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# WOMEN IN UNION LEADERSHIP

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*Lois Gray*

### HIGHLIGHTS

THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT has reached a critical turning point. Faced with shrinking membership and overwhelming economic and technological challenges, unions seek new strategies for survival and growth. Women, who now make up close to a majority of the workforce, are a major—but largely unrealized—force for change.

This chapter examines the evolution of women's struggle for recognition in labor unions and how women today are slowly moving to center stage in the labor movement. It also examines the societal, institutional, and personal factors that still impede women's full representation at the highest levels of labor leadership and the strategies women employ to overcome them. What are the barriers to forging a partnership between organized labor and women members? Why are women underrepresented in labor leadership? Under what circumstances do women become active in labor's cause and achieve leadership recognition? How have unions responded to their potential? And what difference does it make?

- Male leadership and culture dominate the history of American labor unions. Excluded from membership in most unions, women workers nevertheless produced their own heroines, who led struggles for better wages and working conditions and demanded equal treatment and leadership recognition in their unions.
- Today, few of the top elected or appointed officials of American unions are women, but the number of women serving as elected national executive board members, obtaining staff appointments, and assuming leader-

ship roles in local unions and federations is increasing. Women's representation in elected office is greater in unions where they constitute a majority of the membership and in unions that represent occupations traditionally hospitable to women, such as education, nursing, entertainment, and public-sector clerical and administrative work.

- Leadership prospects for women are increasing in the manufacturing and service sectors. Still virtually closed to female leadership are such traditional male preserves as building construction, mining, and transportation.
- Family responsibilities, male bias, and lack of know-how and self-confidence are barriers that women still need to overcome. These challenges, faced by women in other fields, are intensified in the union setting, where leaders are expected to demonstrate extreme dedication and self-sacrifice.
- Career paths of women in union leadership differ from the typical patterns of male leaders who work their way up through the ranks by assuming increasing levels of responsibility at local and regional levels before achieving high office. Some successful union women follow this route; others obtain recognition by excelling as staff specialists hired from the outside for their expertise in a valued professional field. A surprising number move up from clerical positions.
- Factors that contribute to leadership recognition for women in unions are similar to those in other sectors—hard work, performance, visibility, strategic planning, and good luck. Finding a mentor is particularly helpful, but difficult when all the power figures are male. In the political milieu of unions, building a constituency is essential.
- Women have banded together across union lines to form the national Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), an organization that provides opportunities for networking and training in leadership skills. CLUW also articulates and campaigns for issues of concern to women unionists and forges alliances between labor and women's organizations.
- Union responses to the needs and aspirations of women members vary widely. Best practices include: interest surveys of women members; targeted programs on issues of concern to women; opportunities for women to confer with one another through women's committees and women's departments; education and training programs; and affirmative action with goals and timetables for increasing women's representation in staff and leadership positions.
- Women union leaders make a difference through their distinctive leadership styles—which are usually more participatory and inclusive than men's—and by influencing their organizations to become more socially conscious and family-friendly.

## INTRODUCTION

*If the AFL-CIO does not become a movement of and for working women, we don't deserve to have a future and we surely will not have one.*

—Richard Trumka, Secretary-Treasurer, AFL-CIO

Women hold the key to the future of organized labor. Now 39 percent of the membership, they make up the majority of the newly organized and still-to-be-organized sectors of the American labor force. Faced with declining membership, unions are giving priority to areas of growth. Women, according to polls, are more “union-friendly” than men. Heavily concentrated in low-wage jobs, they have much to gain by banding together. On average, union women earn 38 percent more per hour than nonunion women. Even when comparing women with similar education and work experience, union women earn 12 percent more than nonunion women (Hartmann, Spalter-Roth, and Collins 1994).

Thus, women are moving to center stage in the labor movement. In increasing numbers, they affiliate with established unions, most of which are male dominated. Many are initiating new organizations. The largest group of unionized women workers are employed in professional and technical jobs.

This chapter focuses on women in union leadership roles, the barriers they still must overcome, their strategies for achieving recognition, their career patterns and leadership styles, and their impact on the labor movement. The primary sources for this chapter include interviews with union officials, including 56 women who hold leadership positions in national unions,<sup>1</sup> supplemented by insights from the literature.

<sup>1</sup>The women labor leaders interviewed for this chapter are elected officials and appointed staff from the AFL-CIO and from the national headquarters of the AFL-CIO's major affiliated unions (e.g., the Communications Workers of America [CWA], the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees [AFSCME], the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union [UFCW], the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America [UAW], the American Federation of Government Employees [AFGE], the American Federation of Teachers [AFT], and the Service Employees International Union [SEIU]). In addition, interviews were conducted with women labor leaders at the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Nurses Association (ANA). This chapter also draws on a number of interviews conducted with the women presidents of several large local unions located in the Northeast.

## WOMEN ARE NOT NEW TO UNION LEADERSHIP

Women have always been active in the workplace and in labor organizations. In colonial times, women as well as men were required to work; non-workers were jailed. Whether working as slaves, indentured servants, or free women employed for wages, women, like men, rebelled against exploitative working conditions and banded together in protest organizations. When women found the doors closed to membership in male-dominated unions, they formed their own organizations. When employers expected women to work for half the salaries of male workers, women fought back by organizing for equal pay. And when employers tried to enlist women to break strikes, women joined in solidarity with men.

These struggles produced such legendary heroines as Mother Jones, who organized coal miners; Sojourner Truth, who fought against slavery; Susan B. Anthony, the women's suffrage leader who was a delegate to the first convention of the National Labor Unions in 1868; Pauline Newman, who emerged from the "Great Uprising" of 20,000 New York garment workers in 1909 to become the first full-time woman organizer employed by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU); and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the firebrand from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) who was a leader in the 1912 "Bread and Roses" strike by textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts. In 1907 Agnes Nestor became the first woman to be elected president of a national union, the Glove Workers (Foner 1979; Wertheimer 1977).

Yet winning leadership recognition in unions has never been easy for women. When the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was founded in 1898, a woman delegate introduced a resolution calling for the appointment of women organizers, a proposal that was not implemented until 10 years later when the AFL appointed its first woman staff member (Wertheimer 1977).

Early in this century, women, rich and poor, came together in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), an organization specifically designed to fight for women's rights in the labor movement and workers' rights in the women's movement (Kopelov 1984). In 1919, WTUL passed a resolution calling on the U.S. government and the American Federation of Labor and all its constituent bodies to "guarantee to women workers adequate representation . . . on all policy-making councils, on boards and committees that deal with conditions of employment or standards of life" (Eaton 1990, 205).

The WTUL continued to press for the rights of women workers on the job and in the union through the 1930s and 1940s through legislative initiatives and training and education programs aimed to equip women for activity and leadership. As mass production industries organized during the depression years, women played critical roles in sit-down strikes for union recognition in the automobile and rubber industries. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which broke with and challenged the AFL, eliminated the sex and race exclusion clauses that had characterized many of the craft unions and women began to hold office in newly formed labor organizations representing electrical, textile, and tobacco workers (Foner 1980).

