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# Organizing Women: The Nature and Process of Union Organizing Efforts Among U.S. Women Workers Since the mid-1990s

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# Organizing Women: The Nature and Process of Union Organizing Efforts Among U.S. Women Workers Since the mid-1990s

## **Abstract**

The relationship between American working women and the U.S. labor movement can neither be easily described nor categorized. In part, this is because women's participation and experience in the labor movement differ so greatly across industry, region, union, occupation, and ethnic background. But mostly, it is a consequence of the inevitable contradictions that arise when the proportion of women in the labor movement continues to grow at an escalating pace, whereas for most unions and labor federations, the proportion of women in top leadership and staff positions has increased incrementally at best, even in unions where women predominate.

## **Keywords**

collective bargaining, ILR, women, organizing, union, worker, U.S., effort, labor, movement, participation, experience, industry, region, American, occupation, ethnic background, Cornell University, leadership, staff

## **Disciplines**

Labor Relations

## **Comments**

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**Organizing Women: The Nature and Process of Union Organizing Efforts  
among U.S. Women Workers since the mid-1990s**

**Kate Bronfenbrenner, Cornell University**

The relationship between American working women and the U.S. labor movement can neither be easily described nor categorized. In part, this is because women's participation and experience in the labor movement differ so greatly across industry, region, union, occupation, and ethnic background. But mostly, it is a consequence of the inevitable contradictions that arise when the proportion of women in the labor movement continues to grow at an escalating pace, whereas for most unions and labor federations, the proportion of women in top leadership and staff positions has increased incrementally at best, even in unions where women predominate.

Nowhere are these contradictions more evident than in organizing. Although the majority of private-sector union-organizing campaigns continue to take place in industries and occupations where women are in the minority, organizing victories -- through both certification elections and voluntary recognition campaigns—continue to be disproportionately concentrated in bargaining units where women predominate.

Public-sector organizing victories also tend to be concentrated among women workers. Win rates have been especially high in units with high percentages of women of color, particularly in health care, hotels, food service, building services, home care, and light manufacturing. As a result of these trends, women have accounted for the majority of new workers organized each year since at least the mid-1980s, and African American women represent the only demographic group where union density has been increasing. At the same time, membership losses in unionized manufacturing industries, where male workers predominate, continue to escalate each year.

Although the proportion of union members who are women still lags behind women's participation in the workforce, that gap is rapidly closing. If women continue to outpace men in new organizing efforts, whether by accident or design, in the near future the overwhelmingly male leadership of the American labor movement will face a membership that is majority female.

This article examines the role played by gender in union-organizing activity and success in the United States across a wide range of organizing environments. Most important, it looks at the intersection of gender, race, and union strategies and how that has played out in labor's continued efforts at revitalization through organizing.<sup>1</sup>

## **BACKGROUND ON WOMEN AND ORGANIZING IN THE UNITED STATES**

Women are in the workforce today in numbers nearly equal to men. Still, a combination of outright discrimination and gender-based occupational segregation has left the majority of women trapped in low-paying jobs with few or no benefits or opportunities for advancement (Gibelman, 2003; Spalter-Roth, Hartmann, & Collins, 1994). Today, the median wage for women continues to lag at 77% of male weekly earnings. Although there are certainly structural and cultural factors that contribute to the wage gap, as much as a third of gender pay disparities are directly attributable to sex discrimination (Hartmann, 2003).

Although many women had great hopes that the antidiscrimination legislation enacted in the 1970s and 1980s would result in major gains for women in all sectors of the economy, it has become increasingly clear that labor unions are the only major U.S. institution equipped to help women overcome these barriers in the workplace. According to recent data released by the

Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS; BLS, 2003b), unionized women earn an average of 31% more than nonunion women, and these gains remain significant even in studies where researchers have controlled for differences in education, training, and occupation (Spalter-Roth et al., 1994).

Despite the growing number of women in the workplace, women continue to be underrepresented in the labor movement. Although the percentage of union members who are women has more than doubled from 20% in 1960 to 42% in 2002, it still lags behind women's actual participation in the workplace (BLS, 2003a). Traditionally, this was seen by many, both inside and outside the labor movement, as evidence of women's disinterest in unions, with women being viewed by many as extremely difficult, if not impossible, to organize. Yet, for more than two decades, research has consistently found that women have more positive attitudes toward unions and are more likely to vote for unions than their male counterparts (Bronfenbrenner & Hickey, 2004; Freeman & Rogers, 1999; Kochan, 1979; Schur & Kruse, 1992). By 1994, in her summary of research on gender and organizing, Marion Crain (1994) argued convincingly, "The once prevalent view that women are 'unorganizable' has fallen into disrepute" (p. 227). Instead, as our previous research has shown, women have made up the majority of new workers organized at least since the mid-1980s (Bronfenbrenner & Hickey, 2004).

### **EMPLOYMENT, UNION MEMBERSHIP, AND UNION-DENSITY PATTERNS FOR WOMEN WORKERS**

For more than a decade, changes in union membership paralleled employment trends, declining in manufacturing and generally increasing in the service and public sectors. Yet these overall trends fail to capture significant race and gender variation, within and across economic sectors (BLS, 2003a, 2003b; Bronfenbrenner & Hickey, 2004).

