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Women Workers: A Force for Rebuilding Unionism

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Abstract

[Excerpt] Female involvement at every level of union activity and decision-making will strengthen that trend within organized labor that historically has advocated greater rank-and-file participation, greater internal democracy, more collective and community-oriented practices, and more progressive stands on national and international issues ranging from budgetary priorities to peace and disarmament. The attitudes, style of work, scope of concerns and political preferences of today's female union activists — tomorrow's union leaders — will help rekindle a social unionism like that fostered by the CIO at the height of its organizing campaigns — a social unionism that is needed today to inspire workers and galvanize a movement. What's more, if past experience is any indication, women will conscientiously take on a lion's share of the day-to-day organizational work required to rebuild that movement.

What evidence supports such claims? How significant a change in membership and leadership composition has occurred to date? What obstacles have women unionists faced within unions and how have they been able to overcome resistance? What is distinctive in their approach to union work and in their style of leadership that will shape their particular contributions? Drawing on existing research, surveys and studies, along with personal observation and experience, this article will explore the potential that growing female labor participation holds for transforming union life and influence in the decades ahead.

Keywords

women workers, women's rights, gender, unionism

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Women Workers:

A Force for Rebuilding Unionism

• Ruth Needleman

Unions will never be the same. Millions of new women in the work force are rewriting labor's agenda and transforming the culture of unionism in America. Two-thirds of all new workers are women. Two-thirds of all new union members are women. And these trends will continue into the next century.

Faced with declining membership in traditional manufacturing strongholds, unions have sought to recruit this growing female constituency. Industrially-based unions have established white-collar departments, appointed women to organizing positions, and introduced a new language of female concerns into their resolution books and bargaining packages. Unions historically rooted in female occupational areas, service industries and the public sector have also revised their practices and made structural and programmatic accommodations to address women's issues.

To some degree unions see in the recruitment of large numbers of women a remedy for their declining membership and influence. But this is a narrow view of the potential impact of women on the labor movement. Increasing numbers of women in the ranks and in the leadership of U.S. unions can have a qualitative effect.

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on the very character of unionism in the United States.

Female involvement at every level of union activity and decision-making will strengthen that trend within organized labor that historically has advocated greater rank-and-file participation, greater internal democracy, more collective and community-oriented practices, and more progressive stands on national and international issues ranging from budgetary priorities to peace and disarmament. The attitudes, style of work, scope of concerns and political preferences of today's female union activists—tomorrow's union leaders—will help rekindle a social unionism like that fostered by the CIO at the height of its organizing campaigns—a social unionism that is needed today to inspire workers and galvanize a movement. What's more, if past experience is any indication, women will conscientiously take on a lion's share of the day-to-day organizational work required to rebuild that movement.

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Changing Female Participation

More women are in the paid labor force than ever before—54.6 million women, representing 57% of this nation's female population. That compares to less than 34 million women in the labor force in 1972 and 24 million in 1962. Their numbers have increased by more than a million a year since the 1960s, with the largest increases among married women, women of child-bearing age, and mothers. Today women constitute 45% of the work force, compared to 37% twenty years ago. By the year 2000, the U.S. Department of Labor predicts a 25% increase in the numbers of women in the job market; more than 80% of women between the ages of 25-54 will be working.

This dramatic change in the composition of the U.S. work force reflects a variety of developments: changes in labor markets, in family structure and in levels of income as well as a transformation of cultural values and assumptions.

The decline in real incomes for families with only one wage-
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earner, along with the increased dislocation of male manufacturing workers, has forced record numbers of married women into the labor force. Rising divorce rates and the increase of female heads of household also have affected participation rates. A steady rise in service occupations over manufacturing since the mid-1950s has intensified the demand for female labor. Between now and the year 2000, eight of the ten occupations that will produce the most jobs are in traditionally female labor markets—mainly service, unskilled and low-paying. Equally significant is the expansion of part-time and temporary work, historically a female ghetto.

By reducing the time needed to handle household chores, new technologies have also facilitated the move to work outside the home, easing the double burden of women workers. But the most important support and encouragement to women entering the labor market, especially those seeking non-traditional work, has come from the upheaval in social relations and the challenge to cultural stereotypes brought about by the women's movement of the late 1960s and '70s. Organized women, from the early consciousness-raising groups to NOW and the National Women's Political Caucus, have altered irreversibly women's expectations and self-perceptions.

