Space and Opportunities: Developing New Leaders to Meet Labor's Future

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Abstract

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The "how to" guide for developing new leadership for the union movement, particularly women and people of color, does not exist. The need exists, however, and increasingly more unions and union leadership acknowledge the urgency of the task.

Two conflicting transformations in the economy signal the need for change. On the one hand, the work force itself has undergone a transformation in the past two decades. A new majority has emerged, uniting the voices of women, people of color and immigrants. Those voices, as yet, lack resonance at the top decision-making levels of unions. On the other hand, diminished economic opportunity and a global competition for jobs have heightened race and gender tensions, and threaten to undermine the unity necessary to rebuild our union movement. How unions respond to this situation will determine, in large part, their ability to develop new leadership.

More than a century of experience demonstrates the degree to which union growth and power increase with a committed battle

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against discrimination, and how in these and other struggles, women and people of color come forward as leaders. Other examples remind us as well that exclusionary or discriminatory policies undermine union power, weaken union democracy and membership participation, and suppress the development of new leadership. The divisions, especially along race and gender lines, continue to be the achilles heel of the U.S. labor movement.

**INDEPENDENT SPACE—STRUCTURED OPPORTUNITIES**

Individual and union experiences suggest that changing the face of leadership takes a lot of personal courage, independent organization among rank and file members, an activist approach to union work, and strategic support from existing leadership. Change occurs in response to pressure, and in this case, the pressure comes internally from below and from above in union structures, as well as externally from mass movements. There is no way to explain the changes taking place within trade unions today without understanding the enormous impact of the civil rights and women's movements on our society as a whole.

Interviews with dozens of leading activists confirm the importance of both independent space and structured opportunities in changing union organization and culture. The labor movement's dominant culture reflects traditional union customs, values and perspectives—all of which took shape in response to conditions very different from today's. They were defined to reflect the needs, life styles and preferences of a leadership and membership predominantly white and male in character. **Independent space**, then, is space away from the dominant culture and the controlled structures of the union. This self-organized space provides room for women and minorities to identify what in that culture excludes them or makes them uncomfortable; it also provides room for them to create a different kind of culture or work environment, to explore more familiar styles of doing things. In this space, women and minorities can safely articulate grievances, validate feelings, and also strategize about how to engage and change the dominant culture.

The consciousness-raising groups of the women's movement represented such a space, as did the Black power caucuses within the unions, from the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, based in the nation's auto plants, to the Ad Hoc Committee in steel, and POWER (Post Office Women for Equal Rights) in the American Postal Workers' Union. Joe Crump, who heads the Minority Coalition of the United Food and Commercial Workers' Union (UFCW),
agrees that what makes a difference is the existence of caucuses and networks, independent self-organization. The Minority Coalition, Crump explains, grew out of informal discussions and networks among African-Americans in 1972, and maintains its independent status. The same is true for the minority caucuses in the Communications Workers of America (CWA); they decline official status within the union but welcome the opportunity to meet with executive boards and top leaders of their international.

Workers carve out independent space all the time, by building informal peer networks and ad hoc committees, or by taking storytelling breaks at lunch, after work, or in the hall. The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists provides that space for workers from many unions to compare experiences and reflect on solutions to common problems. The regional summer schools for union women offer a similar space for working women.

**Structured opportunity** represents the pressure from above, the support and efforts by those in leadership to open doors, provide education and experience, as well as vehicles for sharing responsibility and power. The establishment of women's and civil rights departments and conferences, the development of special training programs, internships or apprenticeships, mentoring programs, and also the conscious inclusion of women and people of color in visible and critical leadership positions constitute structured opportunities. These affirmative action measures specifically address the problems of exclusion which result from the preferences and biases of the dominant culture.

To be effective, however, structured opportunities must accommodate or allow for the emergence of independent space. The challenge is to overcome policies and practices that favor the "insider," the person who looks like the current leaders and understands their values and their ways of doing things. "Affirmative action works," comments SEIU local president Celia Wcislo. "You see faces like your own, and people identify and develop people who look like them." Yet, she adds, "you have to allow women and people of color space away from the world of white men, allow them to be different and not have to act like white men." If the "structured opportunity" requires participants to learn to think, speak or behave like those in power, then those who "succeed" will be those who are willing or able to adapt to the status quo—at great personal cost. They will be regarded as "tokens;" and the voice they hoped to raise within leadership will have been silenced.

