just really encouraged her.... And then the next time I bumped into her was at an AFL-CIO Safety and Health Conference. She was a local leader, had been elected to office in her local and then actually went on. She's now full-time CWA staff. That school for Midwest working women brought together women from different unions. She was in a different district than I am, and so it's not somebody who I would have bumped into at one of our district meetings or state meetings. It just happened to be we were both from the Midwest and at this conference.

To provide this kind of opportunity, some unions have created women's committees or networks within their national and/or local structures. These institutions are designed to give women a place to articulate and assert their needs and concerns, and activists who have been involved in them see them as important, particularly given women's lack of representation in union leadership.

If nothing else I think it gives a place to vent, which I think is so important. I guess at least for me, I just need to hear myself talk, and then once I've heard myself talk then it's like okay, yeah that's what I want to do with it. I think that women tend to draw off of each other and their experiences, and just giving them that space and that place to go and discuss and get ideas and thoughts and suggestions from other women and ideas on how that worked. I think it's definitely a good thing. I think that everybody needs to have a safe place to do that.

Just listening to these amazing women and what they're going through in their struggles and how they dealt with those struggles.... I think that just that ability to hear other women's stories and be able to bring those back to your own local is a good thing, and I think that women's committees are a good way to get that.

At the same time, this approach is not uncontroversial. Some activists argue that women's committees can lead to the marginalization of women's interests; others see them as another drain on time, a precious resource for most. For these reasons, women expressed conflicted feelings about such committees, particularly at the local level.

I'm afraid I would see it as added work. It might be something that would be good, but there have been many times I've felt like I was stretched so thin, that getting involved in something like that [would be impossible]. But then there might be women that that's the only way you would get them in. I don't know.

I don't think those kinds of things are effective, when they try to create it sort of artificially. We're all really busy and overwhelmed with our work, but now we're going to meet and strategize for half a day about these kinds of issues? That doesn't work, you know?

You know, this country finds more and more and more ways to divide itself. So we have a committee of women and we have a committee of Latinos, and then we have a committee of brown-haired people. Let's have a committee of blue-eyed people. I'm not sure it's productive. The jury's still out with me. Perhaps because true equality doesn't exist in our country yet, perhaps it's necessary. But philosophically, I don't believe that it's productive. I think there should be diversity at every level on every committee if at all possible.... I mean I think we just need to work harder to bring more diverse voices to the table and to these committees. But to have these separations, it'll just continue to divide us.

Some national unions, including the AFL-CIO, AFSCME, and the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) have recently disbanded or restructured women's departments or offices. Again, this has brought mixed reaction from women activists in these unions. While some see benefits to the new approach, many worry about the long-term implications as well. The following quotes typify ambivalence about such changes:

[Eliminating our women's office is] a huge loss and... I was beyond irritated. I still think that it looks bad. [...But at the same time, some of the union staff] changed my mind completely and totally.... To be perfectly honest I felt like the women's rights department, they picked our brains, which was wonderful, but then we came back and I really didn't know what I was supposed to do.... I think the thought is perhaps maybe training all of us to help other locals establish a women's committee, so that women can then work with other women and do things and move, which I think we just didn't have before. Now I think that it's really going to be a good thing.

When you look at the list of the international vice presidents... it still seems a little lopsided.... [Now that they've combined the women's conference with a general leadership conference], I have heard from lots of other women that their council presidents are saying, well, it's not a women's conference, so you don't need to go. I think that that's just very sad. ... And in our local, none of the women are going, because they don't want to go to a leadership conference, they wanted to go to the women's conference.

Interestingly, activists in locals dominated by women (for example, teachers' unions) are less supportive of creating space just for women, at least locally—perhaps because they already benefit from such a space. At the same time, many continue to differentiate between the need for women's committees in their locals and in national power structures. Most recognize that women are still less likely to hold positions of power in national offices, and therefore they see a need to provide specific supports for women's perspectives there. They also see the support that institutional commitment to diversity, both gender and race-based, can give to women and people of color at the local level.

Our president is Asian, and she serves on [the union's] national equity committee. Right now [the union] has a diversity proposal, to try to diversify its executive board, which is mostly white guys. It's caused a fair amount of controversy and our president has been very active in promoting that issue. And [because of it] we've also made an effort locally; our board is fairly diverse.

