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Labor Education for Women Workers

Wertheimer, Barbara Mayer

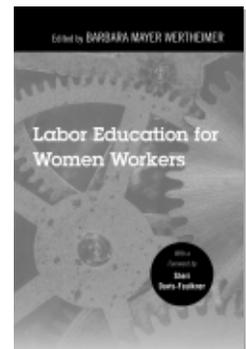
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Introduction

By BARBARA M. WERTHEIMER

Not so very long ago, 90 percent of all Americans went to no school at all. From the opening of the first public high school in 1821, to our highly credentialed society where, in 1975, an estimated 17 million men and women participated in adult education activities,¹ took just under 150 years. This is nothing short of revolutionary. In 1972, for the first time, approximately one half of all students in post-secondary educational institutions were there on a part-time basis. More than 75 percent of these students are in the work force.²

This single fact determines the interests and needs of the student population that adult and worker educators serve. Not surprisingly, most adult students seek education related to jobs, to job advancement, and, where they are union workers, education that will develop their abilities as volunteer leaders or full-time staff.

Today, responding to the growing needs of worker students, some 42 colleges and universities in as many states are members of the University and College Labor Education Association (UCLEA). They have a full-time labor education staff and labor-based advisory committees, and they conduct labor education programs for unions and employee associations. A growing number of universities and colleges have applications pending or are preparing to join this association. In addition, many community colleges now are entering the field, planning to reach working adults with a variety of programs.

As the traditional 18–22 year-old student population continues to shrink, as it is expected to do through the 1980s, efforts to offer courses to the

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1. *Education for Employment*, Task Force on Education and Employment of the National Academy of Educators, March 1979, p. 125.
 2. National Advisory Council on Extension and Continuing Education, *Equity of Access, Continuing Education and the Part-Time Student*, 9th Annual Report, March 1975, pp. 14, 15.

adult student are growing. These programs will supplement the education that many unions and employee associations provide their members, and will offer degree opportunities that the unions themselves cannot supply. The future of workers' education is bright.

It is timely, then, to share some of the newest developments in the field both with practitioners and with those seeking to serve the working adult. This book should serve as an aid to program planners and also help to ensure that the needs and interests of the workers offered this increasing array of programs are met. It has been many years since a book on methods, techniques, and programming in workers' education in America has appeared. The last was A. A. Liveright's *Union Leadership Training*, in 1951, while Theodore Brameld's *Workers' Education in the U.S.*, an account by practitioners of problems and some tested solutions, was published ten years earlier.

The terms *workers' education* and *labor education* are used interchangeably in this volume, according to the definition that we are adopting from the classic survey of programs in the field, *Labor Education in the United States* (1968), by Lawrence Rogin and Marjorie Rachlin: "That branch of adult education that attempts to meet workers' education needs and interests as these arise out of participation in unions." Labor education has evolved, mainly in this century, as education directed toward action, focused on increasing the effectiveness of workers in their unions, on providing a clearer understanding of how society operates and how workers can use their potential power within it. Its further aim is to promote individual development. It is utilitarian and pragmatic.³

The principles that guide workers' education, however, also apply to adult education, because they are rooted in how adults learn. Students must participate in the learning process and make use (preferably immediate) of the material learned. Cognitive and psychomotor activities—thinking and doing—are joined. The kind of group and the purpose of the program determine the approach to subject matter, the methods and techniques selected. What is most essential to the student? How can it be dramatized, brought into sharpest focus? Whether the teacher chooses to involve the student through speaking, writing, reporting, analyzing, through use of case studies, games, or role plays, it is with the purpose of bringing the student into the learning process.⁴

3. Lawrence Rogin and Marjorie Rachlin, *Labor Education in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Labor Education, Sept. 1968), p.1.

4. For a more detailed discussion of adult learning, see Barton Morgan, Glen Holmes, and Clarence Bundy, *Methods in Adult Education* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate, 1976), pp. 20–24.