With World War II came labor shortages that attracted increasing numbers of women into the labor force where they encountered discriminatory practices such as separate seniority lists. A WTUL survey in 1943 found women to be active in unions, some elected as shop stewards, but few holding "high union posts" (Foner 1980). Exceptions were Eleanor Nelson, who was elected national president of the CIO United Federal Workers; Katherine Lewis (John L. Lewis's daughter), secretary treasurer of District 50 of the United Mine Workers; and Gladys Dickinson, vice president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. In 1946 Rose Pesotta resigned her leadership post in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), concluding that "a lone woman vice-president could not adequately represent the women who now make up 85 percent of the International's membership" (Foner 1980, 368).

## WHERE ARE THE WOMEN LEADERS IN TODAY'S UNIONS?

The structure and government of American unions resembles those of the United States. The labor movement is decentralized with a division of powers among local, regional, and national units. The basic building block of unionization is the workplace where employees negotiate with their employer. The workplace unit, in many cases combined with other similar units representing employees in the same occupation or the same industry and/or geographic location, constitutes the local union which elects its own officers. Local unions in common occupations (for example, carpenters or teachers) or related industries (such as automobile and steel manufacturing, or health care and retail trade) affiliate to become national unions. (The unions are called "international unions" when they have affiliates in Canada.)

These national unions are the power centers of the American labor move-

### THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR WOMEN IN UNIONS

*The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA)*, or Wagner Act, passed in 1935, gave employees in private industry the right to join unions and engage in collective bargaining. This right was protected by penalties on employers who engage in unfair labor practices. In 1947, the NLRA was amended by the Taft Hartley Act to modify legal protections for the right to organize and to outlaw agreements that require union membership as a condition of employment. In 1974, the law was amended again to include hospitals and nursing homes under its protections.

*The Labor-Management Reporting Act*, or Landrum-Griffin Act, passed in 1959, established a "bill of rights" for union members, internal election procedures, and reporting and disclosure requirements for unions and union officers.

*Executive Order 10988*, issued in 1962, gave federal employees the right to union representation. Most states currently protect the right of state and municipal employees to organize and bargain.

*The Equal Pay Act*, passed in 1963, provided equal pay for men and women doing substantially equal work.

*The 1964 Civil Rights Act* outlawed discrimination based on race, color, sex, national origin, or religion.

ment. Members of local unions determine the structure and policies of the national unions, and elect officers through referendum or delegates assembled in national conventions. As with the U.S. government, unions function under formal constitutions that spell out rules and procedures. In the United States, most national unions are affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

Women are rarely found among the top elected officers in today's national unions, but their numbers are increasing among appointed staff at the national level and elected officers at the regional and local levels. Currently, women hold decisionmaking leadership positions equivalent to chief executive officers in only three national unions: the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the American Nurses Association (ANA), and the Associ-

ation of Flight Attendants (AFA). The number of women at this level has not changed over the past 20 years. Two significant changes, however, are the 1995 election of Linda Chávez-Thompson, a Latina, as executive vice president of the national AFL-CIO, and the increase in the number of women serving as international union vice presidents, secretary-treasurers, and executive board members.

As might be expected, women are more likely to achieve top leadership status in labor unions where they constitute a majority—or close to a majority (see Table IV-1). In addition to the AFA, ANA, and AFT, these include the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the National Education Association (NEA), the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), and the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE).<sup>2</sup> Even in these unions, however, the percentage of women in elected decisionmaking posts falls short of their representation in the ranks. In recent AFA elections, men defeated women candidates for two of the three top offices.

Recognition for women is more likely to come through appointment than election. As shown in Table IV-1, in most unions, the percentage of women in charge of headquarters' departments substantially exceeds their representation on executive boards. For example, in the AFL-CIO, elected women members constitute only 13 percent of the Executive Council (the elected officials who make policy for the federation) but appointed women are in charge of 50 percent of union departments—including the important Field Mobilization Department, which supervises a staff of field representatives throughout the United States and coordinates a network of affiliated state and central labor councils.

Even when women constitute 50 percent or more of the membership—as in AFSCME, AFT, SEIU, and UFCW—the female percentage in staff supervisory roles far exceeds the female percentage in elected positions. Exceptions are AFA and ANA, where men hold a disproportionate number of staff positions, despite the predominance of women in the unions' membership and elected policy positions. In the case of ANA, the current national executive director is male. The pattern is also reversed in NEA; its women members are prominent in elected policy positions but continue to

<sup>2</sup>On July 1, 1995, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) merged with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) to form the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE).

Table IV-1 • Employed Women by Labor Union Membership and Representation in Leadership Positions, 1999 (in percentages)

	Women as a Percentage of		
	Members	Executive Boards	Department Heads
Union	46	20	60
American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)	52	35	60
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)	85	79	38
Association of Flight Attendants (AFA)	60	40	57
American Federation of Teachers (AFT)	93	73	70
American Nurses Association (ANA) <sup>1</sup>	33	19	40
Bakery, Confectionary and Tobacco Workers (BCT)	49	35	20
Communications Workers of America (CWA)	48	19	13
Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE)	30	0	
International Brotherhood of Electrical Employees (IBEW)	40	25	50
International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Salaried, Machine and Furniture Workers (IUE)	70	46	15
Office of Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU)	68	33	57
National Education Association (NEA) <sup>1</sup>	58	30	50
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)	25	11	10
United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW)	50	11	25
United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW)	66	30	40
Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE)			

<sup>1</sup>Not affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

Source: Survey conducted by author, 1999.



depend on a predominantly male staff to administer the organization's business. The national executive director is male, more than half the elected state presidents are women, and four out of five of the state executive directors are men.

Receptivity to women in leadership roles may also reflect the customs and culture of the field a union represents. For example, in theater, movies, music, and dance, women have long occupied "starring" roles in both their professions and their unions. Examples include Patty Duke, former president of the Screen Actors Guild; Ellen Burstyn, former president of Actors' Equity; Shelby Scott, president of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists; Linda Mays, president of the American Guild of Musical Artists; and Mona Mangan, executive director of Writers Guild East, representing writers for television and motion pictures. In education, another field traditionally open to women, female presidents have emerged in both major unions. Sandra Feldman currently heads AFT, and Mary Hatwood Futrell, an African American woman, is a past president of NEA.

Garment workers' and office workers' unions, which are predominantly female in membership, have only recently elevated women to top office. For example, even though women have played important roles in the history of the needle trades unions, these organizations have always been led by men. In 1999 the UNITE convention increased the proportion of women on its executive board to 30 percent. Historically, OPEIU, which represents female office workers along with fashion models and women in other female-dominated occupations, has been governed by male leaders. At its most recent convention, however, the union dramatically increased the number of female members on the executive board to almost half the total. Women are not found on the executive boards of unions in occupations or industries where the workers are predominantly male, such as building trades, maritime, railroad, and mining (see Table IV-2), although they hold key staff positions in a few of these traditionally male organizations.

Social philosophy may also influence certain unions to adopt a policy of inclusion. For example, in 1944, under the leadership of Walter Reuther, the United Auto Workers (UAW)—which from its inception had a predominantly male constituency—was the first union to establish a women's department and designate a national vice presidency to be filled by a woman (Gabin 1989).