The tension between the status quo or official voice of labor and the newer voices of women and people of color plays out at
the annual meetings of the AFL-CIO organizations set up to address gender and race issues. The Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), the A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI), the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LACLAA) and the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA) have official status and, to a degree, are expected to promote AFL-CIO policies and priorities. At the same time, however, their meetings provide significant independent space for activists to network and organize for their own positions. The strength of independent pressure accounts, for example, for CLUW’s support of women’s right to reproductive choice which differs from the official AFL-CIO position.

The pressure to conform poses a serious dilemma for new leaders, as is clear in the words of this national leader. “I’m not sure what the rules of the game are, so I’m always breaking them. Do I care about it? I have to make a conscious decision all the time: be me or be who I think they want me to be? Say my point of view or just ask a question? Act like the new kid on the block and ask them to take care of me, because that’s easier for them?” Women and people of color grapple with these decisions every day of their active union life. They must weigh the impact of their behavior on their white male colleagues, and decide consciously when to compromise, when to walk away from a struggle, and when to take a stand. What helps the most, according to almost every single person I interviewed, is a mentor, a supportive person in high places.

“A feminist insider in a powerful position is important,” stresses Karen Nussbaum, executive director of a predominantly female organization 9to5. Also the leader of District 925, which is part of SEIU, Nussbaum understands the role of a strategically placed female advocate. “In the early days,” she notes, “there weren’t people who fit that description.” According to Joyce Miller, a vice president of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU), president of CLUW, and one of the first women to gain a top position in the AFL-CIO, “One of the most important things to me, as is true of both men and women, was gaining a mentor.” Miller adds, “It was important to have good relationships with elected officers to gain expertise that was necessary and fit in with the political goals of the union—I also worked harder than most of my male colleagues.” With the help of mentors, Gloria Johnson, director of the Department of Social Action for the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), also a top CLUW officer, moved from a clerical support position to become one of the leading African-American unionists in the country. In turn, Johnson has
mentored countless others. "I love the union for what it has done, but more important what it can do," Johnson comments. "I love being able to play some small role in moving people—sisters and brothers—up in the ranks."

Without a mentor or a connection within the union's decision-making circles, independent space can lead to isolation and intensify alienation. Many of the early Black power and women's caucuses were either refused access or were reluctant to use it, which heightened distrust and delayed change. Structured opportunities help to insure dialogue and joint action for change. "You need to create and control the space for discussion of race and discrimination among yourselves," emphasizes Gerry Hudson, executive vice-president of New York 1199, "but then you can't forget the necessity of joining the larger discussion. Let us think outside the structure but be sure we know we have to think within it."

Promoting organizational change is a very complex and scary issue within unions. The thorny issue is control. When leaders step forward to advocate special measures to develop and promote women and people of color, they too face resistance and endanger their own position. So they often pressure for a consensus for limited change, for a carefully monitored process that will yield predictable or controlled outcomes. But when formerly disenfranchised or marginalized people are brought together, they seize the moment to create their own space and to think for themselves.
how they want the process to go and what outcomes they desire. Women and minorities understand that empowerment comes only through their own efforts and cannot be given as a gift. Often what emerges is a compromise that represents an advance, but leaves the supportive leadership feeling “attacked” and the female or minority participants feeling frustrated or angry that they were not encouraged to develop their own distinctive voice and style.

The two components of any leadership development program—space and opportunities—are critical and necessary, although there is no one model for assembling them. Each union has a different history and approach for addressing issues of equality and representation, determined in part by union policy and commitment, membership activity, industry, geography and circumstance. A great number of union leaders acknowledge that labor’s existence and future depend on its ability to galvanize and organize the diverse work force. As a result, top leaders, both at local and national levels, are seeking help on how to do a better job in hiring, developing and promoting women and people of color. Their interest and commitment, however, exceed their expertise. These union leaders are asking for help.

SEIU’S LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) provides an example of how much can be accomplished when leaders and activists work together to make change. Grass roots pressure combined with a strong commitment from the top officers led to the creation of an historic education and leadership development program, designed to remove barriers, open spaces and multiply opportunities in the union.

The SEIU Leadership Resolution passed at the April 1992 convention commits SEIU to building a representative leadership—from the base to the International Executive Board (IEB)—with percentages equal to those in the membership. Recognizing the achievements of the union, the Resolution stresses that SEIU could and would do more. The accompanying Report on Education and Leadership Development includes many new structured opportunities: expanded staff and leadership training, internships, a job bank, and job enrichment programs. At the same time, it supports many openings or spaces, including study circles for rank and file leaders, roundtables for officers, and regional women’s and civil rights conferences.

