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Women in Union Leadership Roles

Abstract
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Keywords
union, female, membership, board, AFL-CIO, glass ceiling

Comments

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Women in union leadership roles

by Lois Gray

In the early history of American trade unions, women were barred from membership by many unions and assigned to second class "B" locals by others, and almost all leaders of labor organizations were men.

Today, women constitute more than one out of three union members (two out of five in professional unions) and are achieving leadership recognition at the local, regional and national levels. An increasing number of women are being elected to local union executive boards. For example, recent surveys showed that half of all local officers in the American Federation of Teachers are women, and in AFSCME, women hold approximately half of the local presidencies. Another study of unions with 45% or more female membership, revealed that women hold one in three of the professional staff positions in national union headquarters — double the proportion reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1979.

Progress has been slower at the policy-making level, as illustrated by the report that in these same unions with 45% or more female membership, women hold less than 10% of the executive board positions. While the percentages are higher in professional unions — for example, 32% in the American Federation of Teachers which has a 60% female membership — in almost all cases, representation on executive boards falls far below that of local membership. Few of the more than 90 AFL-CIO unions are headed by women: only the Association of Flight Attendants, which has a predominantly female membership, and the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union and Actors' Equity have women presidents. Women are rarely represented at the top. Is there a glass ceiling? Can women look up but not rise up? If so, why?

Lois S. Gray is a professor on the Extension faculty of the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) of Cornell University, where she served as Associate Dean and Director of the Division of Extension and Public Service from 1975 to 1987. Among the programs inaugurated at ILR under her leadership were teacher training for union staff, long-term credit and certificate programs for labor leadership, the Institute for Women and Work, Occupational Safety and Health and Hispanic Leadership Programs. She was appointed by Governor Hugh Carey in 1975 and reappointed by Governor Mario Cuomo to chair the New York State Apprenticeship and Training Council, and serves on the Board of Directors of a number of labor and community-based organizations.

A pattern of segregation

Those women who have achieved leadership roles are heavily clustered in administrative functions. At the local union level women seem to be breaking out of their traditional mold of recording secretaries, but few are chosen to chair bargaining committees. In the national headquarters, women handle research, education, and other specialized or technical functions and are increasingly receiving appointments as organizers, but men continue to staff the collective bargaining departments and represent the union in contract negotiations. Since collective bargaining is considered the key function of unions, the absence of women from this function is significant.

Research in preparation for my article on *Careers for Women in Industrial Relations* revealed a similar pattern of segregation in corporation and government. Women in personnel departments are assigned to "people oriented" functions like employee placement and counseling, sometimes moving up the ladder to the human resource planning function, but rarely participating in the negotiation of contracts with the union. Even labor education, which was in the first part of the century a predominantly female occupation, shifted to male dominance when labor-management relations became the dominant subject matter. This pervasive pattern reflects the stereotypical view that women lack the ability to make hard decisions and deal with conflict. The result is what some sociologists have called "a velvet ghetto" in which women in labor and management are restricted to those aspects of the field which are considered "Women's Work."

How do we break the "glass ceiling?" One way is for women to study how the game is played and learn its rules. What does the record show with respect to career patterns in unions? What are the circumstances and personal attributes which result in leadership recognition? Toward this objective, I will offer a few observations drawn from my interviews with 61 international union presidents and an equivalent number of officers and national staff members from which I expect to publish a book analyzing the characteristics, career patterns, aspirations, successes and disappointments, powers, functions and leadership styles of union leaders. Admittedly, the data is incomplete for hard and fast generalizations about union careers in the complex and diverse organizational forms which exist at the local, regional and national levels of the American labor movement. However, the experience of top leaders offers insights regarding the way that leaders are selected in American unions.

Lois Gray.

Upward mobility in labor unions is a political process which reflects unique institutional characteristics. Unlike business, where personnel decisions are made on a top down basis, and governmental agencies, where people are promoted through examinations, unions are structured to choose leaders who respond to the expressed wishes of the members. For the corporate leader, the bottom line is the profit and loss statement; for the union leader, the bottom line is getting re-elected. Therefore, career patterns in unions — selection, advancement and even survival — are heavily influenced by political considerations.

While unions differ in size, structure, history and even ideology, common to all is the expectation that aspiring leaders demonstrate dedication, loyalty, the abil-

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continued

ty to relate to and articulate the viewpoints of members facing employers and the public, skill in solving problems, and other personal characteristics which help to build solidarity.

Achieving top union office

There are three distinct paths to achieving top union office. The first — rare today — is to found your own organizations. Cesar Chavez and Leon Davis come to mind as examples of leaders who organized unions in previously unorganized fields — farms and hospitals — and became national presidents. While few have founded national unions, many current labor leaders were there at the beginning, playing key roles in the organization of their own local unions, establishing a track record which led to leadership recognition at higher levels.