Overall, women's leadership in AFL-CIO-affiliated national unions has been on an upward trend. Many more women are elected to union executive boards today than was the case 20 years ago (see Table IV-3), although—as noted above—the percentage of women in leadership in NEA and ANA decreased during this period. Currently, two AFL-CIO state federations, Florida and South Carolina, have women presidents. In six others,

Table IV-2 • Women Leaders in National Unions by Industrial Sector, 1997 (in percentages)

<i>Industrial Sector</i>	<i>Women as a Percentage of Executive Boards</i>	
Arts and entertainment	14	
Building trades	0	
Education	35	
Manufacturing, mining, and agriculture	11	
Professional	23	
Public employees	21	
Service	18	
Transportation	7	
Total	14	

Source: Gifford, *Directory of the United States Labor Organizations*, 1998.

Table IV-3 • Women on Elected Executive Boards of National Unions, 1979 and 1999 (in percentages)

<i>Union</i>	<i>Women as a Percentage of Elected Executive Boards</i>	
	1979	1999
AFGE	0	20
AFSCME	3	35
AFT	25	40
CWA	0	35
HERE	4	19
IUE	4	20
SEIU	15	30
UFCW	3	11
ANA <sup>1</sup>	93	73
NEA <sup>1</sup>	55	33

<sup>1</sup>Not affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

Source: Glassberg, Baden, and Gerstel, *Absent from the Agenda*, 1980; and survey conducted by author, 1999.

women serve as secretary-treasurers (Gifford 1998). In 16 percent of the 50 state federations, a woman has been elected to one of the two top offices, an increase over previous years. The picture is similar for central labor councils (CLCs), which coordinate activities at the local level.

In states and regions, as in national/international unions, women are more likely to hold appointive positions than elective positions. Among AFL-CIO appointees who advise, assist, and coordinate the work of state and local federations, almost half of the state directors are women. The AFL-CIO Field Mobilization Department also has demonstrated a strong commitment to diversity in staff appointments. Amy Dean, a CLC executive from California, was appointed by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney to chair the national AFL-CIO Advisory Committee on Central Labor Councils.

Unions report that women's participation has accelerated at the local level. Unfortunately, this is difficult to document, because unions, with few exceptions, do not monitor or survey their local leadership by gender, race, or ethnicity. Available statistics for women in local union leadership suggest that women's leadership representation in local unions more accurately reflects their union membership than at higher levels.

What kinds of positions do women hold in local unions? Thirty years ago, Alice Cook wrote that women "almost never appear on major negotiating teams. Even when they are a majority, women play the role and are assigned to the status of a minority" (Cook 1968, 324). Historically, women disproportionately carried out the duties of recording secretaries and were rarely elected to positions that served as launching pads for power and recognition (Gray 1998).

Despite increases in the numbers of women attaining high office, gender stereotyping persists. For example, only one of AFGE's 50 collective bargaining councils is headed by a woman. A survey of local officers in the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers Union (BCT) found that while three out of four locals have at least one woman officer, women serve mostly as financial and recording secretaries or trustees. A detailed breakdown of leadership positions in the UAW revealed that women hold 13 percent of local presidencies and 50 percent of the recording and financial secretary spots. On the other hand, women occupy 14 percent of the chief steward positions, indicating that they are breaking into the key function of collective bargaining (Gray 1999).

The available evidence indicates that women have a long way to go to achieve leadership in national unions relative to their numbers in the ranks. Still, the movement of women into important staff roles is significant, and their election to local union office, the pool from which top leaders are drawn, bodes well for the future.

## WHY SO FEW WOMEN?

Does the fact that women are rarely to be found in the top leadership of American unions mean that there is a glass ceiling that is virtually impenetrable? Are the barriers societal, institutional, or personal—or a combination of the three?

Women are still limited by family responsibilities and society's view of their role in the workplace. Scholars consistently rank this dichotomy as the most important factor standing in the way of female involvement in union activities and leadership (Wertheimer and Nelson 1975; Koziara and Pierson 1980; Needleman and Tanner 1987; Chaison and Andriappan 1982 and 1987; Andriappan and Chaison 1989). An in-depth study of union stewards reported that having a wife at home was an advantage to male stewards, while marriage and family tended to prevent female stewards from attending meetings, volunteering, and traveling—all the activities essential to moving up in leadership (Roby and Uttal 1993). Even for women who make it to the "first rung of leadership," family responsibilities continue to conflict with union responsibilities.

For example, Linda Chávez-Thompson recounts her early years as a staff representative, when she called home to find her little girl crying and begging her to come home. When Ms. Chávez-Thompson was offered a job near home, she took a cut in pay to be with her daughter every night.

The distinctive structure and functions of labor unions also present institutional barriers for women. Growing out of their tradition as "fighting" organizations with limited resources, required to confront well-funded employer opposition, union leaders are expected to devote unlimited hours (including evenings and weekends), to take risks, and to be willing to travel wherever the organization needs their services. This tradition is not only a deterrent to the involvement of women with families but it also reinforces a male culture in which women feel like outsiders, who are not invited to caucus meetings or to "hang out" with male leaders.

Women who want to participate tend to be assigned to stereotyped roles—such as recording secretaries or members of recreation and education committees. Rarely are they included in the core function of collective bargaining, which is seen as requiring the "take-charge" qualities of aggression and assertiveness usually identified with men. Women are perceived as "too emotional" or "too soft" to bargain with tough male managers (Cook 1968). Some report being expected to take notes at meetings. Even in unions made up of predominately female members, such as the AFA, men are sometimes

**PROFILE OF LINDA CHÁVEZ-THOMPSON, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, AFL-CIO**

Linda Chávez-Thompson was elected executive vice president of the AFL-CIO in 1995, the first Hispanic woman to serve on the executive council. Born in Texas, she worked in the cotton fields with her parents, who were Mexican American sharecroppers. She began her labor union career by taking a job as bilingual secretary for a local of the Laborers' International Union (LIUNA). She was active in community work and volunteered beyond the scope of her job duties to make speeches and organize for LIUNA.

However, Ms. Chávez-Thompson was disappointed to find herself treated differently from her male counterparts—receiving lower pay and expense reimbursement—and she left the local to join the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) as an international representative assigned to represent public employees. There she encountered employers who at first refused to take her seriously, classifying her as “only a secretary.” Nevertheless, she persisted and achieved gains for the members. Subsequently, she set her sights on becoming vice president of AFSCME, with responsibility for leadership of the union in seven southwestern states.

The road to top office was not easy. Ms. Chávez-Thompson's boss, who had been her mentor, turned against her, and critics circulated anonymous rumors about her personal life. Her husband, a union activist, and her children were supportive. What kept her going was her belief in what she was doing. Her dynamic speaking ability attracted attention. In 1988, she succeeded in her goal to be elected national vice president of AFSCME.

In this capacity, Ms. Chávez-Thompson acquired a reputation for organizing the unorganized, and she led a successful policy campaign to pass a law protecting the rights of public employees to join unions. When John Sweeney decided to run for president of the AFL-CIO in 1995, he asked her to join his winning slate. In her current role, Ms. Chávez-Thompson represents the labor movement in a wide variety of forums, inspiring crowds with her enthusiasm for organizing and her campaign for social justice. She characterizes her leadership style as “inclusive.”

picked as spokespersons because it is assumed that they are more outspoken and assertive on grievances.

