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Labor Education for Women Workers

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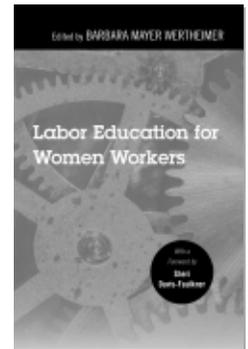
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CHAPTER 4

Conferences: The One-Day Model

By JOYCE L. KORNBLUH

and HY KORNBLUH

We cannot teach except as we help others find their inner freedom and will to learn. The workshop is an evolving invention designed to provide this kind of stage for learning—an exciting experience for leader and learner alike.¹

“I owe it to my union, myself and my world to carry on the work of my sisters in the labor movement,” wrote Virginia Cowley, chief shop steward in a shoe factory in a small western Michigan town. To attend a one-day, six-hour conference on working women and the law (sponsored by the Program on Women and Work) she had traveled with three other women from five in the morning.

The Program on Women and Work grew out of meetings held in spring 1972 at the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations (ILIR) in Ann Arbor, for local union women leaders and staff from across southeastern Michigan. Participants spoke of their work within unions, of their need for more information and for a support network. They requested training in the skills needed to function more effectively within their unions and communities. Meeting as they did with other union women who had similar problems and commitments, they were eager to set up an informal network and educational support system for union women living and working in a wide geographic area but who shared common goals and concerns.

Because of this enthusiasm, the Program on Women and Work began in 1973, a part of the Labor Studies Center of the ILIR. Its goal was to provide information and education to women union members and other women workers on issues of practical interest to them, and to offer training in leadership skills. The program today conducts workshops and conferences,

1. *Conducting Workshops and Institutes* (Chicago: Adult Education Association, Leadership Pamphlet no. 9, 1956), p. 2.

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three-and-a-half-day residential summer and winter institutes, and special conferences and non-credit courses. In addition, the Program on Women and Work sponsored the oral history project, "Twentieth Century Union Woman, Vehicle for Social Change," under a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.

A recent survey indicates that those who attend these types of programs are primarily union-oriented women in their middle years with fewer than three children at home. Almost all are high school graduates. More than half have had some additional formal education or training in vocational schools, community colleges, manpower programs, or in other adult education settings. Half are heads of households; half have always worked in the labor force. One quarter have been union members for three years or less, a figure balanced by the 25 percent who have maintained union membership for more than ten years. The women are an active leadership group seeking training for more effective participation within their unions. They want to see greater utilization of women within the union structures in elective and staff capacities.

Like Virginia Cowley and her union sisters from Big Rapids, Michigan, many participants come from small communities where there have been few sources of information on and training for women workers. While few of the women have been active in the women's movement, a large number have taken part in community and other political campaigns. Many are change-oriented personally as well as organizationally and express the desire to become more competent and confident in both spheres of life. Some seek the skills to negotiate new roles as heads of households and single-parent families. Others speak openly of the need for job mobility within their work settings so they can utilize their talents, earn more money, and have the challenge of more responsible work. Still others want to prepare for more leadership responsibility and to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to advance within their unions.

Saturday Workshops and Conferences

One-day Saturday workshops or conferences have been successful in meeting the needs of geographically scattered Michigan women workers, and are a core part of the University of Michigan's Program on Women and Work. This format is flexible, and can include workshops that build skills or provide information, and are useful as well in launching long-term programs. An initial conference gives an emerging program visibility at an important, early stage. Its structure can highlight some of the issues and skill areas that the ensuing longer-term program will include, and serve as

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a means to collect information on the needs of potential participants through questionnaires, evaluation forms, and discussions.

Subjects suggested for a one-day conference format include: working women and the law, effective speaking, parliamentary procedure, women in the international work world, working with groups, legislative issues for women workers, collective bargaining issues and skills, grievance handling, assertiveness training, writing for union publications, health and safety for women workers, women in the public sector, communication skills, and organizing women workers. In 1974, groundwork was laid for a program with Spanish speaking women in southeast Michigan. Bilingual workshops were conducted on issues for Spanish-speaking women workers, and an assertiveness workshop (in Spanish) was led by a Chicana psychologist. We have found all these areas to be useful.