As national unions consider abolishing women's sections or programs, they should keep the perspective of local activists in mind. They should also take seriously the sense of support and respect, or lack thereof, for women suggested by their actions.

A related strategy that unions can use is to support women's involvement in groups like the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), 9to5, and similar local organizations, such as Chicago Women in the Trades or Oregon Tradeswomen. These groups provide resources and support for women's union work through conferences, research, and other activities. Encouraging or even financially supporting women's involvement in them could be an effective way to promote women's leadership and solidarity with one another, as well as support for the union, particularly when unions have limited resources for providing these kinds of resources themselves.

STRATEGY #4: Put Women in Leadership

4

Another way to promote women's activism is to put women in leadership positions within unions. In these positions, women can serve as role models to other women and signify union commitment to women's issues. They can also provide women's perspectives on union issues, priorities, and strategies.

As noted earlier, many women activists note the importance of having women's voices at the table for how a union is run, both in terms of issues and strategies.

Flexible time off—when we first introduced it in the '80s, I'm not sure that would have been pushed if it weren't for female leaders that recognized sometimes you can't plan when your child's going to be sick. I think those types of things; daycare onsite—I don't know that we have a lot of those, but we have some locals who have provided it. Telecommuting. Those types of things have been tried, and I'm not sure they would have been if we had not had women leaders who recognized that it could make a big difference.

[The idea of looking at pay equity] actually came from some of our [women] members. We have daily newspapers whose circulation department is the most physical aspect of the newspaper, the hardest physical work. It's a male-dominated part of the workforce, but we do have some women who work in circulation who raised the issue. We said, "You know, we'd really like to just look at how we compare with the money." So when we started looking at them, we said, "Well why don't we just expand this and take a look overall?" It is an issue that people are keenly interested in, when you start talking numbers. I've been recruiting a committee of people who are agreeing to take a look at the numbers and do some spreadsheet crunching for us, just to see what we can find. Like I say, we might not find anything amiss at all. But I think [it helped that we have women's leadership].

[I started to provide supports for mothers out of] personal necessity. If I'm going to bring [my son] with me to a union meeting, I know that I'm going to have to feed him. About halfway through it he's going to be telling me he's hungry non-stop, and I'm not going to get any work done.

In these ways, women leaders can make unions more friendly to and supportive of women as workers and union activists.

Having women in leadership can also make those who might otherwise feel reticent more comfortable with leadership. In cases of locals dominated by women, or where there are women professional organizers, activists observe that women are less likely to hold back or be held back by others.

We've taken some quiet people and given them the opportunity to speak. I've watched some [women] grow that seemed kind of mousy when they first started, but then watched them finally get a voice and that's been nice... at least in our local because there are so many women.

What I see in the organizers that worked with us, the way I see how workloads are divided and so forth, and who we have involved... the director for our local union organization, she's a woman, and we've been pretty equally divided, and in the union office they have men and women organizers working, all doing the same work. [That has helped promote women's leadership.]

Again, though, women in locals that are dominated by women often notice a difference at the national level. They express frustration at the high proportion of male leadership there, and they can see it as a symbol of a lack of commitment to women's leadership.

STRATEGY #5: Highlight the Importance of Women's Contributions

5

To encourage women's activism, unions can also call attention to the skills and qualities that women bring to union organizing. Many activists observe that women make important, and sometimes distinctive, contributions to union work.

[Women are] used to juggling a lot of different tasks at one time, are good as far as planning time. The key to successful organizing is doing the work in a systematic way. And I think that many women, just not even recognizing it, have had to plan and strategize, just to juggle all the responsibilities they have when they work outside of the home. They're used to doing some of these things already.

I was a single mom, and the skills and the energies are pretty transferable between being a mom and being the den mother of a union shop. You are viewed by some as their protector, their person that they go to for things that have nothing to do with contract negotiations or their contract. But it's what you do.... I was very involved in internal organizing, that is signing up new members, making sure that our membership base was broad, and strong, and active. So there was a lot of day-to-day hand holding, encouraging, a little scolding, guidance.