Overt sexism persists in the labor movement. On the one hand, a woman who is determined or aggressive is considered a “bitch,” but, on the other hand, a woman who aspires to leadership is expected to be a superachiever. Many women who make it to the top positions in labor unions report being accused of “sleeping with” the boss to get ahead, a charge never made about men.

Sexism combined with racism is a “double whammy” for women of color. For example, Mary Hatwood Futrell, an African American woman who was elected president of the NEA, says that when she first ran for office at the local level, she was asked to “step aside” and “let a man do it.” She also received hate mail, calling her a “nigger” and saying she would ruin the organization. Barbara Easterling, secretary-treasurer of the CWA, found herself ignored and isolated by male staff when she was promoted to a supervisory role.

Women unionists, in this male-dominated environment, encounter difficulties finding mentors and gaining the inside knowledge and networking opportunities that lead to higher positions. Men in power positions tend to seek out other men to be second in command, while women are on their own.

Women report that their leadership skills and capabilities are often underestimated. Women must outperform men in order to receive any recognition. In meetings with male peers, their comments are frequently ignored. On the other hand, when women are selected as spokespersons or appointed to union positions to make up a “balanced slate,” they sometimes feel that they are being used to “get out the women’s vote” or to demonstrate the organization’s interest in women (Needleman 1998).

Even when the leadership of labor unions is unbiased and has good intentions, women, as relative newcomers to leadership, are hampered by the limited number of openings available. Union membership has been shrinking, freezing opportunities for new hires or replacements, and since there are generally no term limits or retirement rules for incumbents, there is little room for upward mobility.

A final roadblock, cited by the women interviewed for this chapter, is personal lack of self-confidence (see also Wertheimer and Nelson 1975; Koziara and Pierson 1980; and Needleman and Tanner 1987). Many fear failure and tend to accept passive roles (Chaison and Andriappan 1982). Gloria Johnson, the current president of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, believes that some women have been “brainwashed” by their past associations with family, friends, and co-workers. Their negative attitudes under-

mine prospects for networking with other women, which might help them overcome other barriers to leadership.

## CAREER PATHS OF WOMEN LEADERS

Union leadership is typically an accidental rather than a planned career choice. Since the vast majority of leaders, male and female, come from the ranks of the membership, they start their careers by working in an occupation that is represented by (or becomes represented by) a union.

Then, through a complex set of circumstances, a worker may emerge as the leadership spokesperson for others in the same occupation. Both male and female union leaders report that they climbed the first rung of the ladder because their associates prevailed upon them to take on leadership responsibilities or because they were particularly dissatisfied with their working conditions or with the incumbent leadership. Many also were motivated by the ideal of advancing the cause of working people (see Quaglieri 1988 for similar findings). Initially at least, they did not think of union leadership as a full-time career commitment.

This "luck-of-the-draw" selection process, combined with the political character of union leadership, presents special problems for women. The career patterns of top leaders include (1) *founders*, who organize a union and become leaders from its earliest days; (2) *inheritors*, who are the beneficiaries of relatives who pass the mantle on to them; (3) *loyalists*, who start at the bottom and work their way to the top; (4) *challengers*, who overthrow incumbents; and (5) *technicians*, who come into the union from outside the ranks with special skills. All the incumbent male leaders have come up through one of these routes, mostly as loyalists, the traditional and accepted path (Gray 1993).

Among women leaders, there are examples of all these career routes. While patterns are similar for men and women, their proportions differ in each of the listed categories. And, for women, there is a sixth route: *secretaries*, who acquire knowledge of the organization and move into professional union roles. Many women leaders have entered the union this way; none of the men have.

There also are women who "founded" their organizations, playing a major role in organizing the members. While few female union founders have careers comparable to such legendary male heroes of labor history as Philip Murray in steel, Harry Bridges in longshore, and Eugene V. Debs in railroads, two examples stand out. Karen Nussbaum organized and became president of 9to5, a unique organization of office workers that functioned

as a national working women's organization and later became affiliated with SEIU. She now heads the working women's department of the AFL-CIO. Dolores Huerta, a teacher and social worker, founded, along with César Chávez, the United Farm Workers, and became its vice president.

In labor history, and even today, there are examples of men who "inherited" their leadership positions as the sons of union leaders. This tradition developed in certain skilled trade unions where fathers passed along their occupational skills to their sons, and, in some cases, their union leadership positions as well. This route to the top has been virtually nonexistent for women. Nonetheless, interviews with women leaders indicate that coming from a union family is an important motivating force that helps many persevere to leadership recognition.

Most women who succeed in unions are, like men, *loyalists*, who rise to leadership through the traditional, slow-moving process, starting as rank-and-file members and getting elected to increasingly responsible positions. When this upward mobility is encouraged by incumbents, it is known as "moving through the chairs."

For women, the process is not always easy, as illustrated by the career of Barbara Easterling, international secretary-treasurer of CWA. She was hired as a telephone operator and immediately became active in the local union, motivated by pro-union views acquired from her family. Ms. Easterling volunteered for all kinds of activities and was elected steward and then chief steward. When she became vice president of her local union, some male members, worried that a woman might become president, amended the local bylaws to stipulate that the vice president would not automatically succeed the president in case of illness or death. Nonetheless, Ms. Easterling continued to achieve recognition through her leadership on the job and in the community. When women in her CWA district pressed the director to appoint a woman to the international staff, Barbara was selected. Subsequently, she ran for and was elected executive vice president with the support of the CWA international president. In 1992, she was elected secretary-treasurer, the second highest office in the union.

Kitty Petticord, the elected national women's director of AFGE, also made her mark in her local union of Social Security Administration employees by becoming an expert on safety and health issues, standing up to the employer as a whistleblower for client rights, and helping to fend off a raid by a rival union. These activities brought her to the attention of national officials, who appointed her to staff. Her networking with women local activists resulted in her election to one of the three top offices of her national union.

Sandra Feldman, president of AFT, also came from the ranks, serving as a teacher and local officer before succeeding to the highest office in her union.



A variation of the *loyalist* is the *challenger*, who also comes from the ranks but runs for office in opposition to established officers. Most AFA presidents fit this description. They all started as flight attendants, then progressed to higher levels of responsibility—first as local presidents and then as members of the national committees that negotiate contracts with the airlines—before moving up to the national presidency. Beginning with its breakaway from the Airline Pilots Association, AFA has a history of opposition to incumbent leaders. Three of the five women who have served as president won by defeating their predecessors. Pat Friend, the current president, says that her male colleagues on the AFL-CIO Executive Council frequently question her about why the flight attendants' union, mostly female, is so contentious!

While union leaders usually emerge from the ranks, whether as chosen successors or as challengers, some join the organization because they are hired as technicians or specialists (as attorneys, for example) and subsequently move into executive leadership positions. Given the barriers women face in competing for elective office, they have found acceptance through this route to a greater extent than men.