The women workers attending the first Saturday conference in the fall of 1973 confirmed this format as a program model. When 174 women unionists and other women workers registered, we attributed the turnout to the enthusiasm of a neglected group of workers who saw some educational attention from the university labor program finally being devoted to the problems of working women. But through the feedback from that day's session and from participants in other ILIR programs, we found that the one-day program also offered a number of advantages:

1. Many women can more readily get away from home for a whole day than for an evening to attend a two-hour, one-night-a-week class. In the fall, husbands or older siblings who are at home watching football on TV can assume responsibility for younger children.

2. Since some participants travel as much as four or five hours each way to take part in a Saturday program, the investment seemed worthwhile when they got a lengthier program for their effort.

3. The experience of being with other women and sharing problems for six hours develops a consciousness and, as one adult educator put it, the feeling of "relatedness" that is matched only by that developed in the residential schools for women workers described in Chapter 7.

4. Many women make Saturday their "day out," away from the concerns of home and job. Following the Saturday program, which usually ends at 4:00 P.M., students arrange to shop together in Ann Arbor, then have an early dinner, before driving home.

5. Coming to a Saturday workshop can circumvent both the issues of reimbursement for lost time and of overnight hotel and meal expenses. The local union may be more amenable to sending a greater number of participants if the cost involves only transportation and a five-dollar registration fee (ten dollars if lunch is provided).

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Educationally, the availability of six to eight hours for a one-day conference or workshop is important in building skills. It is a good time period for consciousness raising. Participants come from a wide geographic area and diverse unions, industries, and communities. It builds a support network, while the group also has ample time to focus on a single issue. A six-hour period allows for (and, we believe, requires) different educational techniques that might combine a speaker, a panel discussion, a film, group discussions, mock situations, and a summary session on back-home application. Looking back on our earliest Saturday workshops and conferences, we realize that the first series served as consciousness raisers to emphasize issues and stimulate women to move on their own behalf. This focus has changed with time, and currently the Saturday programs offer skill building and leadership training.

For example, advanced workshops for women moving up in the union structure supplement our other educational programs—the Workers' Basic Study Program, or the winter or summer schools and/or prior one-day conferences. Advanced assertiveness training, advanced collective bargaining, and advanced communication skills were three recent Saturday programs.

Anatomy of a Saturday Workshop

Like most labor education programs, the Saturday workshops and conferences follow a five-step process: planning, recruiting, administration, evaluation, and follow-up.

Planning

The Saturday series is planned for three- or four-month periods, usually a fall and a winter program, with three or four Saturday workshops scheduled in each program. This makes publicity more efficient, as fliers mailed in the fall and in mid-winter are effective but do not publicize too far in advance. Detailed planning is a staff function, but the topics chosen reflect the suggestions of residential school students and of a statewide planning committee of trade union women. Thus the workshops and conferences also serve as follow-up to the residential programs and are based on the needs expressed by those involved.

Additional input on topics comes from evaluation forms filled out by participants at each of the Saturday workshops. While topics usually focus on leadership skills and union-related issues, Saturday programs conducted in the Detroit area with the Labor Studies Center at Wayne State University

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reflect some different needs, and have dealt with adjusting to divorce, separation and death, and battered wives.

Program dates should not conflict with conferences planned by unions, community organizations, and other groups in the area, or with religious and other holidays. The planning committee provides valuable input on scheduling, but it is important to check with unions in the area before final decisions are made on workshop dates.

Instructors, speakers, and resource persons are drawn from union, government, and community agencies and university staffs. As in programs described in other chapters, utilize as many women instructors and leaders as possible, to provide role models. Some of our instructors are rank-and-file union members expert and experienced in a particular area—for example, collective bargaining, grievance handling, community services, skilled trades, safety and health. Recently we have begun to train teachers chosen from among program participants who demonstrate ongoing commitment and skills. In fall 1978, ten union women were trained as facilitators for assertion training workshops and utilized as assistants in an advanced program on this subject. These ten facilitators will eventually conduct assertion workshops with other groups of trade union women around the state.

It is often necessary to help workshop leaders and instructors choose teaching materials for the kits or notebooks prepared for participants. Maintaining files of usable materials is helpful. At most of the Saturday workshops, a literature table displays free pamphlet material as well as relevant paperback books for sale, obtained on consignment from the University of Michigan's student-owned bookstore. The EEOC, Department of Labor, university and union education programs, newspapers, journals, and magazines are rich sources for reprints for the literature table. More than once we have successfully adapted these materials as questionnaires, case studies, or mock role-playing situations tailored to particular participant needs.