The predominant career pattern — characteristic of four out of five presidents interviewed — begins with taking a job and becoming active in an already existing union. Elected to local office, the typical union leader "moved through the chairs" to a position of regional and national responsibility, whether appointed by top officials, elected by constituents, or both, before reaching the presidency.

The third route, once relatively unknown but becoming more common, is that of entering the union from outside, equipped with specialized training or experience. My survey of national unions, published ten years ago in the *Monthly Labor Review*, revealed that 81% filled some of their specialized positions at the union's headquarters (positions in education, research, safety and health, pension and welfare, political action, and legal affairs, for example) from outside the ranks of the union membership, and a surprising (given union traditions of promotions from within) 28% recruited organizers and contract administrators from these outside sources. Several of these "outside" specialists have reached the top. For example, Murray Finley and Jack Sheinkman, past and current presidents of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, were originally employed as union attorneys; John Sweeney, a college graduate, was originally hired by the Service Employees International Union as an organizer; Jay Mazur started his career in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union as a pension and welfare clerk, and Tom Donahue, Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO was initiated into the labor movement as a local Education Director for the Service Employees International Union.

Unlike other vocations, careers as labor leaders are rarely planned. Only a few of the presidents interviewed originally envisioned themselves as labor officials and deliberately set out to choose this type of career. The few who did were influenced by family members who were union activists or motivated by social and political viewpoints related to unionism.

Achieving union leadership tends to be an accident of circumstances. Historically, labor leaders came to the fore because they reacted to what they perceived as unfair or exploitive actions by some of their employers. This is still the most frequently mentioned motivation. For example, Kenneth Blaylock, now president of the American Federation of Government Employees, became active when he observed that management had appointed a politically connected individual to a supervisory position, by-passing more senior workers.

Other leaders were initially drafted into service when they were sought out by their colleagues to be spokespersons. For some, the union's program of activities, community services, for example, served as a lure.

A number took up the cudgels when they became disaffected with incumbent officers. For example, Vincent Sombrotto was never active in the National Association of Letter Carriers until he became enraged with actions taken by national officers and decided to run for office. He was elected local president and subsequently led a successful campaign to oust the incumbent national president.

Factors in upward mobility

According to the presidents interviewed, the key factors in their upward mobility were:

(1) Acquiring *experience* in all phases of the union's activities. Union officers or staff who are transferred or promoted from one function to another — collective bargaining, political action and administration — have a leg up, as do those who have been picked to serve as "trouble shooters."

(2) *Success* — whether organizing difficult-to-organize sectors, leading precedent-making contract negotiations, holding the union together in a strike or getting favorable legislation passed — insures visability and builds support. Recognition by other unions — for example, getting elected to citywide or state office — is another plus.

(3) The possession of a *special expertise* which is required to resolve critical problems is another avenue to recognition. For example, Jack Lyons, late president of the International Association of Bridge, Structural and Ornamental Ironworkers, attributed much of his success to his degree in engineering and experience in construction management; these equipped him with knowledge of new materials and helped the union win crucial battles for jurisdiction over new work. Legal expertise aided the careers of Victor Fuentealba in the American Federation of Musicians and Jack Sheinkman in the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union.

Is there a glass ceiling? Women can look up but not rise up.

(4) Also important is the willingness to *volunteer*. Lynn Williams, president of the United Steelworkers, says that when he set out to achieve a union staff position he "volunteered for everything." American Federation of Teachers' president Al Shanker became known to officers and members when he volunteered to write the United Federation of Teachers newspaper, and Rich Trumka, president of the United Mineworkers, offered his legal services without charge to miners in his area.

(5) Not to be discounted is the powerful impact of *sponsorship* by key power figures. Having a father in office helped a few of the current union presidents, including Ed Carlough of the Sheetmetal Workers. Mentorship is more prevalent. From the earliest times, young aspirants have been encouraged by older union leaders. Both Sam Gompers in the Cigar Makers Union and John L. Lewis in the Mineworkers, received such encouragement. In recent times, many leaders owe their prominence to powerful mentors who gave them a chance to shine. For example, the late Frank Drozak was a protege of Paul Hall, who sent him out as a trouble shooter and put him in a position to succeed to the presidency of the Seafarers International Union.

(6) Among the *personal attributes* important in achieving recognition, those most frequently mentioned by presidents are public speaking, problem-solving skills and the ability to conciliate opposing points of view.

(7) Finally, there is nothing like being in the *right place at the right time.* When openings develop, timing and positioning are critical.

In brief, becoming known, making the appropriate political connections and tak-

ing advantage of the opportunities which become available are the essential ingredients of moving ahead in union leadership.