As described in Table 1, women's representation in the workforce has remained fairly stable since the mid-1980s, averaging around 48%. However, during this same time period, the proportion of union members who are women has steadily increased from 37% in 1985 to 42% by the end of 2002. These changes are even more significant for women of color. Although the proportion of union members who are White women increased from 29% to 33% (an increase of 10%), the proportion of union members who are women of color increased by as much as 25% during the same period, from 8% to 10%.

**TABLE 1: Women and Women of Color as a Proportion of the Workforce and Union Membership, 1985 to 2002**

	1985		1990		2002	
	Workforce	Union members	Workforce	Union members	Workforce	Union members
% all women	47	37	48	39	48	42
% White women	40	29	40	30	39	33
% women of color	7	8	8	9	9	10
% African American women	6	6	6	7	6	7
% Hispanic women	3	2	4	3	5	4

SOURCE: BLS, 2003b.

Even more striking are the changing patterns in the number of employed workers versus union members (Table 2). Since 1985, the overall number in the workforce has increased from 94.5 million to 122.0 million, although the labor movement lost nearly a million members, dropping to 16.1 million by 2002. However, because so many of the membership losses were in industries where men predominate, between 1985 and 2002, the number of female union members actually increased from 5.7 million to 6.8 million, 300,000 of whom were women of color.

Because these changes were not experienced equally across sectors, they had differential effects on union density levels for male and female workers. For example, between 1997 and 2002, the proportion of union members in manufacturing who were women declined only slightly, from 32% to 31% (BLS, 2003b). During this same time period, manufacturing employment dropped nearly 2 million and union membership in manufacturing decreased by 814,000, resulting in a 12.3% decline in union density (Table 3).

In contrast, in the service sector, where the proportion of female union members remained steady at 62% (BLS, 2003b), double that in manufacturing, the combination of a 5.1 million increase in service sector employment and a 364,000 increase in union membership resulted in an increase in union density in the service sector of 5.6% from 1997 to 2002. In the public sector, where women continue to account for slightly less than half of all union members, employment increased by 1.7 million and union membership increased by 604,000 for a net increase in union density of just under 1%.

These countervailing trends have resulted in very different density patterns across gender groups. Union density for all workers declined steadily from 1985 (18.0%) to 2002 (13.2%). However, the drop was much more dramatic among male workers (22.1% to 14.7%), than among women workers (13.2% to 11.6%). In fact, between 2000 and 2002 union density for women workers actually increased by .10 percentage points, thanks largely to the growth in union density among African American women, which, after declining sharply from 1985 to 2000, increased to 15.7% by 2002, although union density among White women stabilized at 10.9% starting in 2000 (BLS, 2003a, 2003b).

There is also great variation in the participation of women and women of color in the workforce across individual industries (Figure 1). As would be expected, the highest concentration of women is in health care and social services; public education; finance, insurance, and real estate; hotels and motels; retail trade; business and other services; and other public sectors. These are also the industries with the highest concentration of women of color in the workforce. Although both public education and other public sector are also the industries with the highest union density (33% or more), most

**TABLE 2: Changes in the Number of Workers and Union Members by Race and Gender, 1985 to 2002 (in millions)**

	1985		1990		1995		2000		2002	
	Workers	Members	Workers	Members	Workers	Members	Workers	Members	Workers	Members
All workers	94.5	17.0	103.9	16.7	110.0	16.4	120.8	16.6	122.0	16.1
Men	51.0	11.3	54.8	10.6	57.7	9.9	62.9	9.6	63.4	9.3
Women	43.5	5.7	49.1	6.2	52.4	6.4	57.9	6.7	58.6	6.8
White women	37.2	4.5	41.6	4.9	43.6	5.0	47.4	5.2	47.8	5.2
Women of color	6.3	1.2	7.5	1.3	8.8	1.5	10.6	1.5	10.8	1.5

SOURCE: BLS, 2003b.

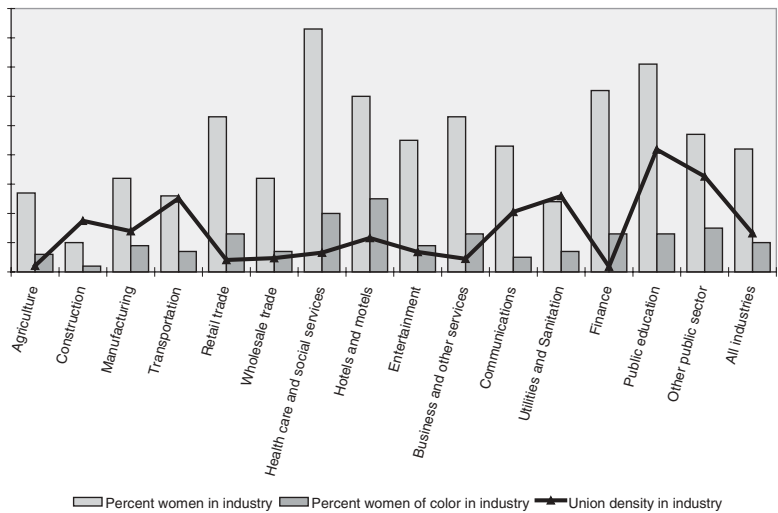
**TABLE 3: Changes in Employment and Union Membership by Industrial Sector, 1997 to 2002 (in Thousands)**

	Construction	Manufacturing	Transportation	Communication, Utilities, and Sanitation	Retail and Wholesale Trade	Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	Services	Government
Total employment	865	-1,990	194	171	1,364	651	5,145	1,703
Union membership	117	-814	-40	-52	-181	-4	364	604
Unorganized workers	748	-1,176	234	223	1,545	655	4,781	1,099
% Union density	-7.5	-12.3	-10.2	-13.1	-19.6	-13.6	5.6	0.8

SOURCE: BLS, 2003a.

