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Labor Education for Women Workers

Wertheimer, Barbara Mayer

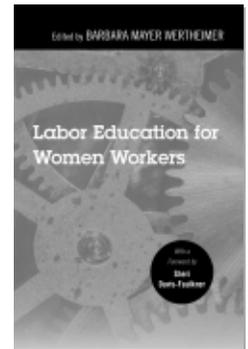
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Foreword to the Reissued Edition

By Sheri Davis-Faulkner

Labor Education for Women Workers was published in 1981, a year that marked a significant shift in labor-movement history. When Barbara Wertheimer, working with a team of leading labor educators, published this essential text, it raised awareness of the importance of creating space for women workers to have solid labor education. They also identified a major gap in the literature on labor education and filled it with an accessible yet scholarly guide. This happened to be the first year of Ronald Reagan's first term as president. His administration broke the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike and signaled the beginnings of an ensuing backlash against progressive social movements and a shift towards regressive policies. These included deregulation of the financial sector, the war on drugs and rise in mass incarceration, and attacks on the social safety net. At a moment when worker education efforts were growing, becoming institutionalized, and turning towards inclusion, the labor movement was essentially forced to go on the defensive.

Similar to 1981, *Labor Education's* reissue comes during yet another a tumultuous shift in the nation's landscape. Barack Obama, the first African American president in U.S. history, completed his second term in office in 2016 and the nation seemed to be on course to elect Hillary Clinton, the first viable woman candidate in the nation's history. In a shocking turn of events an openly anti-woman, anti-Black, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and anti-intellectual corporate boss now occupies the Oval Office. On Inauguration Day, women of color called for and led the largest global women's march in history. Just before the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the *Janus v. American Federation of State, Municipal, and County Employees* case, women workers and trade unionists took to the streets for the National Working People's Day of Action to protest a ruling that would severely restrict the ability of public-sector unions to collect dues from union members. Needless to say, when more than half of states now have right to work laws, the labor movement is still in a defensive position. But some argue the best defense is a good offense—a blueprint.

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In preparation for a post-Janus era, many public-sector unions are focusing on internal organizing, and worker education is key for effective organizing strategies. Unions are also broadening their scope of bargaining to include community and racial justice demands, essentially bargaining for the common good of communities. Over the years, labor educators have published numerous manuals, journal articles, and reports, but *Labor Education* is unique in that Wertheimer compiles a collection of essays and organizes them into a blueprint for thoughtful programming design. Each chapter attends to a key step in planning and implementing programs that are designed with women workers as the target audience. From recruitment and funding strategies, to selecting relevant materials, to determining the length of your gathering—this text offers research and experiential anecdotes on the opportunities and challenges of each step, grounded in deep knowledge of the structure and culture of labor institutions.

Due to shrinkage in overall union density and the simultaneous increase of women, especially women of color, organizing to join unions, women now make up nearly half of union membership. More women have been elected to leadership positions in national unions and associations in the public and private sectors. There has also been an emergence of women of color leading new forms of worker justice and economic justice networks, such as the National Domestic Workers Alliance, Jobs with Justice, and The National Black Worker Center Project. Four of the five leaders of the United Association of Labor Educators (UALE), as well as the International Federation of Workers' Education Association (IFWEA), are women.

There have been efforts to institutionalize and broaden women's labor education and leadership development. The Union Women's Summer School and the Coalition of Labor Union Women are in their 42nd and 43rd year, respectively. The AFL-CIO hosts the Women's Global Leadership program in conjunction with the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. AFSCME convenes a Women's Leadership Academy for their members and USWA maintains a national network of Women of Steel chapters that support women in the building trades. However, women's programs are often underfunded and understaffed and have to rely on grant funding to sustain themselves.

In an effort to bring attention to women's leadership in labor, the Berger-Marks Foundation offered support for women unionists and leaders through training, mentoring programs, and guides designed for younger women unionists. Created to honor the life and legacy of trade unionist Edna Berger, the foundation sought to recognize and amplify women's contributions to labor. As a co-director of WILL Empower (Women Innovating Labor Leadership), a women's leadership initiative funded by the Berger-Marks Foundation, I am a beneficiary of this investment in women's labor education, but much more is required to make the transformations needed for gender-inclusive and race-conscious worker justice movements.

Foreword

The number of women labor leaders and labor educators is growing, and this is a critical moment for rethinking the possibilities of labor education for women workers. There are new means of doing labor education using technical platforms for webinars and videoconferencing tools that reach beyond classrooms. There are advances in popular and adult education that focus on developing whole, healthy worker leaders by incorporating healing practices and building self-confidence, in addition to focusing on skills building. Given the injustices women, particularly women of color, face in their everyday lives, labor educators must constantly revamp their curricula to speak to the needs of formerly incarcerated, immigrant/undocumented, monolingual/multilingual, disabled, and generally undereducated current and aspiring women workers.

New media and changes within traditional media industries are also changing the way that we organize, mobilize, and message our campaigns. There are new movements emerging in the streets, the public sphere, and through social media, for example, the Twitterverse. Women are taking on age-old fights such as sexual harassment, sexual assault in the workplace, and gender-based state violence through hashtag campaigns like #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #SayHerName.

New generations bring about new forms of resistance and organizing, but there is no substitute for coming together in women-only spaces to share expertise and challenges with one another and to strategize targeted methods for improving worker-justice organizations and the world of work for women. Barbara Wertheimer provided us with a foundational text that should be read widely to further the resistance in this moment. As labor educators continue working to build a more inclusive and progressive labor movement, we must not lose sight of the work, like that captured in *Labor Education*, that has been done and done well. At the same time, it is imperative that we continue to expand this body of literature.

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