An overview of the debates and problems, programs and initiatives within SEIU demonstrates how the interplay of indepen-
dent space and structured opportunities contribute to the kind of organizational change that enables new leadership to step forward. Because the union has virtually doubled in size over the past 12 years, going from 600,000 to over a million, it is not a stranger to change. Growth provides the union with opportunities to expand leadership, and to rethink policies and structures. In this, SEIU is not representative of most unions, which have suffered contraction. The advantage of creating diversity through expansion, of course, is that the change does not come at the direct expense of the established leadership, so resistance is diminished.

The SEIU membership truly reflects the new work force. It is over 50% female, at least one-third people of color, with a growing number of immigrant workers. SEIU is heterogeneous in other ways as well; it combines strong AFL-shaped locals with innovative additions like District 925, and social activist organizations like District 1199. Large public sector locals co-exist with major private sector ones, including health care, building services, and office worker units. Although the International Executive Board had been overwhelmingly white and male two decades ago, today this elected leadership is one of the most diverse of any union: about one-third female and one-quarter people of color. Given the range of diversity in race, occupation, nationality, political viewpoints, age, and geography, building unity in diversity at SEIU requires great skill and resourcefulness.

Debates on the issues of race and gender equity within the union have been widespread. A number of factors, particular to SEIU, are shaping the outcome. First, the union has pushed organizing with ever increasing persistence to the center of its agenda. The concerted efforts to organize forced to the surface the problems white or male organizers encounter in their efforts to unionize a largely female and minority workforce. Organizers needed space to talk about their problems and explore solutions. Secondly, the union’s own emphasis on justice and equity created rising expectations among members who exerted increasingly more pressure for change. Thirdly, the very top leadership of the union was committed to developing female and minority leaders. They backed up their beliefs with staff and material resources, structured opportunities and an acknowledgement of the importance of space. Finally, international leadership understood the interdependence of its organizing and leadership development goals: broad leadership development could not be achieved in isolation from building a more activist, organizing style of work, nor could the union accomplish its objectives in organizing without addressing the importance of more female and minority leadership.
SEIU’s emphasis on organizing not only drives the growth of the union but the discussions on race and gender. Organizing the new service workforce requires among other things a talented staff of organizers who look like the people they’re organizing. The ability to communicate with workers directly is essential. A shortage or absence of Spanish-speaking, Chinese-speaking or Tagalog-speaking organizers can pose insurmountable obstacles in a campaign. The ability to understand and mediate antagonisms among minority nationalities is no less important. Not all Spanish-speaking workers share a culture and values; distrust among certain nationalities has historical roots. Few can understand these tensions better than organizers of those nationalities.

Although SEIU made it a priority to hire a multicultural and multinational staff, it has not been so easy to find people willing to adapt to the migrant and exhausting life of an organizer. After all, the standards and qualities held up as the "ideal" organizer reflect the values and biases of a culture defined by white males. The importance of family and community to women and minority nationalities in the U.S. clashes fundamentally with the 24-hour-a-day on-the-road norm for union organizers. In addition, a majority of lead organizers—the strategists—are white. Organizers of color resent being called in to a campaign to "fix it," after racial conflicts threatened to undermine its outcome, without ever having had the authority to plan the campaigns in the first place.

Within the local union, the issues of race and gender also create...
contradictions between leadership and membership as well as among members. In the past, a number of unions—not just SEIU—had locals run by a white leadership with an African American membership, or run by men with a female membership. Today there is less willingness on the part of women and minorities to sit out the election battles. Furthermore, the cultural and racial diversity is more complex: African-American, Latinos and Asian Pacific workers find themselves competing with whites and among themselves for leadership positions in locals with changing memberships. Because so many women and minority activists were thwarted in the past in their efforts to obtain local leadership positions, they lack familiarity and experience with the rather complex job of running a local. SEIU, as a result, lacked a pool of minority staff and leaders equipped to address the organizational and multicultural problems arising in many locals. In the past, the International sent in an advisor or a trustee to bail out locals in crisis. These multicrafted trouble shooters—almost exclusively white and male—could deal with a broad spectrum of financial and organizational failures, but not ones rooted in the race and gender transformation of the workforce.