**ALL STATS IN PERCENTAGES? DECIMALS NEEDED IN OTHER COLUMNS FOR CONSISTENCY**

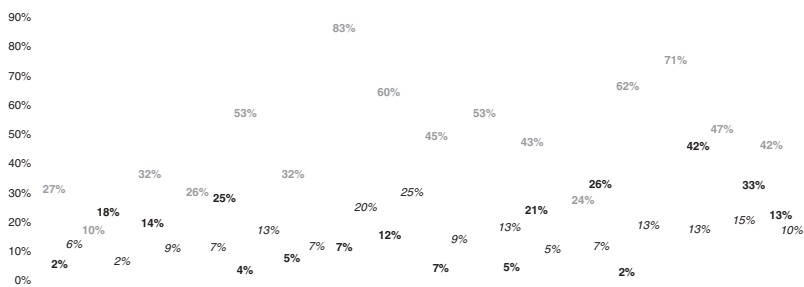




**Figure 1: Percentage Women and Percentage Women of Color in the Workforce and Union Density by Industry, 2002**

of the industries with the highest percentage of women and women of color have very low union density, including finance (2%), retail trade (4%), business and other services (5%), health care and social service (7%), and hotels and motels (12%).

In contrast, the private sector industries with the highest union density (18% or more)—such as transportation, utilities and sanitation, and construction—have relatively low concentrations of women and women of color. This reflects both the historical lack of union activity in industries where women predominate and, as we will discuss later in the article, the fact that current organizing activity has failed to keep pace with the rapid employment expansion in the service, financial, and retail sectors. Yet these data also suggest the great organizing potential offered in these industries, because women, especially women of color, are much more likely to vote for unions than men, and these industries are less vulnerable to global capital mobility than more heavily unionized manufacturing industries. The financial sector in particular, with 62% women in the workforce but union density of only 2%, has remained largely untouched by the U.S. labor movement.



## **ORGANIZING WOMEN UNDER THE NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS BOARD (NLRB)**

The past 7 years have been an extremely frustrating period for the U.S. labor movement that has, at best, stood still, holding union density just above 13%. Some unions, such as Service Employees International Union (SEIU), UNITE HERE, and Communications Workers of America (CWA) are increasingly focusing their efforts on organizing outside the NLRB. Public sector unions, such as American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have also stepped up their organizing efforts, most notably in Maryland and Puerto Rico, which only recently gained collective-bargaining protection for public-sector employees.

Because of the scale of these efforts, in recent years, the net number of new workers organized through NLRB elections has been entirely overshadowed by the much larger number of workers organized in a series of major nonboard victories in homecare, building service, wireless communications, laundry services, health care, hotels, and the public sector. Still, the overwhelming majority of U.S. unions continue to concentrate their organizing resources and efforts in traditional NLRB campaigns, albeit with limited success.

Even with new organizing initiatives, the number of elections held has hovered around 3,000 per year for more than a decade, declining to 2,540 by 2002. Although NLRB election win rates increased from 51% in 1997 to 56% in 2002, it would be premature to see this as an indicator of organizing success and membership growth. For although win rates have increased, the percentage of eligible voters in units where the union won the election declined from 46% of eligible voters in 1998 to 40% in 2002. When we factor in an average first contract rate of less than 70%, this means that less than a third of workers who endeavor to organize under the NLRB are able to gain representation under a collective bargaining agreement (Bronfenbrenner & Hickey, 2004).

Unions have been much more successful in service sector units, achieving an average win rate of 62% compared to a win rate of only 41% in manufacturing. Between 1997 and 2002, the total number of new workers organized in NLRB elections was only 138,394 (29% of eligible voters) in manufacturing compared to 264,430 (56% of eligible voters) in the service sector (BNA Plus, 2002, 2003). Because of the higher concentration of women in service sector industries, the fact that more workers are being successfully organized in the service sector than any other sector is part of the reason women make up the majority of new workers being organized.

Unions have had less success in retail, where women also predominate: Only 34% of retail workers voting in NLRB elections were in units where the election was won. Unions were even less successful in the financial sector, where the overwhelming majority of workers are women. Less than 1% of all NLRB elections take place in the finance, insurance, or real estate industry, and most of those are in credit unions affiliated with unionized companies (BNA Plus, 2002, 2003). Thus, when it comes to both organizing targeting and organizing success, gender has very mixed effects.

