During my elementary school years in the mid 1980’s, I wondered why my mother didn’t attend the Christmas school play at 11 am or the parent teacher meeting at 4 pm. Why did I have to wait for 2 hours in the nurse’s office before someone, usually my aunt, picked me up and why was no one at home after school? My mother could not be involved in my school events or home after school because she could not plan for it. Her employer changed her schedule periodically without notice and often “encouraged” her to work overtime 30 minutes before the day was over. She was afraid of losing her job and needed the money, so she complied. It wasn’t until 1992, when she got her first union job and became a member of HERE Local 11 in Los Angeles that she had more control over her work and could attend parent teacher meetings. Knowing that she was involved assured me that she cared about my education – it made all the difference in my school success.

Unfortunately, the challenges my mother faced 20 years ago continue to impact U.S. workers with school age children, especially those without a union. 1 out of 2 low-income working parents in the U.S. faces barriers to becoming involved in their children’s education. And 39 percent face barriers to participating in school meetings, school trips, or school events (The Work, Family and Equity Index – 2007 by Heymann, Earle and Hayes). Sarah Lawton, an UPTE (Union of Professional and Technical Employees) member at UC Berkeley, speaks about the challenges that the majority of working parents endure: “All the parents I know want to be involved in their children’s education. We want to attend school events and get to know our children’s teachers. It is difficult to be involved when you are a working parent, unless you have a flexible employer who lets you move work hours around to accommodate the events that come up at school.”

Due to economic necessity most working families do not have a stay-at-home parent who can be involved with their children during school hours or be home after school and during school breaks. They simply cannot afford it. In order to survive in today’s economy, in most families, both parents must work and staying home is not even an option for most single parents. “As a single dad, I have to provide for my 11 year old twins. In construction, I can say no to work if I need to attend my kids’ school activities but it means not getting paid, because we don’t get personal or sick days. And contractors don’t look well on guys that say no to work, because they want to get the job done. So it’s a trade off,” says David Mirtz, member of Ironworkers Local 580 in New York. Too often parents risk being disciplined or losing their job so they don’t even try to ask for time off.

Regular school hours, school breaks and activities often conflict with work schedules and increasing demands to meet the bottom line. The rigidity of work hours, forced overtime, continued on next page
longer days and unsympathetic employers pose a huge challenge for U.S. parents who want to be involved in their children’s education, especially for those without the protections of a union contract. The 2007 Work, Family and Equity Index shows that at least 134 countries have laws that fix the maximum length of the work week. The U.S. does not have a ceiling on the length of the work week or a limit on mandatory overtime hours. U.S. employers lag behind other industrialized nations in helping workers juggle their work and family responsibilities. Today employees are working longer hours, enduring longer commutes, and bringing more work home than they did 25 years ago (Family Values at Work 2007). Where’s the time to be involved in their children’s school work?

According to the National Education Association (NEA), when parents are involved in their children’s education at home, they do better in school. However, lack of parental involvement is the biggest problem facing public schools in the U.S. (Michigan Department of Education). Despite national attempts to “leave no child behind” in their education, children are hurting and the unchecked demands of the workplace are contributing to this.

UNIONS STEP UP!

Even union members can be subject to random schedule changes, forced overtime and inflexible workplaces, but they have an advantage other workers don’t: -- the power to bargain. Unions are increasingly recognizing the challenges members face and they are taking affirmative steps to help alleviate some of the pressures on parents with school age children.

Through contract negotiations with Delphi, Ford and Chrysler, the United Auto Workers (UAW) negotiated landmark child care agreements, which have been an example for other unions. The union has negotiated for flex-time, comp time, expanded family leave, paid time off for school activities and full benefits for part-time work. These victories allow UAW members to be both productive employees and involved parents, helping their children get a step closer to higher education and a better job. They have also developed innovative programs to help children continue learning while parents are at work: Homework hotlines and summer camps are two examples. Additionally, the UAW advocates for legislation that improves access and funding for after school programs, child care and family leave.

The United Steelworkers (USW) also put family friendly policies high on their negotiating agenda. They successfully negotiated contracts eliminating mandatory overtime and allowing employees working overtime to take time off with pay in lieu of overtime premium if they choose. These provisions allow parents of school age children to be involved in planning and attending school events.

“To successfully fight and negotiate work family issues, they have to be a priority for our members, which they are. Policies that allow workers to balance work and family are not easy to win, but they are needed, thus we’ll keep fighting until we get them” says Ann Flener, National Director of Women of Steel, USW.

Several other unions, including AFSCME, SEIU, AFT and CWA have union contracts with language on alternative work schedules, mandatory overtime, flex time, and job sharing that could help members stay involved their child’s school activities. To find out more about what unions have done, visit their individual websites or http://www.working-families.org/organize/reports.html.

A NEED FOR PUBLIC POLICIES

Contract negotiations are an effective way of guaranteeing strong work family policies that allow parents to be more involved in their child’s education, but in order to have an even more far-reaching effect, public policy may be the way to go. Several states, including California, Washington, D.C., Massachusetts and others, have job protected time off for parents to participate in school activities. Although this leave for school activities is unpaid in most states, it gives parents the chance to be involved in their children's education without being reprimanded or fired from their job. To see a full list of states visit: http://www.working-families.org/policy/statebystate_leave.pdf.

There is more than one solution to meet the needs of working parents with school age children. Unions and work family advocacy groups must employ innovative strategies and techniques, including contract negotiations, public policy, member education and mobilization to help them earn good wages with benefits and at the same time help their children be successful in their education.

HOW UNIONS CAN HELP WORKING PARENTS STAY INVOLVED:

Ask: survey your members about work family balance needs.

Learn: check out the resources on gaining control over work time by visiting http://www.working-families.org/familyfriendly/worktime_resources.html

Organize: organize around work family issues to educate, agitate and move more members to action.

Bargain: put work family issues at the top of the bargaining agenda.

Advocate: get your union to support work family legislation that helps parents take time off for school activities or provides more funding for quality after school and summer programs.

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