What has not changed, however, is the occupational segregation of women. Well over 80% of female workers hold traditional jobs in clerical, health care, public service and light manufacturing. Because unions concentrated their organizing historically in manufacturing, the vast majority of women were not and still are not union members.

In terms of unionization, the trends are contradictory. While two out of three new union members are women, and more women belong to unions today than ever before, the percentage of women unionized has declined over the past decade from 16% in 1977 to 13% in 1985. Still, women account for a growing percentage of organized workers: from 27.6% in 1977 to 33.7% in 1985. Recent surveys suggest, moreover, that women are more likely to join unions than men.

The most dramatic shift in female union membership patterns came in the 1960s with the organization of public sector and health care workers. Until that point, most female union members were employed in areas of light industry. Today the typical union woman is between the ages of 25 and 44, and works for the federal, state or local government, in transportation, communications or in public utilities. Another important trend is the development of employee associations among nurses and teachers, which
involve large numbers of women. The absence of unionization in private sector offices, retail stores, and other service areas, however, explains the very modest overall growth in the number of organized women.

Why were unions so slow to respond to the influx of women into the work force? Up until recently, there were relatively few efforts on the part of unions to organize any workers, and even fewer with a special appeal to women. Male union leadership, like society as a whole, still perceived women as less "organizable"—as temporary workers, less economically motivated than men, more identified with their employers than their peers, and less willing to take the risks and make the commitments that union organization entails. With some significant exceptions, most unions focused their energies on servicing their existing constituencies and did not feel compelled to seek new ones. When confronted with sharp declines in their membership base due to major cutbacks and changes in heavy industry, unions turned defensively to organizing.

Some of the early attempts at unionization seemed to reinforce popular stereotypes about women, when efforts to organize retail stores, insurance companies and offices met with failure. That unions relied on old approaches with male organizers speaking a "blue-collar" language and fostering a male culture, and that meetings conflicted with family obligations or overlooked child care needs were almost insurmountable obstacles in these early organizing drives. Unions, however, rarely recognized these problems in their approach; they blamed the women. At the same time, management's stake in maintaining a low-paid unorganized female work force was enormous, and corporations spent millions, broke laws (with impunity) and hired scores of consultants to block union drives. It was a fatal combination—corporate consciousness and union unconsciousness.

But times and attitudes changed. Responding to growing pressures from women within their ranks and from independent organizations of women, unions began to make adjustments. International unions established women's departments, appointed women to staff positions, and passed resolutions and held conferences to address "women's special concerns."

Some of the breakthroughs occurred, ironically, in those industrial unions geared almost exclusively to meet the needs of a male membership, like those in auto, steel, even coal mining. The women pioneers who hired into non-traditional jobs following the enactment of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act had strong economic motivation; they also had perseverance and a sense of
entitlement, fostered by the emerging women's movement. Hardly a single one of these women would have credited the women's movement; the decision had been their own. But the opening was there, and it had not existed previously. Conditions on the job—a combination of company discrimination and peer resistance—further cultivated a gender-based identification. In order to deal with an unfriendly environment, including inadequate locker, washroom and shower facilities, work shifts hostile to parenting, and conditions threatening to reproduction, women sought out each other for support. Many of the first women's caucuses and committees were formed in non-traditional workplaces and in unions with relatively small female memberships. The UAW was among the first unions to promote the establishment of women's committees; the largest district in the Steelworkers produced a women's caucus, and in mining, women founded the Coal Employment Project.

In some of the international unions with the largest female membership, there was a tendency to downplay the need for special attention to women's concerns, in part because being female was not an issue and in part because the top leadership was male. Nonetheless, unions like the Amalgamated Clothing Workers pioneered union child care centers, and once changes began, the predominantly female unions championed issues like pregnancy disability rights, pay equity and flextime. AFGE, AFSCME, AFT, APWU, CWA, IUE, and UFCW all have set up women's departments. And SEIU created District 925, incorporating the women, tactics and programs of the innovative 9-to-5 organization that had developed independently. It is in these unions that women have displaced men in local leadership in the
largest numbers.

The 1974 founding of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) represented one of the most important, coordinated efforts to promote women and women’s concerns within organized labor on a national level. In addition to its basic program advocating organizing, affirmative action and greater female participation in unions and politics, CLUW has demonstrated a strong commitment to racial equality; it has a 50% minority membership and leadership.