Leaders, organizers, and staff—of all backgrounds—demanded more effective affirmative action hiring; minority organizers and staff demanded greater training and promotions; white organizers demanded more training and minority peers and staff. Directors demanded help in identifying and hiring minority organizers; leaders demanded more resources for organizers and help in hiring and training. Everyone recognized the problem: it was impossible to ignore, because it got in everybody’s way.

A Solution Process Begins

From the top came the call for more structured opportunities, for programs and vehicles for developing more highly skilled top leaders and for retooling the existing leadership. The union recognized that it had to respond both to the demands for representation of the newer or formerly excluded workers and to the needs of those already at the top, who had committed their lives as best as they knew how to build the union.

In the two years leading up to the 1992 convention, SEIU explored and experimented with multiple approaches for promoting and supporting organizational change and leadership development. Leaders encouraged women and minorities to utilize space to think about solutions, while relying on existing committees and departments to evaluate and recommend new structured opportunities.
Affirmative action committees were established, one at International headquarters, and a second, within the organizing department. Special programs were developed for pre-scheduled activities to raise consciousness and also to encourage collective problem-solving. At a weeklong senior organizers' conference in 1991, a special educational session worked participants through a series of case studies addressing issues of hiring, training and promotion. Relying on a collective problem-solving approach, organizers poured over "laundered" resumes to help reflect on the stereotypes that influence their view of a "qualified" organizer; they watched a videotape of members discussing their personal pain and experience with discrimination. The new organizer training program incorporates many exercises designed to focus on race and gender issues: in doing assessments, building the worksite committee, and identifying central campaign issues.

The development of member organizers also became an important program, not only because the membership is diverse but also because it strengthens the local union's role and opens up a vast pool of energy and talent. Relying on a million members and not just a couple hundred organizers makes organizing on scale a possibility in this country. The member organizing program, developed and promoted by the International, encourages locals to drive organizing, and to become more activist and participatory in their overall approach to union work. Such an approach, of course, also accelerates leadership development. It is the day-to-day struggles at the worksite and in the local that create opportunities for new leaders to gain experience and confidence.

In order to help local unions strengthen themselves, the International established a Local Union Organizational Development Committee (LUOD), combining the expertise of various departments and experienced leaders in a "think-tank" approach. Their job included figuring out how to support locals—from the risk-takers to the troubled—and to summarize from many local union experiences what seemed to work and what did not. An integrated approach enabled the committee to look at the local as a whole: strategic planning, budget allocations, financial, office and staff management, bargaining, grievances and steward organization. Within this context, it was also possible to assess how a local identified, developed and fostered new activists and leaders.

Leaders of some of the largest locals had already begun to meet together to discuss their problems. They had taken the initiative to create their own form of "independent space," to help them talk over what it takes to run a large local. The International not only sought to learn from their experience, but worked to duplicate
this collective problem-solving approach with leaders from other locals of comparable size and orientation. Roundtables and strategy sessions engaged increasingly more local union leaders in coordinating bargaining plans, developing strategies against privatization, and in sharing successes and failures in running locals, working with staff, and managing budgets.

Many of these forums included discussions touching on race and gender and leadership development issues. One roundtable on how to work more effectively with staff addressed directly the dilemma of white leaders trying to hire, mentor and promote staff of color. The contributions of the one African-American in the group were extremely helpful; without his insight the discussion would not have been as constructive. For the other leaders, it underlined the importance of minority leadership participation and development.

The International undertook major initiatives specifically to address the promotion of more women and minorities into leadership. Recognizing the central role of education and training, President John J. Sweeney appointed an Education Committee of the IEB to evaluate existing programs and recommend an overall education program for the union. It was to include leadership development and training for all levels of leaders within SEIU, from rank and file to local officers, and international staff and officers. This Committee developed standards and a framework
that could address the educational needs of a million-member union.

At the same time, President Sweeney mandated both the Women’s and Civil Rights Committees of the IEB to find out what the barriers were to women and people of color in the union and then to make specific recommendations to overcome those barriers. Mini forums were set up at each of three regional conferences in 1991 in order to reach deeper into the ranks of membership to identify obstacles and concerns. One focused on the barriers to women and a second on the barriers to people of color. Hundreds of union activists, from members to local leaders, participated in these discussions. While the space for these discussions was in many ways controlled, the exchange did not end with the workshop. In fact, these sessions helped to encourage more women and people of color to enter the dialogue. All of the problems and suggestions identified at these forums were compiled, and returned to the participants for additions and comments. The International then established two special work groups to review and reflect on those lists and their own experience as well. A cross section of women leaders composed one group; a cross section of leaders of color, the other.