We also find variation in terms of the role gender plays within sectors. In the 1980s and 1990s, a significant portion of the organizing activity among women workers occurred in light manufacturing industries such as textile, apparel, electronics, auto parts, and food processing (Bronfenbrenner, 1997; Bronfenbrenner & Hickey, 2004), where women predominate. However, because these are the industries most vulnerable to global competition, time and time again unions, such as UNITE HERE, United Food and Commercial Workers, United Automobile Workers, and the United Electrical Workers have watched as their dramatic organizing victories have turned into bitter losses as the result of production shifts across borders and overseas. Thus, in the past 6 years, there has been a conscious shift away from the most mobile industries toward sectors of the economy less vulnerable to capital flight and global competition, leading unions to shift their focus to women workers in less mobile industries such as laundries, hotels, hospitals, and food service.

## **ORGANIZING OUTSIDE THE NLRB**

As mentioned earlier, NLRB certification elections are one of several mechanisms under which new workers are organized in the United States each year. Workers in the railway and airline industry organize in elections supervised by the National Mediation Board. Public-sector workers employed in state and local government entities organize through certification elections supervised by more than 40 different labor relations agencies in the 37 states that have collective bargaining legislation covering at least some public workers in the state.<sup>2</sup> In several states—including Washington, New York, Minnesota, and Ohio—there are also state-supervised card-check certifications. Although they have limited collective bargaining rights, federal workers organize through government-supervised certification elections. In recent years, there has also been a wave of public-sector organizing in Puerto Rico following the passage of public employee collective-bargaining legislation in 1998. Unfortunately, because there is no centralized database tracking organizing activity and outcomes in state and local elec-

tions, we have no systemized national data on public sector organizing activity and outcomes.

In the past decade, as the environment for organizing in the private sector became increasingly challenging, more and more unions focused their efforts on organizing outside the traditional NLRB process through card-check recognition and to a lesser extent, community-supervised elections. Because there is no government-mandated reporting requirement for private sector organizing that occurs outside of the NLRB, data on the nature and extent of these campaigns is also very limited. In fact, for both public-sector elections and private-sector nonboard campaigns, the only readily available data come from weekly organizing numbers reported in the American Federation of Labor -Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)'s (2003) *Work in Progress* reports. Although incomplete, because they do not cover any organizing activity by independent unions not affiliated with the AFL-CIO and depend on self-reporting by affiliates, these reports do capture the major organizing victories that occurred outside the NLRB since 1997 and, in doing so, provide important insights into the increasing significance of non-NLRB campaigns. What these data reveal is that the NLRB is no longer the primary vehicle through which workers organize in the United States today. In the same 6-year period, where approximately a half a million workers organized under the NLRB (according to *Work in Progress* reports), more than 600,000 workers were organized by AFL-CIO affiliates in the public sector and another 166,000 were organized by affiliates in the private sector through voluntary recognitions and in National Mediation Board-supervised elections.

For the public sector, the overwhelming majority of organizing activity occurred among two groups: homecare workers (of which 75,000 came from one unit in Los Angeles county organized in 1999) and public schools, primarily in nonprofessional units. Both groups are almost entirely female, including many women of color. Other industries with significant activity include state and local government employees, airline workers, graduate students, and adjunct faculty organizing in public-sector higher education. Once again, these are all industries with high concentrations of women workers.

For several unions, including UNITE HERE, CWA, AFSCME, AFT, and SEIU, the number of workers organized outside the NLRB process far outweighs those organized through NLRB elections, even in their primary industries. Notably, the workers being organized by SEIU, AFT, CWA, UNITE HERE, and AFSCME—whether in healthcare, laundries, hotels, home care, wireless, or public schools—are primarily women, including many women of color. Thus, when taken together, these data suggest that many of the unions that have made the most organizing gains, both inside and

**TABLE 4: Percentage are Women in Unit and Election Activity and Outcome**

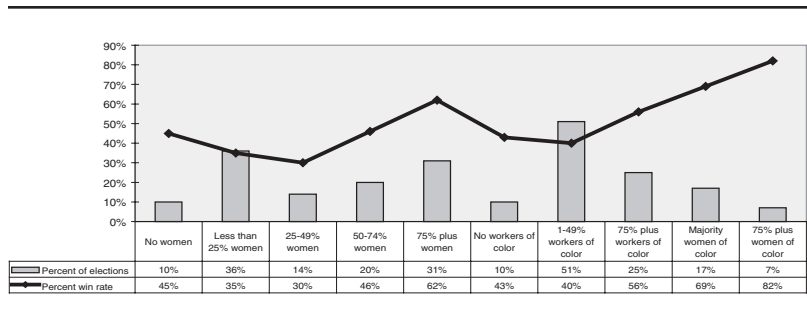
	<i>Less Than 25% Women</i>	<i>25% to 49% Women</i>	<i>50% to 74% Women</i>	<i>75% or More Women</i>
Election background				
% of all elections	36	14	20	31
% of elections won	28	9	20	42
% of elections lost	42	18	19	21
% of win rate	35	30	46	62
% of cards signed at the time of petition	66	65	64	67
% of votes received by the union	46	43	48	55

outside the NLRB process, are targeting industries where women predominate. In combination, the data from NLRB and nonboard campaigns also suggest that women are fast becoming not just the majority but perhaps as much as 60% of new workers organizing each year.

