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Labor Education for Women Workers

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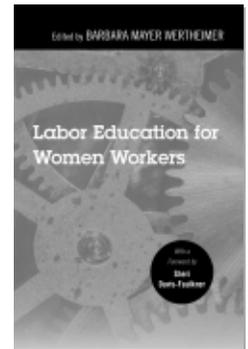
Published by Temple University Press

Wertheimer, Mayer.

Labor Education for Women Workers.

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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CHAPTER 23

A Summary Discussion

By LAWRENCE ROGIN

Once again today we have a women's labor education movement. Indeed, historically, workers' education owes a great deal to the women's movement, and if education is important to unions, as I believe it is, unions surely are in its debt. Just as in the early twentieth century, when women were fighting for the right to vote, it is equally true today, when the goals of women activists are much broader.

It was concern for women as workers that first joined working women with activists from other groups to form the National Women's Trade Union League, which had the first structured educational program for unionists and offered the first staff training. The same groups, with the added support of the staff of the Industrial Department of the Young Women's Christian Association, were responsible for the development and growth of the Women's Summer Schools of the 1920s.

While there was a parallel development in workers' education by the radical parties and unions associated with them, with workers and those from the upper classes often functioning in both movements, the radicals tended to be satisfied with the traditional techniques for educating, even if they turned the course subject matter on its head to give it a revolutionary goal. It was the women's organizations concerned with working women that were the educational innovators. Women labor educators were the first to teach tool subjects, as they sought to help women unionists break into the union hierarchies and win acceptance of their right to join the same unions as men. The Women's Trade Union League developed the first program to train organizers. Women workers' summer schools provided the testing ground for discussion method, and developed a system for consultation between students and teachers that ensured course content and teaching methods would directly meet student needs. These schools explored participatory teaching methods beyond discussion that have

become a staple of university and union classes for workers. The bulk of the useful early research and writing about the problems of teaching adult workers was sponsored by these organizations.

With the growth of unions and the decline of the women's movement during the 1930s, the organizations directed to the special needs of women workers either changed to general workers' education, as did the American Labor Education Service, originally a coordinating center for the women's summer schools, or the Southern School for Workers, which had been the Southern Summer School for Women Workers; or they died, like the Industrial Department of the YWCA and the Women's Trade Union League.

This decline of the women's movement, coupled with the Depression, made it more difficult to raise funds for exclusively working women's activities. At the same time, the rapid growth of unions, particularly industrial unions, created a demand for education that absorbed all available resources. Back in the late 1930s and early 1940s, I was one of those who helped change the character as well as the name of what had been the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, so that it opened its doors to all unionists as the Hudson Shore Labor School. In the end, of course, unions were unwilling to finance independent workers' education institutions, and these were unable to survive, whatever their character.

As a result, in the 1970s, when women unionists were drawn into a revived women's movement, seeking equality of treatment and attention to their special concerns, it became necessary to find new institutions to provide the necessary training and education. The more progressive unions created special departments that dealt with women's issues, or broadened existing departments so that they paid special attention to them. The university and college labor education centers, which have replaced the earlier independent labor schools, also began to promote special programs to meet this need. Gradually several foundations have become a source of funding, enabling some labor educators, mostly women, to concentrate in this field and focus on many of the same problems that had concerned women trade unionists and their allies more than a generation ago.

The women's labor education movement that has emerged is concerned first of all with women's role in unions, and then with the problems of training and educating women trade unionists for increasing that role. This book is the product of that interest and that experience. As Barbara Wertheimer points out in the Introduction, it is the first comprehensive study of methods, techniques, and programming in workers' education in almost thirty years. Why it should be women labor educators who again

A Summary Discussion

take the initiative to work on these problems is an interesting question, not answered here, but certainly worthy of study.

Inevitably, this volume raises—and deals with—an important question not discussed sufficiently in labor education circles in this country. Should there be special education programs for particular groups, either because they are disadvantaged within the unions, or because they are new to the work force? In general, union hierarchies in the United States, even those that support labor education, have eschewed developing such special programs. Their reasoning is based on the assumption that programs are open to everyone; that, at most, special efforts should be made in recruiting, or special arrangements made in scheduling to meet the time, location, or transportation problems of workers not able to attend regular union functions.

The chapters of this volume indicate that these steps are not enough, particularly for groups that are striving to find places for themselves in the union structure, places that previously have been denied them. The educational atmosphere seems more free and at the same time more supportive. The mind opens to new ideas more readily and with less fear in a class made up of likes, at least in the first programs. It appears easier to build self-confidence, to discuss more openly one's weaknesses and strengths in such a class. This is not seen as necessary as the training gets more advanced and the participants acquire more experience and self-assurance.

Certainly women unionists have chosen this approach consistently from the early days of the Women's Trade Union League, the women workers' summer schools, and the YWCA Industrial Department. I believe that it has served them *and* the labor movement well. Certainly there are many, in any group, who will make their way whatever the situation. It is for those who have potential, but who need encouragement and support, that the special programs are designed. And unions need all the leadership material they can get.

In any event, everyone interested in labor education is again in the debt of women labor educators. They have demonstrated an ability to reach a neglected audience in imaginative and creative ways. They, and several men in the field as well, have thought deeply about their work and have put their experiences together in this book, useful no matter whether it is adult or worker educators who read it. Perhaps they will inspire other groups who have special needs to experiment with special programs. It is in this fashion that labor education will expand and will attract new participants, first to classes and programs, then into further union activity and leadership.

LAWRENCE ROGIN

About twenty years ago, in a review of *Labor Education outside the Unions*, by Alice Cook and Agnes Douty, I made the following comment:

The authors are two of a large number of women whose contribution to labor education has been welcomed by American unions over the years, in contrast to the general lack of opportunity for women in other aspects of union staff work. Has this been possible because unions have regarded education as unimportant, or so important that competence was needed wherever it could be found?

At that time the answer to the question was quite clear. Today the situation has improved somewhat, both in the attitudes of unionists toward education and in the opportunities for women within unions. But in both directions there is still a long way to go.

**APPENDIX
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