

WOMEN MAKE UNIONS STRONG:

Seven Strategies to Bring More Women into Leadership

Even in 2008, when we talk about a union leader, the image that often comes to mind is a man -- not a woman.

According to a new report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, while the number of women in unions continues to increase, they are still vastly underrepresented in union leadership. The report, *I Knew I Could Do This Work*, funded by the Berger-Marks Foundation, explains why this is so and outlines strategies for unions to use in promoting women's leadership.

OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT

In October 2007, the Southern "Unions are good for women workers, but they could be much better at promoting women into leadership positions," says Amy Caiazza, the report's author. According to the report, women experience a wide

range of obstacles to their union-based activism. Among these are women's lack of visibility in leadership; the fear of retribution as a result of women's activism; discomfort with conflict and public roles; unions' neglect of women workers' priorities; the time demands of union work; gender bias within unions; and lack of awareness of what unions do.

While women now comprise about 44% of all union members, the report points out that "in no case does the proportion of women in leadership equal the proportion in membership." Changing this dynamic could benefit the labor movement as a whole: as unions ramp up their organizing efforts in traditionally female-dominated industries, women lead organizers have the highest success rates in winning certification elections. (Professor Kate Bronfenbrenner, Cornell University 2005)



Teamsters, Local 896 member Deborah Lobao sits proudly on her Harley. She was elected Chief Shop Steward in January -- the first woman to hold this position since her workplace was unionized in 1943. (photo by Tiffany Lobao)



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— Ann Worth, President of Sign and Display, Local 510 in Northern California

"Unions are missing the boat on this -- women are the majority of our new members and we really need to tap into this resource for new leadership," says Yvonne Syphax, Assistant Director of the Women's Department, AFSCME. Ros Pelles, Director of the AFL-CIO Department of Civil, Human and Women's Rights, agrees: "We have to bring women into leadership for obvious reasons -- nearly half of union members are women and they need to see themselves as leaders in order to become activists and build the union."

FOCUS ON WOMEN'S PRIORITIES

According to activists interviewed in the IWPR report, one way to promote women's leadership is to organize around issues that are most important to women. For example, balancing work and family often comes up with women workers but is not often treated as the main issue in an organizing campaign. Emphasizing ways the union can help with this would attract more women.

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The time-consuming nature of the work is another obstacle to women's activism. As the report states, "Traditionally, union activism has required long hours and substantial time away from home." According to the report's author, these expectations are modeled after traditional male workers – single or with a non-working spouse who can care for the children. As more women with the primary caregiving responsibilities are called on to play an active role in building the labor movement, unions need to offer creative ways to foster and encourage this involvement. As one organizer interviewed by the report states, "You have to meet people where they live. You can't expect them to drop their lives and just do what's convenient for the union."

There are many ways to involve members with family responsibilities. Some unions welcome children and provide child care. Most provide the evening meal to make it easier to attend meetings right after work. The most important thing is not sticking to one model of involvement because it is what has always worked.

WOMEN NEED TO GET INVOLVED

Important for the economic health of women and to the overall viability of the labor movement to bring more women into leadership positions. IWPR says that on a basic level, unions are good for women workers: "Unionized women earn 30% more than non-unionized women, and union workers have more paid leave and are more likely to have health insurance. As more and more women work, their wages, benefits and job characteristics have far-reaching impact on their families and communities."

Ann Worth, President of Sign and Display, Local 510 in Northern California, agrees that unions need to consciously put effort into preparing the next generation of women union members to lead: "We will run out of quality leaders if we don't double the pool by preparing women and youth to lead their unions," she says.

The IWPR report encourages unions to adopt their seven strategies including providing training on how to organize more women and train them to take leadership. Promoting more women to leadership positions can build the union, the labor movement and lead to more women taking leadership in other areas of public life including politics.

SEVEN STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING WOMEN LEADERS

#1: Address Women's True Priorities: If unions more visibly address women's concerns, they are more likely to inspire their long-term, active involvement.

#2: Create and Support Formal Mentoring Programs: Mentoring could be more intentionally incorporated into union organizing as a way to build women's leadership.

#3: Provide Opportunities for Women to Strategize Together: Unions can cultivate women-specific training programs, conferences, and networks at the local, regional and national levels.

#4: Put Women in Leadership: Placing women in visible local and national leadership roles provides role models and articulates respect for their authority.

#5: Highlight the Importance of Women's Contributions: Unions can provide examples of women's current and past union leadership as models for what union women can accomplish.

#6: Provide Flexible Options for Involvement: To accommodate the conflicting demands of women's lives, unions can offer creative opportunities to get involved.

#7: Provide Training on Mobilizing Women: Unions can train their leaders and organizers on strategies that effectively inspire women's activism and promote their leadership.



Women strategize together at the Summer Institute for Union Women in Berkeley, CA Photo by: photographybyaaron.net

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