I raised a kid, put my husband through school, and just didn't realize what a learning experience this was for me. We just learned how to multi-task.

Of course, both men and women can bring organizational skills, an ability to multitask, and models of supportive leadership to union work. Sometimes, though, perceptions of women's skills and contributions can make a difference to how unions operate.

I think a lot of our ideas are the same. Everyone in the union has very similar goals. We all want the same thing in the long run. But I think for a lot of people, for other women especially, women who aren't involved in a union, it's a lot easier just to sit down and discuss the union and things with another woman. And I think that women in general are perceived as being more compassionate, more caring and so on and so forth. Whether or not that's true or

not depending on the woman, we're perceived that way, and people tend to open up to women more, and they get a lot more of the personal stories.

Stressing the contributions of women can also be done by providing examples of women's current and past union leadership from both local and national history. Unions can highlight the stories of their own women leaders, as well as renowned figures such as Mother Jones or Dolores Huerta, among others who successfully organized workers on behalf of their rights.

In general, in settings where men have traditionally dominated activism and leadership, stressing the contributions of women can give women a sense that they can achieve something important.

STRATEGY #6: Provide Flexible Options for Involvement



To accommodate the conflicting demands of women's lives, unions can offer creative ways to encourage their involvement. This can allow them to overcome the challenge of limited time.

You have to meet people where they live. You can't expect them to drop their lives and just do what's convenient for the union. The union has to be the one that reaches out that way to people.

Listen to what workers say they need

Activists describe a variety of strategies for providing women supports and opportunities to participate in union work. A key theme to these strategies is fairly simple: listen to what women workers say they need.

In order to get [women] involved, we have to accommodate them and make the union issue relevant to them in their situation at that time. And that goes back to the whole listening, taking the time to involve them.

As unions go about their organizing work, they can partner with workers to respond to their particular needs. This involves returning to an earlier point: it is crucial that unions listen to the workers that they seek to organize and represent. Unions can do this by providing space for women (and men) to generate ideas and share strategies for accommodating them—and, of course, by responding as much as possible to the needs that they articulate.

That was what I kept hearing, well, I can't come because I've got to go get my kids, or it's dinner time, that sort of thing. Okay, well, how can I make it easier for you? Getting the information out when our meetings are way ahead of time—okay we can do that for you. Having toys and stuff available for your children—sure we can do that for you. Feeding you guys—absolutely we can do that for you.

I guess the approach that I've taken is to treat people first as individuals, and try to see where that individual is at that point in his or her life. By doing that, you acknowledge what people's limitations are and what they can give at any given moment. I guess what I'm saying is I remain open to whatever limitations women may feel they have because of

their families or whatever.... To me, I'll take whatever you can give me.... To me that has been one of the most productive ways of bringing people on board, is if they feel like whatever they have to offer is acceptable and appreciated.

Create ways to participate at flexible times and places

We do [site visits] during people's rotating lunches. We'll stay for two hours rather than just coming out for an hour because some people have rotating lunches.

One of our former board members... has a child now, but she still helps out. We go over to her house, and she puts the baby to sleep or the baby hangs out, and we do work there.

Having conference calls, those types of things can help get them involved, or try to meet with them, so they're not giving more time outside of the home than they already are for work. So when I say meet with them, maybe you meet them on their lunch hour, or right before work. But you go nearby their workplace, so you're not taxing their time anymore. ... Some of it can be done online, or again, with teleconferences, those types of things.

We always have to have the envelopes labeled and stuffed. It's kind of a nice thing at home doing that...so that works really well. We have established a phone tree so people can make phone calls to ten people from their home or from their worksite or in their cars, whatever's most convenient for them, so that's worked pretty well.

Welcome children and provide child care

We offer childcare for people that want to come. My 11-year-old, people call him my little union maid, he comes to everything. I tell everyone that there isn't anything that children can't come to, even if you come to negotiations and you're sitting in the board room, bring your kid if you want to, you're more than welcome to. We provide toys, that sort of thing.

Provide food, especially for mealtime meetings

We always offer food. If we're going to ask them to come right after work and stay through dinner time I think that that's important.... We hold our general membership meetings, a lot of the time, at a pizza parlor.