Many women who hold positions as vice president or department heads entered the labor movement as technicians. For example, Susan Cowell, now vice president of UNITE, prepared for a career in Asian studies at Harvard University and served in the Peace Corps in Korea. Later, while attending Yale University for graduate study, she got "turned on" to union activities when the blue-collar workers went on strike and she volunteered for the picket line. Seeking a union job, Ms. Cowell was first hired as an organizer and was then "discovered" by the union officers, who needed her language skills for an organizing drive of garment workers in Chinatown. From this recognition, she became assistant to the national president, writing speeches and handling public relations. Visibility in this spot, along with the president's support, led to her election to top office.

Susan Philips, recently elected vice president of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), also came into the union from outside the membership ranks. Inspired to social idealism by her father, a union legislative representative in Washington, D.C., Ms. Philips majored in English and journalism and became a writer for political and labor groups before responding to an advertised opening in the UFCW's publications department. She became known to the executive board in this position and was mentored by a woman vice president, who sponsored Ms. Philips as her replacement when she moved on to another top spot in the union.

In Washington, D.C., headquarters of international unions, and in the AFL-CIO, the number of women in technician or specialist roles is increasing. With the growing recognition of the desirability of female input

PROFILE OF SANDRA FELDMAN, PRESIDENT,  
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

Sandra Feldman, one of the few women who serve as president of a national union, is president of the million-member American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Born in a working-class family in Brooklyn—her father was a milkman and her mother worked in a bakery—Ms. Feldman found that school was a “lifeline,” opening up a whole new world and a way to make something of herself. Early on, while attending Brooklyn College, she committed herself to the struggle for social justice, becoming heavily involved in democratic socialist politics and the civil rights movement.

As a civil rights activist, Ms. Feldman met Bayard Rustin, the civil rights leader, who became one of her mentors. After acquiring a master’s degree in English literature from New York University, she began teaching school and became active in union affairs. She was elected chapter leader, and became recognized for her writing and speaking skills. She came to the attention of Albert Shanker, president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) local that represents New York City teachers (it is the largest local in the country). He encouraged Ms. Feldman to take a full-time position with the UFT. As a union field representative, she wrote position papers for Al Shanker and represented the union in a variety of roles, initiating new programs and ideas. When Mr. Shanker was elected to head the national AFT as well as the UFT, he selected Ms. Feldman to be the UFT’s executive director, where she supervised the staff and all aspects of the local’s work. In 1983 she was elected secretary of the UFT—its second-highest office—and in 1986 she was elected to its highest office.

As president of UFT, the largest local union in the United States, Sandra Feldman became recognized as a children’s advocate and an authority on urban education. A veteran of difficult collective bargaining struggles during the fiscal crisis in New York City, she was effective in pursuing the union’s cause in the political arena as well and was described as “tough, smart, tenacious, and committed.”

In 1997 Al Shanker died and Sandra Feldman was elected to succeed him as head of AFT. (Her successor as president of UFT is

Randi Weingarten, a woman for whom Sandra served as mentor.) As AFT President, Ms. Feldman pursued the goal of uniting all teachers in one powerful organization. The merger agreement she negotiated with the two-million-member National Education Association (NEA) was turned down by the NEA membership. Nonetheless, these two organizations continue to work together as a powerful force not only for representation of teacher interests but also for influencing public policy on education.

Ms. Feldman serves on the executive council of the AFL-CIO and is involved in many community organizations. She is married to a New York businessman.

in decisionmaking, it is likely that more women will be tapped for executive leadership in the future.

Unions in arts and entertainment and sports deviate from the leadership patterns in other unions. Performers in these fields are highly unionized and participate actively in decisionmaking as officers and members of their executive boards but do not want to leave their professions to devote all their time to union work. To represent these organizations in administration and collective bargaining, executive directors are recruited from outside the membership ranks. Mona Mangan, who represents Writers Guild East, is an example of a woman who fills this important and influential role. Coming from a background of political activism, Ms. Mangan completed a law degree and acquired experience handling affirmative action cases for the U.S. Department of Labor before applying for an opening with Writers Guild East. She found this organization, with its democratic structure, a "nice fit" with her social action goals and rose through positions of increasing responsibility to become director, which requires her to match her wits with movie and television moguls in the fast-moving field of entertainment.

Thus, women have followed career paths similar to men—founding unions or working their way up from the bottom, sometimes challenging and defeating incumbent officers, and achieving leadership recognition through contributions as specialists and technicians. However, a surprising number of women union officers, like Linda Chávez-Thompson, began their careers as clericals, surmounted the barriers to women in leadership, and attained decisionmaking roles. This path is unique to women.

Lenore Miller, recently retired as president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (which merged with UFCW), and one of the few

women to head a national/international union, originally took a speed-writing course because she was unable to find a professional position when she completed her graduate degree. Hired as a clerical worker in the president's office, she made her mark by volunteering for union work outside her own job responsibilities and moved up to become the president's secretary. When an opening developed for the elective office of secretary-treasurer, the president backed her. She eventually succeeded him as president of the international union.

Gloria Johnson, an African American who is the national president of CLUW and a member of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, was hired in 1954 by the International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Salaried, Machine, and Furniture Workers (IUE) as a bookkeeper. Ms. Johnson, who had a bachelor's degree from Howard University, soon began doing research for the union. Her background in civil rights attracted her to the union's political and social action programs, encouraging her to become involved beyond her regular job duties. Ms. Johnson's speaking ability and dynamic leadership of women's activities brought her national fame and reinforced her recognition in the union, where she was appointed social action director and eventually elected to the national executive board.

Another African American woman, Clayola Brown, current vice president of UNITE and member of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, also entered union work as a clerical. After finishing college, Clayola left the rural South where she had grown up in a family of sharecroppers. She had worked in a textile factory and aspired to work for the union, but found that the job of clerk-typist was the only one available to her. Like others, she volunteered for various additional activities and was eventually promoted to a professional position in union education. When the elective office of joint board manager opened, union officials, who were by then aware of her talents, supported her move into this executive role.

## PERSONAL STRATEGIES

Analyzing their own career experiences in the labor movement, women in leadership positions offer advice to those who aspire to top office. Getting elected to union office requires patience, perseverance, and hard work by both men and women, but more so for women, who must overcome many barriers. As Sandra Feldman says, "Work your way up" and "be better than anyone." Gloria Johnson was advised by her father, an African American who coped with a white-dominated society, "You can't be just as good; you have to be better."

To become better, women have to learn as much as possible about how their unions function. One way to do this, cited by all those interviewed, is by volunteering for every task, no matter how tedious—from stuffing envelopes and placing phone calls to marching in picket lines and participating in endless meetings. In the process, union activists learn not only the rules and procedures that govern the union but also the ins and outs of union politics.

Several of those interviewed noted that it is important to avoid becoming pigeonholed in “women’s” jobs—such as recording secretary—and women’s committees, even though filling these roles may be an essential first step on the ladder to recognition. Elaine Bernard, a leading labor educator, says that women need to avoid being thought of as only speaking about women’s issues or becoming the “female token.” She suggests that the best way to avoid such perceptions is by helping other women break the barriers and joining together in leadership roles (Bernard 1996).