Career patterns of women

By and large, women who have achieved top office have followed the same career patterns as men. They move up through the ranks, serve their time and make their marks at various levels in a variety of assignments. Nine to Five, the organization of clerical workers which ultimately joined the Service Employees International Union, is an example of women founding their own union, and as such is similar to the examples of Cesar Chavez with the Farmworkers and Leon Davis with the Hospital Workers. Mary Futrell, President of the National Education Association, followed the career pattern typical of men who "move through the chairs." She served on committees, ran for and was elected first local, and then state president, and served as national executive board member and secretary-treasurer before achieving the top position in her organization. Several women in national union office came from outside the union's ranks with college degrees but started their union careers at the clerical level, as did Jay Mazur in the ILGWU. Such women include Lenore Miller, now president of RWDSU, who earned a degree in Sociology but was originally hired as secretary to the National president, and Gloria Johnson, who, equipped with a Master's degree in Economics, started with IUE as a bookkeeper. Women have also achieved top office through leading successful rebellions in their unions. Linda Puchala and Susan Bianchi Sands, past and present presidents of the Association of Flight Attendants, successfully challenged the then all-male leadership of the Airline Pilots Association, to which their organization was affiliated. They broke away, formed a separate union and subsequently ran against the AFA officers whom they considered autocratic.

For women as well as men, the rise to a top position usually comes about through getting to know all phases of the union's operations, working incredible hours and achieving visible successes. For example, Vicki Supporta who was appointed Director of Organizing for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters at an exceptionally young age came to the attention of national officers as a result of a number of organizing wins in hard-to-organize sections of the South. Having a powerful mentor proved helpful to a number of women, including Lenore Miller whose president backed her to become the first women elected secretary-treasurer which, under the terms of the union constitution, put her in position to succeed him at the time of his death. For Mary Futrell, who had been preceded by another woman serving as national president of the National Education Association, having a role model was important both in advising her and in demonstrating approaches to leadership.

These "success stories" offer a few guidelines but do not answer the question of why there are so few women on the middle to upper rungs of career ladders in unions.

As seen by the male leaders who were interviewed, women are generally unable or unwilling to make the required time commitment to night and weekend meetings and travel. We know that many are — and the illustrations cited certainly confirm it — but still the perception persists. Since unions are highly political, and the road to leadership is a political process of forming alliances and coalitions, and making trade-offs, this may be an important barrier for women. Many officials, both male and female, have observed that women usually lack the political know-how and stick-to-itiveness required to line up support for themselves and other female candidates. Is this true? If so, what can be done about it? If it is not true, how can women change their image?

Not to be discounted as a factor for change is the climate created by the women's movement, the experience which women are acquiring in local, state and national campaigns, the more widely recognized importance of "women's issues" and the growth of the Coalition of Labor Union Women. How can women acquire the rounded experience in all aspects of union activities which would qualify them to compete for top office, particularly since they are rarely given the opportunity to head key contract negotiations which would give them the necessary and visible track records required to put them in the running for top spots? Although women certainly possess problem solving, public speaking and conciliation skills at least to the same degree as their male colleagues, they may find it more difficult to secure the backing of key power figures who are predominantly male, and none to date has been given a head start by a father or mother who occupied a position of power. It may appear to women who try to climb the ladder to higher levels of leadership that a few of the rungs are missing.

Today, unions are committed to organizing and involving women. This goal would be advanced by the recognition of women in leadership positions. Among the steps already taken by some unions are:

(1) Providing opportunities for education and training in leadership skills, whether in separate programs especially designed for women members or in planned outreach to recruit women for ongoing union educational programs;

(2) Offering opportunities for mentoring and networking among women through establishing a Women's Department, Women's Committees at national and local levels, and conferences for women activists;

(3) Promoting issues of special concern to women, including parental leave, child care, health insurance, safety and health, and equity in pay and promotions at the workplace which would encourage women to serve as spokespersons for the union; and

(4) A planned program of affirmative action in the union itself.

The last step listed is the most difficult. Unions are not required by law to implement affirmative action in their hiring of staff, much less in their elective processes. In addition, several have observed that the union's self-image as a socially conscious force is a barrier to perceiving inequality of opportunity or prejudice in their own organizations. We might look at the experience in Germany, where nine of the 17 national unions have adopted affirmative action plans which pledge both local and national unions to raise the representation of women to their proportion of the membership. While this idea is not under current consideration in the United States, several of the union presidents interviewed indicated that one of their priorities is the elevation of women to leadership positions, a goal which they expect to achieve through providing training, both in classroom and on-the-job (for example, appointment to important assignments), and earmarking vacancies which occur through death or retirement for women candidates.

Women are very much on the agenda of American unions and have come a long way towards involvement and recognition. But there is still a long way to go. Much can be learned from mastering the rules of the game. It is timely both for the women who are union activists and for the unions who want and need their involvement to review the rules to ensure that there is a level playing field in which qualified women can win the recognition they deserve. The professionals' unions, which have a major and growing segment of women members, should lead the way.

Women are very much on the agenda of American unions.