STRATEGY #7: Provide Training on Mobilizing Women

7

To encourage women's activism, unions can also provide training to their leaders and organizers on strategies that can effectively address the obstacles facing women. Despite extensive training programs, most unions do not address how issues of race, class, and gender might shape the experiences of the workers they are trying to organize. Organizers would benefit from deeper knowledge of these dynamics, in order to more effectively approach and mobilize women and people of color.

In our interviews, activists observe that they do sometimes use strategies targeted specifically at women, including many of those described in this report, such as listening to and substantively reflecting women's concerns, providing mentoring, creating women-centered space, and developing flexible options for participation. Some have developed ways to dispel women's discomfort with taking on public authority; one, for example, described pushing wives to take responsibility for bettering their working conditions when they want to consult their husbands.

A male is going to make the decision and he's not going to ask the wife. But the wife is going to have to go home, and she's going to have to run it by the husband and she's going to have to do all the legwork telling him all of what's going on. So what I do is change it and say, "I understand you have your husband at home, that you might want to talk to about this, but you're in this job. How do you want to go to work? This should be your decision. Yes, you talk things over with him, but ultimately this should be your decision. Do you want to be able to go to work and have a say so? Do you want to be able to go to work and not be harassed?"

In almost every case where activists have used specific strategies for involving women, they developed them through their own experiences, rather than based on training they received from their unions. Clearly this kind of knowledge could benefit unions and their organizers as they seek to mobilize women workers. By gathering this knowledge from their experienced organizers, unions could easily incorporate training on how to support women's activism into existing programs for organizing and leadership.

Why Unions Need Stronger Partnerships with Grassroots Women's Organizations

Feminist groups can, and should, be a resource for union women. They can provide a wide variety of indispensable resources: analysis of gender inequality, policy recommendations for alleviating it, and strategy suggestions for promoting women's perspectives. Women's groups can also provide political and emotional support for women within unions.

Most of the activists interviewed support women's movement goals and look favorably on the accomplishments of the women's movement. A typical sentiment:

I have enjoyed the benefit of growing up in a generation where I'm surrounded by such phenomenal women. Honestly, it still comes as a shock when we have those reminders that maybe we're not treated exactly the same. So I think that I have benefited from work that was done by a lot of women before me.

Some participants also see their work as a form of women's organizing, because of its focus on building equality and empowering women workers.

We're empowering women. The union offers training in jobs to help women, to further their education and move onto bigger and better things.... It's all about equality, and we're all human, and we shouldn't be treated differently based on gender by any means. Anything that's available for one person should be available to everyone. It should be about your credentials not about your sex.

There's so many single women out there that we need to organize to have more power. And salaries—there's quite a gap between men and women's salaries, doing the same thing. So I think it's imperative that we get involved.

This perspective, though, is fairly unusual. When asked, most activists say that they do not think of their work as part of a women's movement or a form of women's organizing. Instead, they are more likely to wonder where the women's movement is.

I never even thought of it that way. It never occurred to me. I guess I don't know who I would identify as the women's movement right now. You know, in the '60s and '70s, there were certain people that were always on television and in the news and you could identify that those are the people working for the women's movement. But I guess, right now, I don't-- I can't-- I don't really think of a woman's movement.... I can't even think of any feminist groups around here but I'm sure there must be some.

This stumped answer was repeated many times:

I consider myself a feminist, and I consider my husband a feminist, too, and people that I like to work with, but I do see the women's movement as not being very clearly defined. It's not clear what the women's movement is doing... As a movement, it's not clear to me.

Are there feminist groups here in [my community]? I don't know. I've never heard of any here. I have never heard of anybody saying anything about feminist organizations. I've heard of them like on TV. Not locally. I've never seen any at all.

Because down here we don't have a whole lot of women. I mean seriously. We don't have a whole lot of women's movement going on here.

For a few activists, a lack of interest in working with women's organizations comes from a sense that they do not work on issues relevant to women workers. Although many national and local women's groups do, in fact, focus on issues of concern to women workers, these union activists are more aware of their work on issues that they see as less directly pertinent to unions:

At times I feel [the women's movement] doesn't address the needs of women of color or recognize the fact that there is a gap between women of color and white women. I think it [should] focus a little more on economics and class, women living below poverty.