**WOMEN AND ORGANIZING TODAY,  
RESULTS FROM SURVEY DATA ON  
ORGANIZING ENVIRONMENT**

To gain a better understanding of the role played by gender in organizing today, it is essential that we move beyond national level data on employment, membership, and election activity to more microlevel data on the nature and process of current organizing campaigns collected as part of our survey of 1998 to 1999 NLRB campaigns (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). To capture gender differences in the nature and process of union-organizing campaigns, we break the data down into four groupings: less than 25% women, 25% to 49% women, 50 to 74% women, and 75% or more women in the unit.<sup>3</sup>

Table 4 provides summary statistics on election outcomes for the campaigns in our sample. Consistent with the findings from the national NLRB data, we find that although overall union activity is fairly evenly divided between units where women are in the majority and those where they are in the minority, elections won by unions tend to be highly concentrated in units with a majority of women. Win rates and the percentage of votes received by the union also are highest in units with 75% or more women, despite the fact that the proportion of workers who sign cards before the petition is filed averages around two thirds for all four gender groupings.



**Figure 2: Gender and Race Homogeneity and Election Outcome**

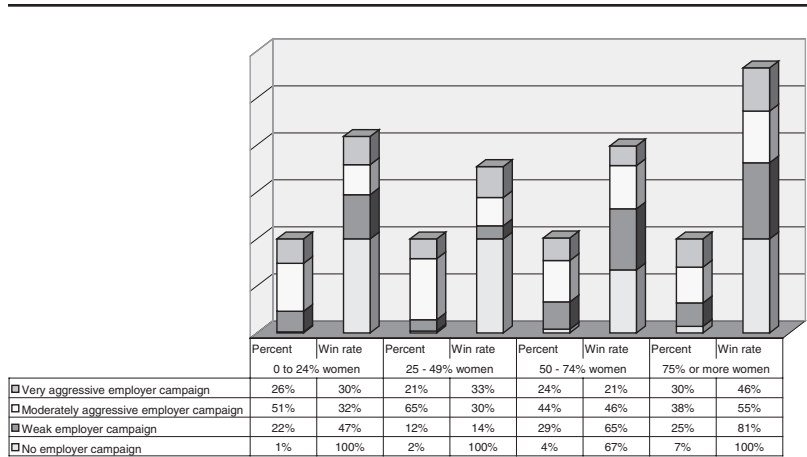
Yet, as shown in Figure 2, when we examine the data more carefully we find a much more complex relationship between organizing outcomes and gender than might be readily apparent. Not only is the intersection of race and gender important, with the highest win rates associated with units where women of color predominate, but also race and gender homogeneity play an important role as well.

Although women and workers of color individually and as a group have been found to be more likely to vote for unions, consistent with our previous research, we find that union-organizing success is weaker in mixed units than it is in all male or all-White units or in units where women or workers of color are in the majority, and win rates are even higher in units with 75% or more women or workers of color in the unit (Bronfenbrenner, 1997; Bronfenbrenner & Hickey, 2004). The highest win rates by far (82%) are in units with 75% or more women of color. As Milkman (1992) argued in her work on gender and organizing, the lower win rates in mixed units appear to be a consequence of the employers' ability to capitalize on racial or gender divisions in the unit to undermine the union campaign.

We also find differences in the kinds of companies and bargaining units where organizing campaigns among women workers are concentrated (Table 5). As would be expected, male workers are much more concentrated in higher wage, production and maintenance units in large, more global, manufacturing companies and women are more concentrated in lower wage jobs in the service sector where companies are much more likely to be entirely U.S.-based and either nonprofits or publicly held for profits. Still, a significant portion of units with 50% to 74% women remains in multinationals (43%), for-profit companies (74%), and in production and maintenance units (35%). Male workers are much less represented in professional, technical, and white-collar units being organized under the NLRB than they are in the

**TABLE 5: Company and Unit Characteristics, Gender, and Election Outcome**

Company characteristics	0% to 24% Women in Unit		25% to 49% Women in Unit		50% to 74% Women in Unit		75% or More Women in Unit		All Elections	
	% of Elections	% of Win Rate	% of Elections	% of Win Rate	% of Elections	% of Win Rate	% of Elections	% of Win Rate	% of Elections	% of Win Rate
For-profit company	99	36	95	30	74	42	46	61	77	41
Publicly held	54	30	57	23	51	33	45	60	52	33
Privately held	45	43	40	39	36	52	25	61	48	48
Nonprofit company	1	0	5	33	26	57	54	63	23	58
All sites in										
United States	37	34	32	44	31	52	31	58	33	45
Multinationals	62	37	63	32	43	35	15	67	31	39
Unit characteristics										
Production and maintenance unit	69	35	72	32	35	21	7	56	43	33
Service, maintenance, and nonprofessional	0	0	5	67	25	70	40	70	17	44
Professional, technical, white collar	7	30	9	0	16	46	33	54	19	68
Average wage less than \$8 an hour	8	42	23	39	31	48	32	64	22	53
Average wage \$12 an hour or more	39	35	20	18	22	31	30	54	30	39



**Figure 3: Percentage Women in the Unit, Employer Behavior, and Election Outcome**

general workforce (BLS, 2003b). This reflects the fact that, with the exception of aerospace, most of the NLRB election activity among professional and technical workers has been concentrated in health care, where these workers are overwhelmingly female, although very little organizing activity has taken place in the high-tech sector, more dominated by men.