Enrolling in labor education programs where available, whether inside the union or in outside educational institutions, is another way for women to acquire the skills and knowledge they need. Many successful women attribute their start to union women’s summer schools and local labor studies courses, which build self-confidence and enhance the public-speaking and communications skills so important to achieving recognition. Experience in community and political activities is also a plus, according to several women leaders, who found that organizing constituencies outside the union developed skills that were transferable to the union setting.

To get ahead, it is important to be visible. This often means taking risks. Many of the women interviewed got their first recognition by speaking out on workers’ grievances in meetings with supervisors or on behalf of other women in the union. For example, a Latina member in a predominately female local questioned the white male officer’s practice of limiting recruitment for staff positions to white males. As a result, she was given a chance to organize, which led to her appointment as a business agent.

Success calls for strategic planning—setting goals and devising plans for achieving them. For example, Shirley Carr, who was elected to the highest position in the Canadian labor movement (the Canadian counterpart to president of the AFL-CIO), reports that from the time she was first elected union steward,<sup>3</sup> she had a plan that guided her through contests at various levels of union leadership until she made it to the top. In a similar vein, Sandra Feldman suggests that aspiring women leaders should not be so devoted to their current roles at the local level that they ignore the big picture. She

<sup>3</sup>Ms. Carr began her career in Local 133 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

learned from her mentor, the president of AFT, that she should participate in national union affairs and become known to, as well as learn from, a broader constituency. Anna Marie Taliercio, a local union president in a male-dominated local union of restaurant workers, reports that she made it a point to attend local and state meetings—and to make contacts with officials from other areas—and thus was selected to become vice president of the New York State AFL-CIO.

At one time or another, all the women who achieved leadership in predominately male organizations encountered instances of discrimination and/or sexism. They advise women to rise above such attitudes and to “seek equality not revenge” (Bernard 1996).

Finding a mentor is one of the keys to moving up in any organization, and almost all the women interviewed stressed the role of mentors in their own careers. Many relied on male mentors, who were the power figures in their organizations, while others received help from sympathetic and helpful women. All advise other women to seek help and be prepared to offer help to others.

Several women interviewed acknowledged that, while they worked hard and achieved results, they gained recognition because they were in the “right place at the right time.” For example, Dee Maki says she was elected president of the AFA when delegates were deadlocked and looked to her as “a calming influence.” Linda Puchala attributes her election to the AFA presidency to the fact that the union had been split into factions by the recall of the previous president and delegates saw her as “a mediator.” Several women believe they were elected to the national executive boards of their unions because it was “time to promote a woman.”

Whatever the reasons for their success, the experience reported by these and other women union leaders suggests that intensive efforts—learning, doing, planning, communicating, and networking—benefit individual career advancement.

## COLLECTIVE ACTION

No matter how effective, individual strategies have limited impact on changing the face of leadership. Unions are political organizations in which decisions are made by voting blocks of members. Therefore, until women achieve power, rather than merely access or individual recognition, there will be no dramatic change in the gender composition of leadership. Bill Fletcher, assistant to AFL-CIO President Sweeney, says that “women need to make things more uncomfortable for union leaders. In the absence of ag-

itation, there is backsliding." He offers the same advice to African Americans and other underrepresented ethnic groups.

Yet there is a dilemma here. Union officials generally view political caucuses as disloyal and discourage their formation. Therefore, members generally approach collective agitation for change with caution. Nonetheless, groups of women and groups organized along racial and ethnic lines do come together from time to time to make demands of leadership. As a result, women (and minorities) are added to leadership slates (see Gabin 1989 for a description of the rebellion of women in the UAW during reconversion after World War II).

The Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) is a national organization that provides a collective forum for union women. Established in 1974, it grew out of regional meetings of union women who wanted to effect changes in their unions. The debates that took place at its founding convention illustrate the tensions associated with separate organizing for women. Among the issues in contention were whether the proposed national organization should function outside and independent of the AFL-CIO, whether membership should be open to women who were not union members, and what stand CLUW should take on longstanding union policies with which delegates might disagree.

One of these policies was seniority, which adversely affects women and minorities in layoffs but protects them against discrimination. Another was reproductive rights, strongly favored by feminists but controversial with male membership. CLUW faced attacks on two fronts: from militant feminists and activists in left-wing organizations—whose agendas threatened to set CLUW on a collision course with the AFL-CIO—and from male leaders, who questioned the need for an organization of women. The convention managed to steer an even course between the twin goals of increasing the rights of women and strengthening their unions (Balser 1987).

Olga Madar, vice president of the UAW, was elected to be CLUW's first president. She was succeeded in 1979 by Joyce Miller, vice president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union. That CLUW had achieved the desired delicate balance was underscored when AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland invited Joyce Miller to join the executive council. This was a breakthrough for union women, since Joyce Miller, who became the first woman to serve in this decisionmaking body, did not qualify under the traditional rule requiring that only presidents of major national unions be eligible for membership. Later, when there was a question about whether Gloria Johnson, Miller's successor as CLUW president, would be elected to the council, women rallied behind her, and council members eventually supported her bid to serve as a leader and spokesperson for union women.

Currently, CLUW has 81 local chapters that provide leadership training and networking for union women activists at the community level. Among its other major accomplishments, according to officers interviewed, are influencing unions to support issues of concern to women (e.g., pay equity); conducting research and producing publications on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from a report that called attention to the paucity of women in union leadership positions to model collective bargaining clauses; and building alliances between labor unions and women's organizations to achieve common political objectives (Glassberg, Baden, and Gerstel 1980).

CLUW has been especially effective in attracting the participation of African American women and, in several cities, Latinas. Membership in many of the local chapters is predominantly minority. Given the dual barriers that minority women face in their jobs, their unions, and the communities where they live, CLUW is an important source of empowerment. Many local leaders bring to their leadership roles "an impressive degree of political sophistication gained from their activity in the Civil Rights Movement in their communities and in their churches and are not afraid to stand up and let people know where they stand" (Harriford 1993, 404–5). The multiracial, multiethnic composition of CLUW is one of its strengths.

In addition to CLUW, training and self-help networks for union women have grown out of courses offered by university labor education centers. These include annual regional summer schools sponsored by the University and College Labor Education Association, AFL-CIO, and CLUW as well as many local leadership institutes. Follow-up studies from these programs indicate that they have a significant impact in generating increased activism and leadership recognition for participants (Catlett 1986 and Elkiss 1994).

## UNION POLICIES

How have unions as institutions responded to the rise of women? What policies and programs have they developed to encourage participation by female members and to facilitate recognition of their leadership? This section takes a look at "best practices" associated with enhanced leadership roles for women.

Recognition of the importance of gender integration is the first step. This may take the form of a policy statement, adopted at the union convention or by the national executive board, which puts the organization on record as promoting equal opportunity within the union as well as in the workplace and the community. For example, SEIU enacted a leadership resolution at its 1992 convention, committing the union to building leadership at



all levels so that it would be representative of women and minorities in the membership.