I don't necessarily see [a women's movement].... We all know about NOW and that is a women's movement, that's the high profile one, but it's generally about reproductive rights. It's not focused on workers' rights.

Even when women are aware of local women's groups and supportive of their goals, they do not necessarily work with them within their union activism—usually because they have never thought of the option nor been contacted by women's groups. In fact, of the 15 women interviewed for the project, only three said that they had worked with women's or feminist organizations at the local level. Thus, although there are national connections between feminist organizations and unions, local activists in our interviews suggest that these partnerships do not extend to the grassroots level in many communities.

Promoting stronger relationship building between the two communities at the local level could be an effective strategy for promoting women's union leadership. In cases where local unions have pursued it, it has been fruitful. For example, one activist suggested that recent new collaborations in her state allowed them to achieve political success:

We actually worked with a women's health group this past year and got contraceptive coverage for women in our state. Health insurance that covers prescriptions now has to cover birth control... [Working with women's groups was] actually a new thing this year. It was encouraged by a political coordinator for our Council, and she recommended a few groups to start working with, because they had similar agendas to what we did. And as a large group of people getting together we were able to accomplish much more. It was definitely new for us. It's something that we will definitely continue because it worked so well.

Local unions should be fairly open to such collaborations, because they often coordinate with other social justice organizations, including community organizing groups such as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), labor coalitions such as Jobs with Justice, immigrant justice organizations, churches and other religious groups, local political parties, and other unions. In most cases, building those coalitions is a priority, as it generates support for workers' causes. Two examples of successful alliances:

Myself and another woman went out and talked to several priests in the community to see if we could garner support for the union. One priest, it surprised me, he was very - what's that word? Staunch, an old-school type priest. He's young, but he was raised with the more traditional faith and it just amazed me. He sat down and wrote out a

letter, right there when we were sitting in the office, and it was very eloquent and to the point, the university has an obligation to do what's right for the people in the community.... There's another couple working with the union that are much more involved in the church, and they know the priest real well. Well, they got in touch with the bishop and even [he] came out in our favor.

Instead of being paid every two weeks you would be paid for your actual hours worked, so your paychecks would be different. The conversion was going to happen in February, so for the first check, it would be short. And a lot of people go from paycheck to paycheck, so we said, "This is going to be a problem. What are you going to do about it?"... So we went through ACORN and then also United Way, and we set up a program of food baskets for people who were going to have a difficult time, to provide them with some food for those two weeks. United Way was the one who actually gave it out... And the [employer] was furious.... So that was one of the little organizing things that I think was very effective, and had real meaning.

This kind of cooperation suggests that there is room for stronger local partnerships between women in unions and women's organizations.

To accomplish this, there is a need for locally based outreach on both sides: by grassroots women's organizations to local unions and vice versa. In addition, there is a need for national organizations to promote local partnerships. National women's groups can increase their support for grassroots activism, including the cultivation of women's local leadership, in both women's and union organizing and mobilization efforts. The lack of awareness of local women's organizing suggests a need to carve out more visible activism at the grassroots. For their part, national and regional unions can promote the idea of linking to local women's organizations.

Conclusion

The strategies outlined in this report are fundamentally designed to help women claim a voice of authority in an area that is traditionally dominated by men: union organizing. They are all ways for unions to provide supports, networks, and other resources that can engender a sense of empowerment among women, within unions and beyond. By claiming leadership, women can transform their lives, their unions, their workplaces, and their communities to reflect their needs.

It is our hope that unions will intentionally cultivate women's political activism and leadership through the strategies outlined here. Doing so is crucial to creating healthy working families and providing all workers a sense of autonomy and well-being.

We also hope that women's organizations will support women's union activism by cultivating stronger local ties at the grassroots. These relationships can benefit both union women and women's organizing generally.

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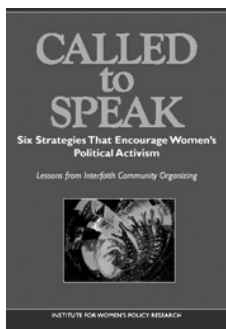
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