Across all company types, we find that win rates average highest in predominantly female units than in more mixed units or in predominantly male units. Win rates were also much higher in predominately female units across all unit types including production and maintenance units (56%) and professional, technical, and white-collar units (70%) than in predominately male units (35% for production and maintenance and 30% for professional, technical, and white collar). Win rates also averaged much higher in predominantly female units regardless of wage level.

As described in Figure 3, these higher win rates among units where women predominate cannot be explained by differences in employer opposition across gender groupings. In fact, employer opposition to union-organizing activity appears to be no less intense in campaigns with a majority of women in the unit than it is in campaigns where they are the minority. Thus, we find that 30% of employers in predominantly female units run very aggressive antiunion campaigns, compared to 26% in predominantly male units, 21% in units with 25% to 49% women, and 24% in units with 50% to 74% women in the unit.



## Organizer background

A central component to labor's renewed commitment to organizing has been an effort to recruit and train a cadre of new organizers to staff and lead campaigns, including an emphasis on developing a younger and more diverse pool of organizers who are a better match to the workers most actively organizing today. For many unions, this has not been an easy process because their organizing departments tend to be neither young nor diverse.

Table 6 provides some insight into the progress unions have made in this area. If we compare these findings with our earlier research, we find that unions have not just been increasing the number of organizers assigned to campaigns; they have also been recruiting a more diverse organizing staff. In the late 1980s, only 12% of lead organizers were women and 15% were people of color (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). Today, 21% of lead organizers are women, 22% are workers of color (primarily African American and Hispanic), and 7% are women of color.

In predominantly female units, 42% of the campaigns have a female lead organizer and 65% have at least one female organizer working as a lead or staff organizer for the campaign. Still, more than a third (35%) of the campaigns in predominantly female units have no female organizers on staff. Only 8% of the campaigns in predominantly male units and 12% in mixed units have a female lead organizer. In units with 75% or more women of color, 64% have at least one woman of color working on the campaign but only 32% have a woman of color as lead organizer. The percentage of campaigns with women of color as lead organizers drops below 10% for all units with less than 75% women of color in the unit.

Although the win rate for women organizers averages 53%, the average win rate for male organizers is only 42%. However, in units with 75% or more women in the unit the win rate averages more than 60% regardless of the gender of the lead organizer or staff. The highest win rates, 89%, are found in units where women of color predominate and where there is at least one woman of color as lead or staff. But the win rate drops to 70% in units where women of color predominate if there are no female organizers of color.

Table 7 provides a more detailed picture of the differences in background between female and male lead organizers. Female lead organizers are much more diverse than their male counterparts. A third of female organizers are women of color, including 20% African American, 9% Hispanic, 1% Asian and Pacific Islander, and 2% Native American. In contrast, only 18% of male lead organizers are people of color.

Women lead organizers also tend to be younger, better educated, and have much less union and organizing experience than their male counterparts.

TABLE 6: **Characteristics of Organizing Staff in National Labor Relations Board Certification Election Campaigns**

	<i>% of Win Rate Elections</i>	<i>% of Win Rate When Present</i>	<i>% of Win Rate When not Present</i>
<b>Women</b>			
Lead organizer female	21	53	42
In units with 75% or more women	42	62	63
In units with 50% to 74% women	20	63	42
In units with 25% to 49% women	12	14	32
In units with less than 25% women	8	36	35
One or more female organizers lead or staff	44	49	41
In units with 75% or more women	65	61	65
In units with 50% to 74% women	55	50	42
In units with 25% to 49% women	39	46	20
In units with less than 25% women	21	23	39
% women organizers lead or staff	24		
<b>People of Color</b>			
Lead organizer person of color	22	58	41
One or more organizers of color, lead or staff	45	50	40
% of organizers of color lead or staff	28		
% of African American organizers	13		
% of Hispanic organizers	11		
% of Asian or Pacific Islander organizers	2		
% of Native American organizers	1		
% of organizers of other races	1		
<b>Women of color</b>			
Lead organizer woman of color	7	69	43
In units with 75% or more women of color	32	89	79
In units with 50% to 74% women of color	8	67	60
In units with 25% to 49% women of color	9	75	46
In units with less than 25% women of color	3	44	38
One or more women of color, lead or staff	23	59	41
In units with 75% or more women of color	64	89	70
In units with 50% to 74% women of color	50	65	55
In units with 25% to 49% women of color	36	50	48
In units with less than 25% women of color	12	35	39
Percentage women organizers of color lead or staff	11		

Although a third of women lead organizers are under 40 years old, only 18% of male lead organizers are under 40.