The honesty, depth of feeling and constructive energy demonstrated at these meetings were remarkable. ‘Is this meeting taking place,’ asked one participant, ‘so that there’s something to display at the convention, or do you really want to know what stands in our way?’ ‘Will there be retaliation for honesty?’ posed another. ‘Will our views shape policy or will we get a ‘thank you for your input’?’ Because the International called together the work groups, and then asked participants to speak openly, the real question was: Is this meeting ‘our’ space or ‘yours?’ But the days of discussion produced significant results.

The final lists of recommendations from both work groups were written into the reports and resolutions of the convention. The education report became a program for education and leadership development, with training programs to enhance leadership at every level and also career ladder programs to insure advancement and promotions within the union. Unanimously recommended by the IEB, the Education and Leadership Development Report and Resolution were adopted by the full convention. Another convention resolution, raised from the floor and passed, encouraged SEIU Regional Conferences to support the establishment of African-American caucuses.

These efforts combined make an important difference, but not a revolution. Organizational transformation is by nature slow,
uneven, and complex. Change has already occurred, though, in SEIU through the process that led to the development of the reports and resolutions. It involved the establishment of networks, a dialogue among leaders at many levels, the space to identify and name the obstacles. Structured opportunities played a role as well, in the forums, on the IEB committees, and the work groups. The widespread participation means that many SEIU leaders and activists have some ownership over the ideas and proposals. They will not easily sit by without implementation.

The success of the program, therefore, rests on many shoulders. The International can provide opportunities, but without independent self-organization, it could be a hollow victory. “In the absence of self-organization,” says SEIU Education Director Bill Fletcher, “we can have a great leadership development program, but there will be no feeling of ownership and, as a result, no accountability. . . . If there’s no pressure and involvement,” he warns, “we’ll be acting in a vacuum, doing what we think is best, and I worry about that.’’

As the face of the SEIU’s leadership diversifies, so too does the culture of the union. The result, of course, is that when there are more people in the union and in leadership positions who reflect the diversity of the workers—not only their faces but their songs and dances—the more welcome those workers will feel; the more successful the union’s organizing efforts will be.

CREATIVE INITIATIVES FROM MANY UNIONS

There is often a correlation between the degree of independent space or organization among women and minorities in a union and the track record of the international in establishing structured opportunities—special programs, departments and initiatives. The Communication Workers of America (CWA) is one example. In the early 1970s, the International had established an Office of Ethnic Affairs (1972), a policy on discrimination (1973) and a “Blacks and Other Minorities Structure Study Committee” and a “Female Structure Committee” to identify ways of increasing involvement in the union. The National Equity Committee was appointed in 1974. By the end of the decade and during the early 1980s, three important programs were launched: an internship program for minority members, a national conference on minority concerns and the Minority Leadership Institute (MLI).

In the background propelling these advances was an active, well organized minority caucus. It is still very active and ad hoc by choice; the caucus meets annually and includes at its meetings
over a hundred local officers, stewards and members. The network "works," to pass resolutions at conventions, to recommend programs and to help train and promote new generations of minority leaders for the union. There is a clear and inseparable relationship between the independent space occupied by the caucus and the structured opportunities developed by the International.

The CWA's Minority Leadership Institute is fairly unique within the labor movement. Each year since its founding in 1983, eight local leaders of color are selected to attend this three-week course, held by the union's education and civil rights departments at the George Meany Center. Sessions cover political economy, history and law, with a clear focus on the civil rights movement and minority union and legislative issues, from health care to the free trade agreement. The curriculum stresses extensive writing and public speaking classes, and skill-based workshops on bargaining, organizing and grievance arbitration. Participants meet a variety of labor leaders, including leaders of color, and have a chance to discuss personal and professional concerns. Graduates of the program have gone in different directions: some have been placed on staff; others remain active in their locals; some have moved up in the union, and others have disappeared.