Women in Leadership

How far-reaching have the changes been? At the highest levels of the trade union hierarchy, there is still only a miniscule showing of women: three members of the 37-member AFL-CIO Executive Council; this represents, however, a 300% increase over a decade ago. There is only one AFL-CIO Department head (Education), and three presidents of international unions (RWDSU, Flight Attendants and Screen Actors’ Guild). The AFL-CIO has a Coordinator of Women’s Affairs but has yet to establish a women’s department.

The latest official statistics on women in national leadership positions are over ten years old: in 1976 only 47 women held top posts in AFL-CIO unions, non-affiliated unions and employee associations. Only 9 positions were elected; the rest, appointed. While the high percentage of appointments indicates a commitment to bring women on board, it also shows how difficult it is for women to get elected. The number of female leaders has definitely increased, but in relative terms the change is small. The unavailability of current information is due in part to the reluctance of many unions to reveal their not-so-favorable figures on female representation.

On the other hand, at regional, state and local levels, women are entering positions of leadership, with the support of male as well as female co-workers and in contested elections. The presence of women in state and local labor councils is no longer an anomaly; and most labor organizations now slate women, although the most common job remains recording secretary. One-third of AFSCME’s locals are headed by women, and 50% of local officers are female. CWA reports 15% of its locals have women presidents; the IUE, 12%.

In the workplace women hold large numbers of steward and union representative positions, and not just in departments populated with other women. There are elected female stewards, presidents, and business representatives in majority-male locals.
This is an important development and no longer an isolated exception.

It would be wrong, however, to underestimate the roadblocks women confront in becoming more involved in union affairs. They are numerous and more awesome at the top where decision-making power is at stake. The roadblocks, moreover, are not just obstacles placed in the path of women unionists; many reflect organizational structures and ideological preferences which also discourage male workers from becoming more actively involved and responsible in their unions.

To deal with corporations at the bargaining table and comply with complex laws, procedures and reporting requirements, unions centralized their operations in the 1950s, shifting decision-making away from the local level. Reliance on lengthy arbitration procedures to deal with work problems also tended to disempower workers on the shopfloor. Large legal, research and benefits departments staffed with professionals took over critical areas of union administration, reinforcing the view that unions are service rather than membership organizations. Rank-and-file influence dwindled, especially at national levels. But more and more, at the local level, leaders complained of decreasing participation and apathy.

A further discouragement to involvement is the apparent lack of leadership openings. Although turnover rates vary dramatically from local to local, and are lower at the top than at the bottom, union leadership has become a lifetime career for many officers.

Studies on local union participation argue that members tend to get involved if they have adequate information about the union, are given concrete ways of contributing, know someone in office, socialize with current leaders, experience relative job satisfaction, and feel that their effort will accomplish something. Otherwise, workers do their job and go home.

While all workers have to contend with these factors, they present greater difficulties for women. Women are the "outsiders," less likely to know someone in office, to be part of the in-leadership crowd, to socialize with that circle, or for that matter to be satisfied with their job. Moreover, women have less access to union information, and are prevented by family and home responsibilities from "hanging around" the union hall or the local bar.

Probably the most difficult barrier to surmount is that of gender stereotypes which play a major role in shaping attitudes and voting preferences within unions. Traits dealing with competence are considered male and those relating to emotions, female. Male traits are valued within the world of work and generally coincide with
leadership qualities; female traits have been viewed as an impediment to being an effective leader.

For women to overcome these cultural stereotypes and general obstacles, they must usually meet higher standards of skill and knowledge, work twice as hard, and organize a broad base of support within the local. Not every woman in leadership has had to overcome all these obstacles, and many women have attained positions of influence only to discover that to do their job, they have to adopt the same methods and attitudes as their male predecessors. The pressures on women leaders to conform are powerful; studies show that women leaders in token numbers in any organizational framework will experience extreme pressure either to act like one of the guys or to maintain a low profile and take a back seat.

But the successful efforts of women leaders over the past decade have changed the attitudes of many of their male co-workers, not only toward women but toward the union as well. Women have created openings for involvement, and have shown that organization among rank-and-file workers can produce change. They have raised the expectations of all their members. Women expect more from their unions, feel more a part of their locals, and as a result expect more from themselves as participants. In many cases, as women have moved into local positions of leadership, they seem to have narrowed the gap between leadership and membership which has plagued organized labor in recent times.

