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Labor Education for Women Workers

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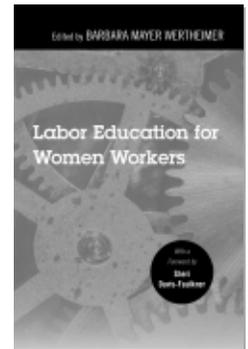
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CHAPTER 19

Subjects and Materials: How to Handle Controversy

By CONNIE KOPELOV

Women workers seek a partnership role in their unions and in society. Education programs help to provide the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve this role. Acquiring information, techniques, and strategies empowers them to perform as partners and get their message understood and accepted. But this may well involve dealing with latent or open hostility in the local union. How can labor education prepare women to handle these attitudes on issues important to them? What are some effective methods for readying them to present information to a group, to involve a committee in discussion rather than argument? Or to decide which skills to use to put forward their case most effectively in a given situation?

This chapter examines several areas that, because of space limitations, could not receive full-length chapter presentations of their own. These areas embrace legitimate programming for labor education and deal with issues of concern to women workers. The focus is on handling sensitive subjects in mixed groups, based on the need to reach all members, to deal with how to change attitudes as well as to provide information on women workers in general and women union members in particular.

Labor education recognizes that attitudes are not changed by talking to or at program attenders, but by bringing about behavior change that leads to, or at least promotes, attitude change. Simulation exercises and role plays are essential to effect this. They underscore the value of workers' education as an action-oriented outreach, illustrated here in terms of building leadership ability so that women can present in their unions issues that may be controversial. These issues revolve around increasing understanding of and interest in general areas such as the growing number of women in the work force, the need for organizing women into unions, why women should be involved at all levels of union activity, and the impor-

How to Handle Controversy

tance of union programs that reflect women's special needs and concerns, such as the growing gap between what men and women earn.

Examples of specific issues around which useful, stimulating programs can be developed might include the still-controversial Equal Rights Amendment, and getting the union to launch an active program in its support; enforcement of equal employment opportunity at the work place; promoting clauses to be incorporated into union contracts on maternity and parental child care leaves, flexitime, provisions for child care; dealing with sexual harassment as a job grievance; and job reevaluation toward equal pay for work of comparable worth. Labor education should also prepare women to participate in areas of union activity that at least some might still regard as male "turf."

The Winning Combination

In the workshop on the Equal Rights Amendment described below, the aims were: (1) to deal with an emotion-charged issue by providing facts where slogans had often been substituted; (2) to help participants develop a program to take back to their locals and implement; and (3) to demonstrate through a learn-by-doing experience one or more program ideas and methods useful for local union membership or education meetings.

In preparation for the workshop, specific questions were developed that needed discussion and answers. What would ERA do and not do? What would be its economic impact? What is the ratification process? What is its present status? Its history? What about deadline extension? What is the thrust of the argument of ERA opponents? The fears that these arouse? The public relations impact? What has been done up to now to campaign for ratification? What can unions in ratified states do to help?

Discussion of these and related questions may bring the class face to face with examples of sexism and its force in their own lives. It is important, too, to enable men to see the implications for their mothers, sisters, or daughters, whose paychecks as well as human potential are involved in this issue. How does inequality impact on men? These are emotional issues, and not easy to discuss.

Providing information on the status of women in the work force is one useful approach. A profile of employed women helps to point up inequities that women contend with every day. (The Women's Bureau "Fact Sheet on Working Women" is a valuable handout here.) To move the group into this profile, I found it helpful to divide participants into buzz groups to address the question: "How do we explain the earnings gap between men and women?" The give and take, especially when men as well as women are members of the group, brings out the components as well as the consequences of sex discrimination, rooted in the students' own work experiences. This

CONNIE KOPELOV

makes it an excellent technique for workshop participants to take back with them to use in the local union.

The ERA Workshop

A fuller account of a workshop on ERA, where content was combined with developing some specific skills and strategies for action, may serve to illustrate. I assisted the education committee of the New York City chapter of the Coalition of Labor Union Women to plan and sponsor this event. The program involved: (1) an initial presentation on ERA that explained the issue to the group and served as a model, consisting of a lecturette demonstrating how to present an issue; (2) materials distributed to each participant that reinforced the information that had been provided and supplied additional data on the legislative status of ERA, the AFL-CIO's position in support of the amendment, and some sample resolutions; (3) buzz groups, each chaired by a CLUW education committee member who had gone through a preparatory training session in discussion leadership.

Directives to buzz group leaders ensured that each group would go through pro and con arguments to become familiar with them, and that group members would explore ways to handle misunderstandings about or even hostility toward ERA. Each group also was charged with designing activities that could be carried out in the work place or union. To develop mutual support for this, women from the same union were assigned to buzz groups together. This was an aid to realistic planning in terms of what would be acceptable in their situations, and in working out ways that they could help each other to follow through. For many it was the first step in building a support group or caucus where they worked or in the union itself.