Similarly, although 32% of the women lead organizers have a 4-year college degree and 16% have a professional or graduate degree, only 24% of the male lead organizers have a 4-year degree and 8% have a professional or

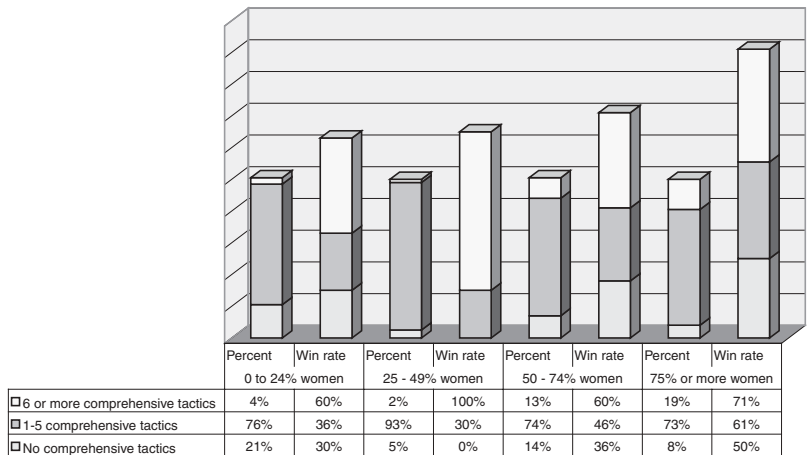
**TABLE 7: Lead Organizer Background by Gender**

	<i>All Lead Organizers</i>	<i>Female Lead Organizers</i>	<i>Male Lead Organizers</i>
<b>Race and ethnic background</b>			
% White non-Hispanic	79	67	82
% Black non-Hispanic	9	20	6
% Hispanic	10	9	10
% Asian or Pacific Islander	1	1	1
% Native American	1	2	0
% Other	1	0	1
Average age		43.4	46.3
Average less than 30	5	5	5
Average 30 to 39	17	28	13
Average 40 to 50	47	38	49
Average More than 50	30	25	31
<b>Union experience</b>			
% Years rank and file experience	16.0	9.9	17.7
% Years staff experience	8.1	6.8	8.5
% Years officer experience	5.9	3.4	6.6
% Number of campaigns lead organizer	15.9	9.4	17.6
% Number of campaigns staff or volunteer organizer	15.5	21.0	14.0
<b>Marital status</b>			
% Single no dependents	19	37	15
% Married no dependents	41	34	43
% Single with dependents	9	9	9
% Married with dependents	31	20	34
<b>Highest level of education completed</b>			
% Less than high school	1	0	1
% High School or GED	37	24	41
% 2-year college	27	28	27
% 4-year college	26	32	24
% Prof or grad degree	10	16	8

graduate degree. Women are much more likely to be single with no dependent children (37%) compared to male lead organizers (15%).

## UNION STRATEGIES

Based on Bronfenbrenner and Hickey's (2004) analysis of the evolution of successful union organizing over time, a new model of comprehensive union strategies emerges—namely union success in certification elections depends on a comprehensive union-building strategy that incorporates the 1



**Figure 4: Percentage Women in the Unit, Number of Comprehensive Organizing Tactics, and Election Outcome**

following ten elements, each of which is a cluster of key union tactics that are critical to union organizing success: (a) adequate and appropriate staff and financial resources; (b) strategic targeting and research; (c) active and representative rank-and-file organizing committees; (d) active participation of member volunteer organizers; (e) person-to-person contact inside and outside the workplace; (f) benchmarks and assessments to monitor union support and set thresholds for moving ahead with the campaign; (g) issues that resonate in the workplace and in the community; (h) creative, escalating internal pressure tactics involving members in the workplace; (i) creative, escalating external pressure tactics involving members outside the workplace, locally, nationally, and internationally; and (j) building for the first contract during the organizing campaign.

Figure 4 describes the frequency in which comprehensive campaigns using six or more strategies are used across the different gender groupings. What these data suggest is that unions such as SEIU or UNITE HERE that organize in predominantly female units are much more likely to use comprehensive union tactics than unions organizing in units where women are in the minority.

For all gender groups, win rates increase dramatically in units where comprehensive organizing strategies are used. Thus, in predominantly male

units, win rates increase from 30% where no comprehensive tactics are used to 36% for one to five tactics and 60% for more than five tactics. Similarly, in mixed units, unions won none of the elections where no comprehensive tactics were used, 30% of the campaigns with one to five tactics, and 100% of the campaigns with more than five tactics. In units with 50 to 74% women, win rates ranged from 36% for no comprehensive tactics to 60% for more than five tactics. In predominantly female units, win rates ranged from 50% with no tactics to 71% with more than five comprehensive tactics.

To better determine the relative significance of comprehensive campaign strategies, company characteristics, employer opposition, and bargaining unit demographics in determining election outcome, Bronfenbrenner and Hickey (2004) used binary logistic regression to test for the additive effect of elements of the comprehensive organizing model while controlling for the organizing environment. As predicted, the number of comprehensive organizing tactics was found to have a statistically significant impact on election outcome at .01 or better, increasing the odds of the union winning the election by 34% for each additional tactic used even when controlling for employer behavior and the broader organizing environment. Thus, unions that used at least six comprehensive organizing tactics increased their odds of winning the election by 204% (six times 34%). At the same time, having at least 60% women in the unit was also found to have a statistically significant impact (.05 or better), increasing the odds of winning the election by 70%. Similar findings were found for the 60% or more workers of color variable. This suggests that regardless of industry, company characteristics, or even the employer or union campaign, unions have their greatest success in units where women and workers of color predominate. Yet, even in sectors where women are in the majority, the quality, comprehensiveness, and intensity of the union campaign remains critical to union organizing success.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear from our research that women workers are central to union-organizing efforts. We have provided further evidence that women are organizing in greater numbers than men, but it is also true that union organizing among women does not take place across all types of employers and occupations. In the private sector, organizing activity among women is highly concentrated in health care, hotels and motels, home care, building services, laundries, retail, and light manufacturing but almost entirely absent among office workers outside of academic settings. In the public sector, women are

organizing primarily among home care workers, support staff in school districts, graduate students, and adjunct faculty in higher education.