Female Styles of Work

How have women been able to move from the sidelines into leadership? What methods, resources and tactics have women utilized? Are they in any way different from the traditional male paths to leadership or the established approaches? The answer is yes and no. Some of the choices women have made reflect their status as ‘outsider’ or minority and are no different than others in their situation would make. But there are also gender specific characteristics.

Women, for example, have identified lack of self-confidence as a major factor inhibiting their greater participation in union activities. Women refrain from running for office or assuming posts of responsibility because they feel they do not have adequate skills, knowledge or ability. In part, this reluctance reflects the internalization of gender-based stereotypes; women attribute leadership qualities to men and seriously underestimate many of their own skills and experience. Women who have run PTAs,
church organizations and community groups, raised vast sums of money, and involved hundreds of people in working toward a common goal maintain that they have no skills. Similarly, women who balance a full-time job with responsibility for home and children decline union positions because they are “too difficult.”

When women do decide to run for union office, however, in order to overcome their lack of self-confidence, they seek training, education and collective support. They set high standards for themselves, and therefore tend to be better prepared and more educated when they finally do attain leadership positions.

Experience and data from 13 years of regional women’s summer schools, sponsored by university labor education programs and the AFL-CIO, support this view. A 1984 survey of women at all four regional summer schools, for example, showed that 60% of local women leaders had completed high school and some college, which is a higher percentage than a parallel cross section of local male leaders. And, yet despite this educational advantage, these women still place greater demands for competency on themselves.

These summer schools for women also provide a measure of the progress women have made. The majority of participants in the first years held no union office and paid their own way on their own time. Many had to battle their employer and their local union to attend. Now, close to 95% of these women are supported by their locals and hold some position, usually shop steward or committee member. Each year, however, there are more presidents, chairs of grievance committees and business representatives. What continues to be unique about the schools is the bonding among women, the support and encouragement they
provide each other, and the work many of them take on voluntarily to plan and recruit for future programs.

While many male leaders support education for their members and have supported labor education for women, there are also significant numbers who do very little to encourage education because they fear a challenge to their leadership. In contrast, it is characteristic of many women leaders to push members into training programs and to encourage the development of second-line leaders to whom they can delegate responsibilities. Perhaps it is women's double workload on the job and in the home which makes delegation and shared leadership more attractive. Perhaps it is the lack of self-confidence that drives women to stress training and education and to seek collective forms of activity.

There is a growing body of literature arguing that women have a distinctive style of work, an approach to jobs, organizations and people that is feminine. This literature walks a difficult line between capturing a genuinely female style and falling prey to traditional stereotypes. Women, much of the literature explains, are more concerned with relationships and emotions, with people and their needs. Women are more nurturing. The traditional stereotype contrasts this female nurturing trait with a male commitment to task accomplishment; while the woman "mothers," the male acts.

What is different about more recent feminist studies of women and work is the recognition that women are no less task-oriented, no less efficient and competent, but that they recognize that tasks involve the management of relationships and not just inanimate resources. To work effectively in a social environment like a union, people must be motivated, utilized, and their efforts coordinated and acknowledged. Women pay attention to relationships and human needs—the nurturing trait—in order to get tasks accomplished, and in so doing are often more effective managers, leaders and co-workers. The task-orientation associated with male behavior is more individual and authoritarian, concerned with the final product but inattentive to process. The job gets done, but people may feel used and less willing to lend a hand in the future. With voluntary organizations like unions, it is very important how people feel about what they're doing, whether they feel listened to, respected and rewarded for their efforts.

Studies of women managers, administrators, nurses, teachers, secretaries, even janitors have highlighted this particularly female style of work: taking care of people and managing relations as a means of accomplishing tasks. Most female-dominated occupations, not surprisingly, involve caretaking; women's jobs are often
seen as an extension of the kind of work and responsibilities they handle almost singlehandedly in the home. This “seamless” quality of women’s lives also makes them more sensitive to the many ways in which a worker’s home life affects his/her work and vice versa.

These human relation skills are complex and difficult to learn; females begin their apprenticeship very early in life as part of their socialization. The earliness of the training deceived many observers into thinking that these skills were “natural to women.” Employers have exploited this situation, expecting women to use these caretaking skills but never mentioning them in job descriptions or providing compensation. Since not all women are so skillful at managing relations and caring for others, it is as natural to women as mechanical skills are to men, which is not at all. But women learn these skills more often than men, and in the context of union organization, they are invaluable.