The format of this workshop can be used in teaching numerous other issues where content needs to be matched with plans for action. The collective bargaining issues mentioned earlier are examples of such topics.

Integrating Women's Issues

An important way to deal with controversial issues in relation to women workers is to integrate them into the mainstream of workers' education, making them part of the material in courses that reach union men. For example, courses in labor history rarely cover women's role, but are greatly enriched when readings and discussions are included on strikes where women were involved (for example, the Pullman strike described in Chapter 13). In some strikes women were the major force, as in the garment strike of 1910–1911 in New York City. Discussions of the conditions that led to the strike, the pay inequities, the low rate of women's unionization,

How to Handle Controversy

and the difficulties that surrounded their attempts to organize, flow easily from this material, and provide a logical transition to looking at how women's situation in the work force has changed or remained the same.

Traditional classes on the political process can focus on bills that deal with issues of special concern to women that also are critical for men. For example, the class can examine a legislative issue like labor law reform in terms of its special impact on women's organizing efforts, and why organizing women workers is key to labor movement growth.

Teachers of stewards' classes can set the tone by using sex-neutral terms such as worker, employee, or steward, and by using generic "they" instead of the usual "he." Grievance cases and role plays can be written using unisex names such as Lee, Bobbie, or Chris. Some grievance cases can be developed around women's issues (see Chapter 15) such as equal pay, sex discrimination problems, or sexual harassment on the job, in addition to the more traditional grievance situations.

The following suggestions illustrate several additional possibilities:

1. Unions often embark on organizing drives in which one of the units is predominately female. Without making assumptions or judgments of male attitudes, valuable points could emerge from a discussion of organizing strategy. Organizing strategists might be encouraged to answer these questions: What job complaints might these workers have because they are women? Can the union provide them with a sense of importance denied them at work? Could some women workers be reluctant to join because they think unions are anti-women? Why would they believe this? Is gender a consideration in deciding who will approach this unit? Why or why not? Has sexism contributed to a self-image among these workers that is a barrier to the organizing drive? Are there economic facts based on the pay of workers in sex-stereotyped jobs that would be useful to the organizers?

2. Most unions worry about membership commitment. Some adopt measures to improve the loyalty and active participation of members. Questions here might include: What barriers do you think exist to women's participation? Why is it more difficult for women to take part? Is it time and place? Type of activities? Recruiting devices? Lack of encouragement? What can the union do to overcome these obstacles?

3. The labor movement's legislative goals are threatened by conservative and right-wing forces. Unions use communication networks (newspapers, regularly scheduled meetings, special programs) to alert members to the danger from undemocratic groups. Women can contribute such questions as: Which issues does the right wing use to attract unionists (among these are ERA, divorce, reproductive rights)? Why does the right wing so often use women's issues as a come-on? How can unions counter this maneuver?

What educational work or action can unions engage in relating to such issues? What do members need to understand about women's issues that will enable them to resist right-wing propaganda?

4. Alcoholism and counseling services are offered by more and more unions. There are both humane and practical reasons for unions to establish alcoholism projects. Women alcoholics have special problems that should be a focus of these projects. What are the attitudes at work, in society, and in the family toward the female alcoholic? How do these impede efforts to recognize and treat female alcoholics? What additional burdens does the woman alcoholic bear because of her gender? Is the female alcoholic short-changed in societal services and family support during treatment?

5. Predominately female occupations or professions pay less, regardless of the worker's gender. Health professions, libraries, and schools are examples. What is the history of the work force in that job before it was unionized? Who did the work fifty years ago, or, in the case of teachers, more than a century ago? Are today's problems rooted in yesterday's sexism? Do men share women's low wages if they do the same work? Are earnings in male-dominated professions higher? What is the data on educational attainments and earnings of "male" versus "female" occupations? Does education explain the gap? Will the fight against lower-paid sex-stereotyped jobs protect everyone?

Conclusion

Whatever the subject addressed, we should never underestimate the power of labor education. I have watched women unionists confront senators with detailed questions on the finer points of national health insurance proposals, or take the microphone to challenge an admiral on the need for specific defense expenditures. In this instance the women were members of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, which had conducted education in which union members served both as major participants and leaders.

Through labor education and the training it provides on issues that often are controversial, women can develop the necessary self-confidence to run for union office, to take part in political campaigns, to engage in lobbying, to organize community activities in their neighborhoods. Using many methods and a wide range of subject matter, labor education offers the information and skill development that moves women workers one more step along the road to equality.