Another useful step is to survey women members to find out how many there are and what is important to them. Gloria Johnson, current president of CLUW, instituted such a survey in the late 1950s, when she was employed in the research department of IUE. The results of her survey laid the groundwork for a women's council and periodic conferences for women members, activities that stimulated activism. Last year, Karen Nussbaum, director of the working women's department of the AFL-CIO, launched a nationwide survey, "Ask a Working Woman," which the AFL-CIO has used to generate interest and support for women's priorities—equal pay, safety and health, child care, and family leave.

It is also important for unions to gather information on the current status of women in the union—where they work, what kinds of jobs they hold, their participation in union activities, and their representation in leadership. Surprisingly, very few unions collect this information. AFSCME and NEA are among those that do. The survey process is valuable as an educational tool contributing to membership awareness. Results provide the basis for assessment and goal setting, as well as a benchmark for evaluating progress. If, as might be expected, the survey indicates that women are not as actively involved as their male counterparts, it may be helpful to identify barriers to women's participation and to create plans for surmounting them. Unions with "best practices" develop affirmative action plans and programs.

Targeting issues of concern to women members in collective bargaining and on the legislative front creates a climate that encourages women to be active and involved in the union. For example, UFCW won a sex discrimination suit against Publix Supermarkets in Florida, overturning a policy that allowed (male) stockers to rise to management positions but denied (female) cashiers the same opportunity (Waldman 1997). The UAW has focused on sexual harassment by filing grievances in the workplace, bringing suits against employers, and offering awareness training to its staff and local officers. AFSCME has pursued the issue of comparable worth (equal pay for jobs of equal value) in a number of successful public-policy initiatives. And the AFL-CIO has played a lead role in promoting equal pay, family leave, child care, and domestic violence prevention, thereby demonstrating support for issues reported as priorities by its women members (Milkman 1995). Campaigns on these issues also afford women members an opportunity to showcase their skills as expert witnesses and speakers, a big step up in leadership recognition.

Ruth Needleman (1998), who has written extensively about women and minorities in unions, concludes that "independent space" and "structured

opportunities” are prerequisites for moving union organization and culture in the direction of equal opportunity. “Independent space” means encouraging interaction and self-organization among women and minorities who are outside the dominant culture and leadership cadres of the union so that they can analyze and articulate their own needs and possibilities. Needleman uses the phrase “structured opportunities” to signify leadership pressure for change.

An increasing number of unions offer “independent space”—women’s committees and union-sponsored conferences for women. The UAW constitution mandates a women’s committee in every local union. Currently, eight national unions support women’s departments with full-time staff devoted to organizing and promoting interaction among union women. In AFSCME, for example, the women’s department has a staff of six and an annual budget of more than one million dollars (not including staff salaries). The head of AFGE’s women’s department is one of three national officers elected at conventions.

Nevertheless, holding conferences of female activists is still controversial. Male officers fear the formation of caucuses aimed at challenging the power and policies of incumbents. In many cases, conferences are carefully structured to avoid major policy discussions. Still, interaction and self-organization are increasing, enabling women to hone their leadership skills and acquire knowledge of union practices and politics in a protected environment.

In the past, some of those who were otherwise supportive of female equality voiced a concern that separate structures marginalized women, diverting their energies from succeeding in the mainstream (O’Cleiracain 1986; Baden 1986). For many years, the AFL-CIO considered and rejected the idea of a separate women’s department, opting instead to place coordination of women’s activities in its civil rights department. But with the election of John Sweeney as AFL-CIO president came the establishment of a working women’s department headed by Karen Nussbaum. Under her leadership, the AFL-CIO encourages interaction among women’s departments and formulates policy proposals on issues of concern to women. Women also seek independent space on their own, with or without union approval and financial support, by participating in local chapters and national CLUW conferences.

“Structured opportunity,” the push from the top, includes efforts to open doors, provide training, share responsibility and power, and include women in visible leadership positions. There are numerous examples of such affirmative action. As noted, while women are still relatively rare in elected positions, union leaders are increasingly appointing women to staff positions. Under John Sweeney’s leadership, the AFL-CIO set an example for its af-

filiates by restructuring headquarters so that women head half of all departments. Even unions with no female representation on their national executive boards are hiring women in key staff positions. The Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO has a woman chief of staff; the International Association of Machinists (IAM), a female general counsel; and the Bricklayers Union, a female director of legislation.

Top-level appointments, particularly those that break the stereotype of "women's work"—that is, women's departments, education departments, and recreation departments—and move women into the mainstream collective bargaining and legislative arena, send a message to local unions about women's potential and provide role models for women who aspire to leadership.

Organizing the unorganized has provided a major impetus to appoint women to union staff. Sectors targeted for organizing are predominately female ones in which unionization is low. These include service, public-sector, and professional fields, as well as low-paid manufacturing, agricultural, and home-care jobs.

Furthermore, surveys and public-opinion polls demonstrate that women are more "union-friendly" than men—that is, more likely to favor joining a union (Kochan 1979; Freeman and Medoff 1984; and Bronfenbrenner 1998). Therefore, it is not surprising that young women are being recruited for the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute (they currently constitute half of the trainees) and for Union Summer, an outreach to college students to encourage their participation in labor activities. For union sponsors, the results are paying off. Women in campaigns involving a female workforce have achieved better "win rates" than their male counterparts (Bronfenbrenner 1998).

Collective bargaining, long a male preserve because of its adversarial character, is also beginning to open to female staff as women assume positions as legal counsels, research directors, and even directors of negotiations. With support from the top, women are making progress in expanding their options with respect to career choices.

Goals and timetables for recruiting women to staff are rare, however. In fact, unions rarely maintain personnel or human resource departments or even affirmative action plans of the type utilized in corporations and government. NEA is one of the few labor organizations with a mandate to track personnel decisions along these lines.

In contrast to affirmative action policies long implemented by unions in Canada and Western Europe, quotas or set-aside positions on executive boards are frowned on in most sectors of the American labor movement (Trebilcock 1991). The first "designated seat" for a woman came when Joyce

Miller, president of CLUW, was invited to join the AFL-CIO Executive Council, breaking a longstanding policy limiting council membership to elected presidents of large national unions.

When John Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO, he added Linda Chávez-Thompson to his slate and successfully persuaded delegates to create a new officer position, executive vice president, that was, in effect, designated to be filled by a Latina. He also enlarged the executive council to include more women and persons of color, ignoring the longstanding rule that council members must be presidents of national unions. In recent years, the New York State AFL-CIO and OPEIU have also enlarged their executive boards to diversify the membership. Nonetheless, no labor organization in the United States has a quota, or proportional representation, for women or minorities in leadership.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, with which the AFL-CIO is affiliated, has recommended that unions “examine their structures and modify them in order to improve the representation of women” (International Labour Office 1999, 18). Its *World Congress Report* noted that when unions reserved seats for women on their national executive councils, the women subsequently were elected to these posts on their own. Among the countries where unions target female representation are Sweden (50 percent) and Norway (40 percent). The Canadian Congress of Labor also reserves seats on its executive board for women. Japan provides reserved seats for representatives of its women’s committee (International Labour Office 1999).