Consider, for example, what the most pressing needs of unions are today. Unions need to combat apathy and involve more members; unions need to break out of their isolation and win support from other workers, organizations and communities; unions need to develop a more union-educated and identified work force; they need to devise new strategies to handle the changing corporate world and to formulate programs that respond to a worker’s life necessities, on and off the job. Unions need to project a new image, less self-centered and more altruistic, less bureaucratic and more democratic, less as a special interest group and more as a voice of all working people. Organized labor has, in fact, recognized the importance of moving in these directions, but has had much difficulty breaking with old customs and attitudes.

Women have been instrumental in pressuring for many of these changes, and as their influence grows, they will be able to make significant contributions in each of these areas, based on their own experience, consciousness and style of work.

Apathy is the price labor unions pay for concentrating more and more power and decision-making at top levels and for functioning for many years as if unions were service organizations. Apathy results from a sense of powerlessness, is exacerbated by lack of information and of concrete, clear channels for involvement. When workers feel they can accomplish little or nothing from their activity, they become inactive, passive and often cynical. Over the past decade, women have battled this sense of powerlessness and apathy in themselves, and have found through collectivity, networking, training and determination a road toward empowerment...
and a means of carving out channels of involvement. In addition to providing a model for increasing participation, women have become skilled at building networks, identifying resources, mobilizing support, sharing responsibilities, and working democratically.

Without building caucuses, committees and coalitions, women could not have run for office successfully. To get their demands on the bargaining table and their issues on a union’s agenda, women have learned to frame their concerns in a way that will appeal to the self-interest of their male co-workers and to the public at large. Within the union, women have argued convincingly that health and safety issues [work load, weight limits, health and reproductive hazards] are not women’s issues, but workers’ issues. Women have addressed their co-workers as husbands, sons, parents and brothers, showing men that their workplace behavior and needs, like women’s, are shaped by family and home life. To the public, women have argued justice, patient care, quality education, improved services, jobs and the fate of this nation’s children.

At the level of national politics and international concerns, women have often been associated with progressive causes, advocates of peace and supporters of social legislation. Although few studies exist which probe the priorities and preferences of union women on national issues, a survey of hundreds of local women leaders participating in the summer schools provides an indication of the kinds of leadership we can expect from union women on these issues.

Female union members polled were strong supporters of women’s issues: 95% believed in a woman’s right to choose whether or not to have an abortion; 95% supported the Equal Rights Amendment; a generous majority supported affirmative action and federally subsidized child care. Only 4% of the women advocated an increase in the defense budget; 70% called for a decrease. 90% urged more spending on education and more efforts to feed the world’s hungry and protect human rights. A majority opposed any U.S. intervention in other countries, and only 9% indicated they would back the sending of U.S. troops.

Conclusion

From the narrowist survival perspective, labor must organize these new women workers—to maintain their numbers, to prevent the use of cheaper female labor to lower wages, and to thwart employer efforts to expand the part-time, temporary and subcon-
tracted work force. To accomplish this organizing challenge, women must be utilized, trained, promoted and welcomed into positions of power. And accommodations need to be made to facilitate women’s involvement—adjustments in meeting and work schedules, greater emphasis on training, and a campaign of re-education to combat gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices at all levels of the union.

But labor’s future will also depend on its ability to learn from women activists, from their style of work and their approach to problems. New ideas, new methods, new programs cannot be feared or fought; there must be more openness, flexibility and innovation within the house of labor. Today’s leaders must be willing to cede control and share power, not only with women but with rank-and-file activists across the nation. To increase participation, commitment and union consciousness, there must be greater access to information, more democratic decision-making, more concrete channels for involvement, more emphasis on initiative and less on loyalty. Union leadership does not need a set of answers for today’s problems; it needs a better approach to solving problems. The answers will follow.

The best of today’s emerging women leaders, concerned with family and community, with a social conscience and political awareness, supportive of education and training, skilled in coalition-building and collective styles of work, driven to work twice as hard and be twice as good, often underestimating their own ability and skills while encouraging and acknowledging others’ accomplishments, depending on others and fostering involvement, represent an important force for rebuilding a broad-based, independent and powerful labor movement in the decades ahead. They will add numbers to the ranks of labor, but it is not their numbers which matter most. What matters is their ideas, their energy and commitment, and their approach to challenges.

References