

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL:

Balancing Work, Family and your Union

BY JENYA CASSIDY AND BRENDA MUÑOZ



Britta Duncan and family on the picket line supporting Blue Diamond workers

During the 2007 Western Region Summer Institute for Union Women (SIUW), the Labor Project co-facilitated a class on Balancing Work, Life and Union. We expected rank and file members to identify ways to involve their unions in helping to balance the demands of their jobs and the demands of their families. However, the 30 participants quickly showed us that they were not interested in a generic discussion on how to balance work and family, but how to avoid burn out from working full time, having a family and playing an active role in their unions. They believed in what they were doing; but they were exhausted.

Burnout and exhaustion are potential hazards for union activists, especially for those with young children or other caregiving responsibilities. Many organizers find it challenging to recruit these members and keep them involved. “The hardest part about recruiting a union activist is that they have difficulty with committing their time. They worry

that they can’t balance the time they need for the union with the demands of their family. Workers already have to split their time between work and family -- the decision to engage in one more activity is hard” says Dan Abernathy, Organizing Director, AFSCME Council 18, New Mexico.

CAREGIVERS NEGOTIATE FOR FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES

With a diverse membership body involving union members with family responsibilities is key to negotiating for work and family policies that benefit the whole union. Britta Duncan, a Summer Institute for Union Women participant and a member of ILWU Local 5 in Oregon, is a shop steward in her union and the mother of three children. Britta works at Powell’s City of Books in Portland and became involved with the union when she needed more job flexibility to take care of her new baby. “My job got less flexible when I got a new supervisor and I turned to the union for help,” she explained. “The union connected me to other workers experiencing the same

thing and I began to see workplace flexibility as an issue for everyone. I worked with my co-workers to make sure that there was a uniform policy in place. I have continued to stay active in the union because I want to help other families fight for a better work and family balance.”

Ray Graham, shop steward and member of Carpenters Local 713 in Hayward, California, has three sons and has played an active role in his union for more than 10 years. Ray was instrumental in getting the Local to offer child care at meetings and believes that doing so increases the involvement of a diverse group of members. “It helps people stay involved,” he said. “When we got Spanish translation we saw an increase in Spanish speaking members coming to meetings and when we got child care it made it easier for parents to participate in the union.”

CAREGIVERS AS ORGANIZERS

In spite of the difficulty in involving union members with families, Dan Abernathy of AFSCME Council 18 says it’s worth it and it’s necessary. “Members with family responsibilities know the importance of commitment and that is what we need in the union movement. It is also important because when they organize new members, they can relate to the challenges of balancing work, family and other responsibilities. When new members can relate to the



Ray Graham relaxing with family and friends

continued on next page

INSIDE STORY

experiences of activists, they are more inclined to want to join the union.”

Britta is effective as an organizer because she understands the challenges of those she is recruiting. When workers say that they can't get involved because of their family, Britta makes it clear that ILWU Local 5 is family friendly and that if they need child care, the union will provide it.

“I also make the work easier by making suggestions about specific activities and breaking up large jobs into smaller, doable pieces,” she explains. For example, she may recruit someone to do house visits once a week for the next three months rather than just telling them that the overall organizing campaign could go on for 1-2 years. Britta is also motivated to recruit and train more activists so that there are more people to share the workload.

UNIONS ARE A POSITIVE INFLUENCE

“Being active in the union does make you extremely busy,” says Ray Graham. “There were times that I was so busy with my union work that I joked that the kids were going to start asking, ‘who’s that guy?’ when I came to the dinner table” he laughed. Ray says that the best way to balance union activism with family is to involve them directly. “Being a shop steward, you definitely take your work home with you but we should not shield our kids from our union work,” he explained. “They need to see us do this work in order to understand the struggles of the working class. I take the kids out on the picket line with me and my wife wanted to spend Mother’s Day on a picket line at a local hotel.”

Dan Abernathy agrees that balancing union work and family does not have to be either/or: “We have to let members know that the union is more than family friendly -- the union can be a positive part of your family life. We’re all in this together and we want to make their activism manageable.” Dan also notes that what union organizers need to remember is to make the

work fun: “In order to recruit more union activists and keep them involved, organizers have to remind themselves that working with the union shouldn’t have to be a sacrifice, it should be something members want to do and enjoy.”

Union members like Britta and Ray are doing more for their kids than negotiating for child care and flex time. By playing a role in their union, they are providing a good example of community involvement and strength. Ray commented, “I look at it this way: as a dad, I could be watching TV or drinking beer in my down time. Instead, I am either with my family or the union and, while the union takes time, I feel it is a positive influence on my kids.”

“Being a shop steward, you definitely take your work home with you but we should not shield our kids from our union work.”

— Ray Graham,
Carpenter’s Union, Local 713

MAKING YOUR UNION COMMITMENT MANAGEABLE

- **Know yourself:** make sure that you are honest with yourself about what you can take on before overcommitting.
- **Speak up:** if the work gets to be too much, talk to your union about your concerns before giving up.
- **Put it in writing:** create a workable plan with your union.
- **Remember,** even if you can’t dedicate a lot of time there are ways to stay involved.

Reprint freely with the following acknowledgement:
Reproduced from the Fall 2007 issue of the Labor Family News – Newsletter of the Labor Project for Working Families. For more information, please email info@working-families.org, call 510-643-7088 or visit www.working-families.org

UNION TIPS ON MAKING THE WORK FAMILY FRIENDLY

- **Identify** and develop more leaders so that responsibilities can be divided.
- **Honor** the fact that members have other responsibilities – they will be more open to getting involved if they know the union respects this.
- **Break it down:** organize the work into sizable chunks.
- **Write it down:** work with the member on a work plan to make their volunteer commitment clear and manageable.
- **Offer Child Care:** make the union more family-friendly by offering child care or other options at meetings and events.
- **Have fun:** when possible, have events at family friendly venues, for example, bowling alleys or a park.
- **Involve the kids:** find creative, fun ways to involve family members like sign-painting for kids.