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While workers' education is more widespread today than ever before, it is also fragmented. There has never been a national or comprehensive rubric under which it has operated, as Rogin and Rachlin point out. This may be a strength. The door is always open to innovation, experimentation, and the flexibility to meet new needs. Thus today we find programs that provide college credits and even degrees in labor studies, a somewhat new development, alongside traditional short courses, conferences, and week-long residential schools on core subjects like shop steward training, as well as on broader issues relating to economics, health and safety, and energy problems. Unions, universities, community colleges, and institutions like libraries and Y's are joined in providing worker education by new groups: associations of women office workers, apprentice training agencies, the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and the National Commission on Working Women, to name a few.

One of the most recent developments, a product of the 1970s for the most part, is education for labor union and other working women. That is the focus of this book.

The Need for Programs for Working Women

Women employed outside the home constitute the fastest-growing potential student group for adult and workers' education. Today they number more than 44 million; three out of every five new jobs are filled by women workers. It is estimated that between 1975 and 1990 women will make up 54 percent of the civilian labor force increase, if Bureau of Labor Statistics projections are correct.⁵ Inflation and economic necessity continue to bring women to the work force.

Not only are women continuing to come into the work force in unprecedented numbers; they are staying longer. The average stay is close to 25 years, but women who support themselves or their families have the same 45-year stay as men. Nor is this longer period unusual: the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor reports that the number of families headed by women has increased by 73 percent since 1960.

However, women still enter the work force at the lowest wage and skill levels, jobs that offer the least upward mobility. This is the job ghetto, the traditional area of "women's work," which is in part responsible for the fact that women earn, for year-round full-time work, an average of only 60 percent of what men earn.

5. As discussed in Task Force, *Education for Employment*, March 1979, p. 26.

The jobs women hold are in the least unionized occupations. Perhaps six and one-half million women are members of labor unions or associations. Within the labor movement, women make up 27 percent of all union members, although only about 7 percent of the top appointed or elected jobs in national unions are held by women—and these are more likely to be appointed rather than elected positions.⁶

The 1980s will continue as a period of increasing women's participation in the work force, but with a difference. Many of the women there will not be new entrants. They will have been there for a while, and will be pressing for upward mobility on the job and, where they are union members, in the unions as well. For women locked into dull, routine jobs with little chance to move up, the union offers an opportunity for self-expression. Talents and abilities stifled at the work place can be put to work in union activity. Education for effective use of these talents will be increasingly important. In fact, it already is.

During the '70s, the women's movement grew as part of the experience of labor union women. One result is the popularity among women of education programs that put them in touch with other working women and help them develop and practice the skills and self-confidence needed to increase their participation in their unions. Their motivation is high.

Labor educators and others who program for working women are aware that the women who come to their classes are there despite great obstacles: they hold full-time jobs plus the traditional second job of most women—home and family. They are active in their unions, and often in other organizations like their churches. One of my favorite anecdotes is of a teacher in Cornell's Trade Union Women's Studies who asked her class: "How do you do all the things you do? How do you manage? Something's got to give—what is it?" And she learned that what "gave" was sleep—the women in her class got between four and six hours of sleep a night.

What women workers need—and are willing to sacrifice to get—is "catch up" education. Their off-work hours, when they were young, were devoted to children and family; men tend to have more time to begin their union involvement. By the time women are more free of home responsibilities, their male peers are well advanced into union leadership roles. Women need the chance, in a secure and supportive atmosphere, among women with similar experiences, to learn and to practice the leadership skills they will need, as well as to discuss and analyze union structures and how they work.

6. U.S. Department of Labor, *Directory of National Unions and Employee Associations* (Washington, D.C.: Bulletin 1937, 1977), pp. 105–10.

Barriers to Women's Participation in Education

The barriers that come between women and their desire for education and skill training fall into three main categories.

Personal. Often it is a question of how women view themselves. They lack self-confidence. They know their study skills are rusty, that they haven't been in the classroom for many years. Sometimes they do not rate themselves as important enough to spend the time or the money on something that they view as just for them. Or they are too tired, or may have to wage a constant battle with disapproving husbands. Perhaps home responsibilities are too heavy. Transportation is a problem for many. Courses may be at inconvenient times or locations.

