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Labor Education for Women Workers

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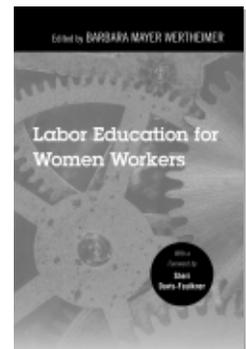
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Foreword

By LOIS S. GRAY

The long and illustrious history of workers' education in the United States is missing from the voluminous body of literature associated with the field of education. Education for working adults, including working women, is not new, dating back at least one hundred years and having had a significant impact on American labor history in general as well as adult education methodology in particular. For example, education programs for working women played a decisive role in the evolution of protective labor laws early in this century, while a high proportion of students at one of the early labor schools became organizers and leaders of the new Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Throughout its history, workers' education has been closely linked to social action. Nonetheless, neither written records nor analyses nor evaluations are readily available. Worker educators tend to be doers rather than writers—too busy organizing, planning, and teaching to communicate the what, how, and why of their profession. *Labor Education for Women Workers*, written by leading labor educators who are all current activists in the education of working women, is one of the rare exceptions. In its examination of an evolving body of knowledge and blueprinting of ideas and techniques this volume meets an important need.

Workers' education, generally defined as education for working adults in relation to their organizations, encompasses a wide variety of functions reflecting both individual and organizational goals. Individual enrichment has been achieved both through remedial programs designed to help adults "catch up" on what they missed in the formal educational system, and cultural courses that contribute to life enjoyment and understanding. The dominant organizational goal of workers' education has been union building through orientation, indoctrination, heightened ideological commitment, or, more generally, leadership training. Programming for working women,

the focus of this book, brings all of these together, combining individual fulfillment (for example, confidence building) with organizational participation in labor and women's organizations.

Particularly with its outreach to women, workers' education has registered major growth in recent years. Its future is promising. In the early years, workers' education was provided mostly by "friends of labor," social, religious, or political organizations committed to improving the life of working people through building a better society. Currently, unions and universities are the major labor education suppliers. Union-sponsored education, for many years a tertiary activity, took a major leap forward with the establishment of the George Meany Center for Labor Studies, a year-round leadership training program sponsored by the AFL-CIO for its affiliated unions. Many national unions have increased their budgets for education. A notable example is the United Automobile Workers, whose Family Education Center involves union members and their families in a residential program of union and political education. University and college-sponsored programs for workers also are on the rise, reflecting the general upward trend in adult education. While universities have been involved in workers' education for more than fifty years, the growth has been notable since World War II. The latest arrivals on the scene are community colleges, which have recently discovered labor unions as a new constituency congenial to the natural interest of these schools in occupational and community education. Under the leadership of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, their outreach has been through initiatives to new groups of worker students that link apprenticeship training and associate degree credits.

Most programs of workers' education have been and continue to be non-credit, dealing with subjects closely related to work and union interests and conducted on an informal basis. Participatory teaching methods and action orientation are the key characteristics. Credit and degree programs in the field of labor studies are a new but growing trend and are currently offered by seventy-five colleges and universities.

What influences this demand for college credit programs in labor studies? First, technological changes have transformed this country's labor force from blue collar to predominately white collar; second, rising levels of education and income make credit and degree work possible; and, third, new constituencies of union membership, particularly in the public sector, find job advancement as well as union leadership skills linked to college credit course work.

On the supply side, credit and degree programs for working adults have been encouraged by, first, the availability of financing from union-

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negotiated educational benefit plans, and, second, the pressure on higher education to offset the demographically projected decline in traditional college-age enrollments.

Working women, long underrepresented in workers' education activities, recently have been increasing their share. As they enter the work force in growing numbers and aspire to leadership roles in the union and the community, women seek educational opportunities that reinforce their struggle for equality.

This growth in activity in the labor education field has resulted in a shortage of experienced professionals to carry it on. Limited funding forces universities and unions to rely heavily on part-time instructors, many of whom often need "retooling" for adult teaching. A national workers' education center for curriculum and materials development that would provide an established sequence of instructor training has been a long-time dream of many of us in this field.

Labor Education for Women Workers is an important first step in meeting the needs of a profession enjoying a renaissance today and for which the future is bright.

**LABOR EDUCATION
FOR WOMEN WORKERS**