Recruiting and Publicity

Face-to-face recruiting remains the most effective approach to publicizing conferences and workshops. Planning committee members and program participants are the most enthusiastic recruiters for the Saturday series, since they have an interest in the success of a workshop that they have suggested or helped to develop. Additionally, past participants in conferences may have started women's committees in their local unions or have volunteered for union education committees. Through their increased activism they become excellent contacts for publicizing and recruiting in their locals. In addition, a systematic mailing goes to all participants of previous programs and to women unionists who have taken part in other

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ILIR Labor Studies Center activities, to Michigan members of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, to union women's committees, and to union staff. Union education representatives who serve on the Washtenaw Area Labor Education Board, the advisory committee to the Labor Studies Center, are an integral part of the recruitment process.

Press releases go to union and community newspapers. ILIR staff attend local union and regional meetings to announce forthcoming programs; fliers are distributed at union functions; and radio and TV interviews and announcements help publicize the programs.

Administration

We have found it most effective to assign one ILIR staff person to the administration of each workshop. If possible, that staff member should not teach, so that she is free to greet, register, and talk with participants and to handle any non-teaching problems that might arise, as well as deal with the many administrative details. A Saturday workshop checklist includes remembering chalk, name tags, and newsprint; collecting the registration fee from those who did not register in advance; making notes on more materials to order; arranging chairs and tables; and so forth.

The Saturday workshops provide useful training experiences for interns from the University of Michigan School of Social Work and the School of Education as well as for undergraduate students interested in labor education as a field work placement. The workshops usually attract between twenty and fifty participants, and are a good place for student interns to learn the anatomy of a workshop program in which they can assume responsibility and work as part of a staff team.

The end of a Saturday workshop or conference, of course, is only the beginning of cleanup and follow-through. A list of tasks for this phase includes: reading participants' evaluation forms; evaluating the workshop and making notes for future workshops based on this experience; sending thank-you letters and payments to instructors and resource persons; sending any follow-up materials promised to participants and instructors; making sure participants' names are on the mailing list; debriefing the student intern; planning such necessary follow-up as advanced workshops, materials development, or special programs; sending any newspaper coverage/photos of the workshop to instructors, participants, or the press.

Teaching Methods

The one-day model is flexible, allowing for effective use of various teaching methods and approaches developed for adults through workers' and labor education. Experiential learning methods could include mock

bargaining games to simulate real-life situations (for example, to develop negotiating skills); video-taped grievance sessions; discussion questionnaires; buzz groups; panel discussions, using participants with special expertise and experience; community-building exercises to develop group awareness and to sensitize participants to group dynamics and interpersonal skills; simulated committees (for example, to plan a season of education programs for a local union). Films, film strips, and other audiovisual aids are valuable if integrated into the program—an introduction and follow-up discussion should relate them to the workshop's focus.

Where the one-day conference or workshop is aimed at initiating a program in a specific geographic area, or is focused on a single topic, it is useful to include speakers who can both share information and demonstrate the availability of people who are resources in that area; they can be utilized in follow-up programs. Including women leaders from area unions and the community as speakers performs a similar function: it highlights that there are women in the participants' home base who have moved ahead.

However, for many women the workshop is a very different way of spending their time from what they are used to. It is important to provide comfortable chairs, a break at least every hour and a half, and the opportunity to move about throughout the day. Finally, there is a limit to how much information and skill building can be accomplished in one day. Effectively adapting to that limit and refraining from cramming too much into a one-day program is a constant challenge to program planners.

Some General Observations

Wherever possible, the Saturday workshops are team-taught by women facilitators from a union and a university setting, with special efforts made to include a variety of unions and women from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This record of team-taught workshops has been a little-publicized but important accomplishment of the program.

The issue of child care during Saturday workshops has surfaced a number of times in program planning for women workers. Early in our program we faced the problem of finding and offering such a service. When we rented a nearby nursery school for the day, only one participant brought a child. The issue of child care during workshops and conferences involves careful planning and assessment of actual need. Several working mothers who come to the Saturday programs told us that they prefer to make other arrangements for their children so that they can have the day without this respon-

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sibility; they provide for their children's care either with family members at home or with their children's friends in the neighborhood.

Throughout the country, women workers are on the move. They need the opportunity to meet with other women, share concerns and goals, acquire necessary information, and increase their skills and confidence to meet more effectively the many new challenges and responsibilities in their work places, unions, communities, and homes. Saturday workshops and conferences are one suggested format for accommodating the roles, needs, and time constraints of working women who live in a wide geographic area. Although these workshops are not enough by themselves, they can be an important link in a program developed by and for women workers.

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