Critics note that representation that is reserved on the basis of gender could result in tokenism. Questions have arisen, such as, if women serve on a policymaking board with the president of their own unions, can they express independent views freely and confidently? If a woman holds a designated seat on an all-male executive board, how much influence will she have? Women interviewed for this chapter who hold these positions do not experience these limitations, however. They see themselves as representing a constituency and playing important roles in union decisionmaking.

With all these “best practices,” women continue to be underrepresented in union leadership roles. What is needed, according to some veterans of the struggle, is a complete change in union culture with a restructuring of the responsibilities of full-time union officials. They maintain that long hours, constant travel, and the conflict and political intrigue involved in organizing and bargaining—all of which are seen as necessary qualifications for union leadership—are incompatible with family responsibilities and feminine culture. Rather than encouraging women to become more like men, unions should become more women-friendly (Fellner 1993 and Needleman 1993a).

A few unions have already taken steps to become more family-friendly, providing child care at union meetings and conventions, for example. However, these policies are the exception and may only be found in organizations in which women have reached a critical mass in their representation in active membership and leadership positions. The possibility of a dramatic transformation in the responsibilities of leaders in the labor movement (or in business or politics, for that matter) is remote. Therefore, we must rely on incremental steps toward equality of opportunity until women are in a position to influence the culture as well as the policies of their organizations.

## WOMEN LEADERS: DO THEY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

As the number of women in union leadership increases, what is the impact? Do they have a different leadership style? And what are the implications for union policies and priorities? Will a more integrated leadership make the movement more effective in reaching its goals of representing and empowering American workers?

Numerous books and articles have examined, based on corporate experience, whether the leadership style of women executives is different from that of men (Wajcman 1998; Aburdine and Naisbitt 1992; Epstein 1991; Rosener 1990). Some predict that the "feminine" style is the wave of the future, while others argue that to succeed as executives, women must act like the men who hold those leadership posts.

The overwhelming consensus among union leaders interviewed for this chapter is that women bring a distinctively more open, participatory, and "people centered" approach to their leadership roles. In some circumstances, women emulate men. "Pounding the table" and profane language are expected, for example, in the "tough" climate of bargaining with business owners in the garment and trucking industries. Women who are the first to break into male-dominated leadership sometimes "behave like men in women's clothing" because they have to "go it alone." But as more women reach this level, they reportedly develop styles that are "warmer" and more "inclusive."

Describing their own leadership styles, women union leaders use such words as "good listener," "democratic," "willing to share," "open," "inclusive," "consultative," "flexible," and "aiming for consensus." Mary Hatwood Futrell, a former national president of NEA who was trained as a schoolteacher, saw her leadership style in the union as one of sharing knowledge and involving colleagues in the same way she did with her students. Clayola Brown, who adopted a consultative style as a union education director, says that she often won over opponents by actively involving them

in decisions. Mary Crayton, an AFL-CIO regional director who started her career as a union secretary, developed what she called a “self-effacing” style—helping others rather than asserting herself, in contrast to the behavior of many male leaders she observed.

Ida Torres, a Latina who is head of her local, officer in her national union, and treasurer of the New York City Central Labor Council, believes that women are “more tender and caring,” while men are “afraid to show their emotions.” Josephine Le Beau, an African American who is president of AFSCME 1707, a large union of social workers, finds men generally more controlling and women more willing to share information, delegate work, and support the growth and development of staff. According to Dolores Huerta of the Farmworkers, women deal with problems more directly, while men worry about “who’s going to get the credit—or the blame.”

These observations coincide with findings about women’s behavior in nontraditional jobs. Compared with men, women listen more carefully, emphasize cooperation over conflict, and use power differently—not for control but to ensure a fair distribution of resources (Lunneberg 1990).

In considering women’s leadership patterns, it is useful to examine organizations of female-concentrated occupations—such as flight attendants, office clericals, and nurses—in which women occupy most leadership positions. Probing into the history of waitress unionism, Sue Cobble (1990) found that women, who were organized in locals that were separate from men, developed a system of “peer management,” in which they disciplined and governed themselves in a highly participatory fashion.

The American Nurses Association (ANA) is described by its officers as highly participatory. Staff members are consulted by the executive director about all major decisions, and information is fully shared with staff and officers. There are frequent meetings and focus groups. Men who join the staff have to adjust their style to this way of conducting business.

The organization and representation of women clerical workers at Harvard University also reflected an unusual degree of membership involvement with an emphasis on individual empowerment and cooperative relationships—among the women themselves and with management. Observers noted that this style carried over into contract negotiations (typically an adversarial process in other settings), where many members participated in planning and negotiation (Hurd 1993).

Within the New York City chapter of CLUW, led primarily by African American women, a researcher who monitored meetings for more than a year observed that women have a “different way of doing.” Leaders are determined to make CLUW meetings harmonious. If disagreements develop, discussion is postponed until members can work out compromises. The most

influential members were those who could get along with everyone, putting the needs of the organization above their own personal ambitions (Harri-ford 1993).

These examples do not prove that women's leadership styles differ from men in all settings. Nonetheless, experience suggests that in a sup-portive environment where the number of female leaders has reached a critical mass, women often bring a distinctive approach to their leadership responsibilities.

Policies and priorities in female-led organizations tend to give greater em-phasis to social goals in political action and to family and equality issues in collective bargaining. Researchers have observed this pattern not only in the United States but also in Great Britain (Heery and Kelly 1988) and Canada (Briskin and McDermott 1993)—where unions led by women emphasize organizing women workers and promoting their specific interests, while widening the scope of collective bargaining to include such benefits as ma-ternity leave and child care.

The best-case scenario is that with the inclusion of more women in lead-ership positions, unions will organize more diverse constituencies; strengthen relationships between members and executives through a listening, caring, and participatory approach; broaden the bargaining and political action agenda to give greater attention to the interests of working families; and en-hance outreach to community allies.

## CONCLUSION

Women's importance and influence in the American labor movement will continue to grow in proportion to their increasing numbers in the work-place. No longer "absent from the agenda," as CLUW charged in 1980, women see their concerns—including family benefits and equal opportu-nity—becoming priorities for unions that seek to organize the new, pre-dominantly female and minority workforce.

Women unionists have worked for years to gain positions of greater influence in their organizations, using a variety of strategies—both personal and organizational—to overcome a number of barriers. These barriers will continue to exist for some time, both within individual unions and in soci-ety at large, but women who believe in the labor movement and in the promise of unions as the best hope for America's working families will con-tinue to challenge them, as they always have.

This chapter has included examples of women who have followed var-ied and remarkable trajectories to influential positions. These women have

exhibited courage and tenacity beyond what it takes to become a male labor leader in male-dominated unions. As we enter the new century, the American labor movement is changing, but the traditional resistance to women's leadership within unions still slows the growth of labor's influence. To the extent that unions realize this, they will benefit from the creative potential and tremendous skills of their female leaders. This will happen even more quickly if these unions develop a keener ability to recognize and recruit leadership from the ranks of their female members and leaders, and develop mechanisms to promote and train women who show commitment and talent.

For their part, women unionists will continue to press for greater access and openness. As more women gain leadership positions, mentor other women, and press for shared priorities—and as unions become more receptive to differences in leadership styles—the labor movement will be better prepared for the challenges of the new century.



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