A recent addition to the MLI is a two-week organizing program designed as a hands-on experience. The CWA understands both the importance of organizing and of real-life struggles in opening the union to and developing the leadership of women and people of color. Tremendous resources have gone into focusing organizing in the South, as a central vehicle for outreach to African American and Chicano workers, and a training ground for bringing forward new leadership (see "Home-Made Organizing," elsewhere in this issue). Allowing new leaders to network at annual district conferences for women and minorities further supports leadership development efforts. A new manual, Committee on Equity (COE), provides one more extremely valuable tool to local leaders and activists committed to promoting respect and equality within the union. Along with highlighting the role and importance of local equity committees, the manual explores the difficult issues of racism and sexism, addresses the problems for the union of discrimination based on sexual preference, ability, age, nationality or religion, and provides activity ideas for building a local COE.

Other unions are exploring different and innovative approaches to strengthening the multicultural and multinational fabric of their organizations. Like the CWA caucus, POWER seized and used their space effectively in order to gain recognition and support from the leadership. These women, many of the founding leaders
African-American, organized themselves at conventions and other meetings, but then set up their own leadership training programs with the help of others, including labor studies programs. They used their independent pressure to gain a forum at international events, and ultimately official status.

Train-the-trainer programs are another effective tool for leadership development. Recognizing how important it is to have trainers who share the same background and experiences as the participants, AFSCME has developed a week-long instructor training program. Offered regionally, the program is designed to enhance the union's ability to develop many more stewards and worksite leaders nationally.

The work-based literacy and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) developed differently. They were set up to teach English and basic literacy skills, but were transformed spontaneously by the students into an independent space for exploring how immigrant workers could contribute to the union. Students set up their own council and asked to be involved in the development of goals and curriculum for the program. The council experience helped to develop leaders, who in turn wanted to organize friends, family and neighbors! The council took the initiative of launching an associate member campaign. Now the Internationals are exploring ways in which to make use of this energy and emerging leadership.

It is an important sign that some of the unions historically more resistant to change are demonstrating a new commitment to diversity by structuring opportunities. Some of the building and construction trades are exploring some interesting approaches to their apprenticeship programs, involving mentoring and special support for women and people of color. Internships along with mentoring and train-the-trainer programs are becoming more widespread, and they serve as very effective vehicles for affirmative action leadership development work.

Outside individual unions, numerous programs have been in existence for years focusing on women and minority leadership issues. These programs provide a safe and independent space for women and minorities who have not found the needed networks within their own union. The regional summer schools for union women, jointly sponsored by the University and College Labor Education Association (UCLEA) and the AFL-CIO, embracing the traditions of the pioneering Bryn Mawr Women’s Summer School provide skill training and networking opportunities for thousands
of rank and file women workers. The George Meany Center sponsors an institute on women’s issues and a second one, for minority trade unionists. In Michigan there is program designed particularly for African American male unionists. Unions are also discovering they can take advantage of organizer and leadership training programs of groups like the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Midwest Academy.

CONCLUSION

Years ago I asked Joyce Kornbluh, a true pioneer of leadership development for women and people of color, what it takes to develop a leader. Her reply emphasized resources, opportunity, responsibility and respect. "People have to be able to live while they learn," she said. "They have to have training and support, recognition and trust. But especially, they have to be provided challenging opportunities, and then have the space to take risks, make decisions, do it their own way and be held accountable."

"The overall theme," concludes Bill Fletcher, "is we have to be our own liberators. It can’t be that someone else liberates you, because then you don’t know the taste of freedom." Leadership development for women and people of color happens only with their own involvement in the process. A mainly white or male leadership can decide to support that process—and their support is essential. They can allow space, provide opportunity, and allocate resources, but they cannot control the space or the process without undermining it. And that’s hard. A critical component of leadership development within unions requires that those in leadership let go.

Author’s Note: This article is my own, but the ideas belong to dozens of union leaders. In particular, I want to recognize the contributions of the following people: Judy Beard, APWU; Joe Crump, UFCW; Bill Fletcher, SEIU; Yvette Herrera, CWA; Gerry Hudson, 1199; Gloria Johnson, IUE; Joyce Kornbluh; Kitty Krupat, ILGWU; Jose LaLuz, ACTWU; Joyce Miller, CLUW, ACTWU; Karen Nussbaum, District 925, SEIU; and Celia Wcislo, SEIU; and a special note of appreciation to President John J. Sweeney and other SEIU leaders. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the contributions of dozens of African American and Latino steelworkers who worked for their union from 1936 to 1970 and who shared their life stories with me. This article reflects a part of what they taught me.