Economic. The cost, not only of the courses, but also of child care, may be too high. Tuition refunds may not be available where they work, or they may not know of their availability. If it is a labor education program, the union may not be willing to pick up course fees in all cases.

Institutional. Not all educational institutions know how to recruit women workers, where to reach them. Or the program may not provide a supportive atmosphere, and the women will be intimidated and not return. Are there women teachers in the programs? They are important role models. Women should be among the teaching staffs for regular course offerings as well (and they should be better represented on labor advisory committees). Course materials should be not only sex-neutral, but for women's programs should also build self-confidence and a sense of competency, and pride in what working women and women in unions have accomplished in the past and are doing today. Institutions should examine their procedures to free them of red tape. Student services, including counseling, should be available at convenient times and locations. Courses must be relevant, directed to the concerns of women as workers. Where necessary, teacher-orientation sessions may be necessary to familiarize teachers with the most useful methods and techniques for relating to working women.

For too long, labor education and evening adult programs have held second-class status at most colleges. To change this, program directors and deans must be willing to fight for the budgets that labor education programs deserve.

Why This Book?

Seven years ago there were only occasional, sporadic programs for union and other working women. Today these are an accepted part of workers'

education and a legitimate part of university labor programming. This is in part due to programs initiated by Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, initially with the support of the Ford Foundation, later joined by several other foundations, and to the dedication of a growing number of university and union labor educators around the country, many of whom have written of their programs for this book.

When we began the Cornell program in 1972, there were few materials suitable for labor education for union women. We wrote our own and made them as widely available as we could. Today there are books on working women's history, pamphlets from the Women's Bureau and other organizations, and a range of materials developed by union and university educators. This is not enough, but it is a healthy beginning.

It is important to pull together in one volume some of the fine work that has been done recently to develop working women's education as a viable part of the labor education field, for it is making important and unique contributions in program design and method. To do this, I have invited women and men who have been working in the field and have contributed to the development of education for women workers to share what they have been doing. They represent eleven different universities, six labor union organizations, and one foundation.

The writers underscore what we know about education for adults, particularly workers: that it is a craft and an art that is transferable, from one subject area to another, from one kind of group to another. Labor educators are flexible and ingenious; they take basic forms and they create and innovate. They know how to reach students, grab their interest, find a spark and fan it into a flame of excitement over learning.

It is my hope that readers of this book will visualize not only how the methods, materials, and subject matter have been used by the writers, but also ways that these can be extrapolated, adapted, turned to useful purpose in a wide variety of programs. For they would be equally at home in adult and continuing education, in such organizations as Y's and community and women's groups, in church educational activities and political education, and in other areas where adults are involved in combining their leisure and their desire for education.

This book represents an opportunity, too, to share my own philosophy of adult and worker education. The field has absorbed my energy and thought since I was twenty years old. At that time, so very young and wet behind the ears, I went with my husband, Val—we were an organizing team with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America—to the coal hills of Pennsylvania. It was there that we produced our first workers' education "publication," a slim brochure cranked out on a hand mimeo machine. It

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had a blue cover, I remember, on which appeared the words “Welcome to Your Union.” Pants workers whom we had just seen through a six-week strike (our first), a National Labor Relations Board election (our first), and a union contract (our first), were on the receiving end of this homespun informational bulletin . . . and we thought it was beautiful!

It’s not too far from there to here. The years that I have spent directing a union’s education program, then developing community leadership training for the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal, confirmed for me the extent to which workers’ education methods and techniques are transferable. Since 1966 I have been a part of Cornell’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations, designing and testing programs and materials for working adults—and, for the past eight years, primarily for women workers.