We have also shown that employers do not act in fundamentally different ways in predominantly female units than in predominantly male or more mixed units. Similarly, most unions do not use fundamentally different tactics based on the gender make-up of bargaining units, but the unions that consistently use a more comprehensive organizing strategy are also those unions who concentrate their organizing efforts in industries where women predominate. These more comprehensive and effective union campaigns, coupled with the greater interest in unionization among women workers, allow unions to overcome employer opposition and win against the odds. But the effectiveness of these campaign strategies is not limited to units with a majority of women workers.

Although we found that unions had their greatest success in predominantly female units, greater use of a comprehensive organizing strategy would also make units containing a concentration of men more successful. Thus, we find that recent gains among primarily male workers by International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers in aerospace, SEIU in building security, and the United Automobile Workers in auto parts all depended on the use of a more comprehensive multifaceted strategy combining grassroots union building and leadership development with escalating external pressure tactics involving customers, suppliers, investors, and other outside stakeholders in the company. This is not to say that unions should ignore gender when choosing issues and tactics in organizing campaigns. But clearly a myriad of other factors—such as race, age, occupation, industry, corporate ownership structure, and the larger community where the campaign is taking place—must be taken into account as well.

In particular, unions must adapt their strategies to the changing corporate and occupational structures where both male and female workers find themselves. Traditional hot shop, site-by-site NLRB election campaigns are no match against large multisite corporations such as Wal-Mart, Cintas, Sprint, or Sodexo-Marriott. Instead, these companies will only be organized through national, multisite, and in many cases multiunion campaigns, using a combination of bottom-up organizing among workers, their families, and their communities and top-down pressure to gain neutrality and card-check recognition.

We also cannot ignore the role played by gender within the labor movement. Although it is true that unions are organizing disproportionate numbers of women, we also find that significant barriers continue to exist for women in the labor movement. Too few women are involved as organizers, even in units that are predominantly female. Also, too few unions use

organizing committees that are representative of the gender and racial make-up of the bargaining unit. Perhaps most significant of all, women, particularly women of color, continue to be locked out of top leadership positions at every level of the labor movement, even in those unions where women make up the overwhelming majority of the membership. At a time when more and more unions are shifting resources from education and leadership development programs into organizing and political action, it is essential to remember that membership education, organizing committee training, and leadership development are core elements of the kinds of changes that are necessary for unions to organize more successfully and develop leadership more representative of the rank and file.

It is also important to remember that the tactics that are successfully being used in organizing today are part of a very different model of unionism—one that has a number of implications for women. Unions cannot expect to empower workers using these tactics during organizing campaigns and then abandon them once the drive has been won and dues are being collected. Although women workers and women of color are ready and willing to do what it takes to organize a union in their workplace, they will not endure the stresses and risks of an organizing campaign only to discover that they, and others like them, do not have a seat at the table, or a voice in the union, when the campaign is won.

Unions will fail if they see new women workers as pressure groups that need to be politically accommodated into the already existing structure and practices. Although changing demographics in the workforce may pose a difficult challenge to some unions, these new workers from diverse ethnic, racial, and gender backgrounds can also offer an opportunity to jump-start a more inspired, committed, and effective grass-roots movement to organize workers in all industries, just as they did in earlier union-organizing struggles among textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts in the early 1900s or during the rise of the industrial union movement in the 1930s. With these newly organized women workers comes an opportunity to broaden labor's agenda to include issues of discrimination, comparable worth, job advancement, hours of work, and a host of other social and family concerns. They also provide an opportunity to rethink union structure and practice, much of which was established in a very different social and political climate, to become more responsive to what is an increasingly diverse labor movement in a world economy where democratic, progressive, inclusive, and powerful unions are more essential than they have ever been before.

## NOTES

1. This study is based on data collected from a combination of sources including monthly establishment data and Current Population Survey data from BLS (2003a, 2003b), national NLRB data compiled by BNA PLUS (2002, 2003), data on nonboard campaigns compiled from the AFL-CIO (2003) Work in Progress Reports from 1997 to 2002, and survey data collected by Bronfenbrenner in 2001. For more detailed information on the data sources and method used, please see Bronfenbrenner (2001) or Bronfenbrenner and Hickey (2004).

2. See Juravich and Bronfenbrenner (1998) for a more comprehensive analysis of organizing in the public sector.

3. To simplify the text, we use the term *predominantly female units* for units with 75% or more women and *predominantly male units* for units with less than 25% women. Mixed units are those units where women represent between 25% and 49% of the unit.

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