I have found that those of us in labor education, always pressed to do more than can be done in a twenty-four-hour day, have learned never to do anything for one reason alone. If we develop a workshop, we try to design it for portability around our state, so it can be run more than once. When we hold conferences, wherever possible we try to prepare summaries, both to share the ideas that emerge and to encourage replication elsewhere. We keep endless files of course materials to whip out and send to colleagues who write us for help. Labor educators visiting from out of town are pressed to observe our classes, give us feedback and suggestions, and serve as resources.

With each new area of programming that I have explored, I have tried to leave a “how to do it” handbook or manual behind to ensure the possibility of replication, before I moved on to another specialty within the field. Other labor educators have done the same.

One of our great needs in this profession is for a resource center and clearinghouse for the materials that are churned out daily in programs across the country. At the moment there is no practical way to share these as fully as we would like. Imagine how creative each of us could be if we didn’t have to re-invent the wheel each time, if we could sometimes just adjust someone else’s wheel to fit our wagon, and benefit from the immense talent out there.

This book is intended to do this in a small measure. The programs, methods and techniques described in the chapters that follow have been tested with the student population—working women—for which they were designed. But with maximum replicability in mind, contributors have taken a “how to do it” approach.

Each contributor is mindful that working women have been absent from or, at best, underrepresented in classrooms in the past. The success of

programs for union women seems to indicate that women do want and need the chance to study for a time within a supportive environment and with other women, the major reason for offering programs especially for them.

The authors also know, and state, the importance of integrating information and materials on working women into ongoing labor education. In standard labor history texts, in steward training manuals, wherever the labor educator looks, women's role usually is missing. It is hoped that this book will serve a special purpose in raising the awareness of educators to the many areas where working women's needs, concerns, and contributions can be included as a regular, accepted part of course curricula and readings.

In the coming decades, women will comprise close to half the work force. They will make further, major strides toward equality—on the job, in the union, in political and community life, and in their families. Adult and workers' education can help them, sometimes immeasurably, on their way.

I am aware that this book is merely a beginning in presenting labor education program ideas and designs. There are labor educators whose ideas and programs are not included in this volume, some because, in spite of our best efforts, our network remains incomplete and we do not know of their work, but mainly because of space limitations. Some initial chapters planned for the volume had to be dropped because we sought a sense of unity and they did not quite fit. I regret all the omissions.

Some important, exciting new program areas had to be left for a future book: programs for women facing retirement, for example; or those that help women deal with job stress and family pressures, or with sexual harassment on the job, or with building support groups for women entering non-traditional occupations. There are a growing number of union programs sponsored by women's departments in major labor organizations that are making notable contributions to the field, and these should be included in any future volume.

In editing this book I have had nothing but cooperation and the warmest understanding from the contributors, for which I am deeply grateful. Others, behind the scenes, are colleagues and friends without whom I could not have managed. I particularly want to thank Erna Dacres, Administrative Aide to the Institute for Education and Research on Women and Work, who has helped in countless ways and always with encouragement, love, and kindness. Fanny Ninzatti, also an Administrative Aide with the Institute, has been unusually helpful. The staff I work with every day, some of whom have prepared chapters for this volume, have through their warm interest and evidence of caring contributed more to me than they can ever

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know. My children, Ellen, David, and now Mark, have helped me in ways for which I shall be grateful always.

Michael Ames at Temple University Press has made the production end of this book a pleasant experience.

Dr. Jacob Kaufman, Metropolitan District Director of the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, has been constant with his friendly support. My close associate and friend, Anne H. Nelson, with whom I have worked since 1972 to build programs for women workers, once again has shared with me, as she always does, her wisdom and her patience, two of her many strong suits.

In introducing a book on labor education, I want to take the opportunity to pay special tribute to someone whose understanding and support have gone far beyond the preparation of this volume. Lois S. Gray, Associate Dean and Director of Extension and Public Service, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, is one of the strongest endorsers of innovation in workers' education. She is a leader in the field who has done more than anyone I know to provide for many of us the freedom to explore new dimensions that makes working in this profession exciting and fulfilling.

Even with the generous help that I have received, errors will appear; they are my responsibility alone. All these notwithstanding, it is my deepest hope that this book will prove useful.

