Sisterhood and Solidarity

Kornbluh, Joyce L., Frederickson, Mary

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Kornbluh, Joyce L. and Mary Frederickson.

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Chapter 10

Memories of a Movement:
A Conversation

Lyn Goldfarb

Cook

Gilmore

Rogin

Peterson
In its sixty-year history, the movement for workers' education for women workers has become a tradition, carried on from generation to generation. The residential schools for women workers, remarkable in their clarity of vision and purpose, ideological framework, and understanding of material and social conditions, have become the foundation and force behind many developments in labor education today. The early residential schools became models for the schools for women workers that emerged forty years later, when it became clear that women workers still desired programs and schools designed for their particular concerns.

Despite their short history, in the Twenties and Thirties, the residential schools for women workers lived on in the spirit and activities of the students and staff who attended and taught at these programs. As activists in the labor movement, in labor education, and in government and community organizations and agencies, they continued their work in ways that kept the spirit and philosophy of their labor education experience alive.

As a labor educator coming of age in the 1970s, I was profoundly influenced by the women and men who shaped a movement that gave working women the tools to break through many barriers and gain power and justice in their own right. Labor education is not just a concept on paper, but is a reality kept alive by their stories and the vibrancy of their commitment and accomplishments.

Through oral histories and the continued visibility of those former participants in the early programs for women workers, I have learned from their voices, their experiences, and their memories. In many ways, the schools and their teachings, as well as the ideology and methodologies on which they were based, seem as real to me fifty years later.

As a graduate student with a commitment to feminism and the labor movement, I met Marguerite Gilmore, then working at the U.S. Department of Labor's Women's Bureau, who introduced me to Hilda Smith. Meeting Hilda—Jane, as she is often called—was a turning point in my life. During the hours of oral history interviews I conducted with her, she shared her life with me—her visions, her ideas, and her belief in the profound effect that education could have on women workers. It was a transforming experience for me. Labor education became the vehicle for my own work.

These next few pages are interviews with four pioneers in
the early workers' education movement: Alice Cook, Esther Peterson, Marguerite Gilmore, and Larry Rogin. Their work spanned the breadth of labor education programs and projects, and their interviews reflect a cumulative experience. They were not interviewed in one setting, yet their four interviews are interwoven to form a complete story.

Alice Hanson Cook, a graduate of Northwestern University, did graduate work at the University of Frankfurt-am-Main in Germany. She started teaching at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in 1928 and continued to teach there and at other residential programs for women and men workers for the next thirty years. Serving on the executive board of the YWCA, and as staff for the Industrial Department of the YWCA in Chicago and Philadelphia, she planned classes and programs for working women. She is currently Professor Emeritus at the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University.

Esther Peterson, the recreation director at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in the early 1930's, has taught courses and organized for several unions: the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. She served as a labor lobbyist in Washington, D.C. for several international unions and for the AFL-CIO. In 1960, she became director of the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor and became the executive director for President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, which Eleanor Roosevelt chaired. She served as Consumer Affairs Advisor in presidential administrations from Johnson to Carter and had a seven-year tenure as Consumer Affairs Director for the Giant Food Corporation. She continues to work in related fields.

Marguerite Gilmore began her work in labor education in 1929 at the Vineyard Shores School for Women Workers as secretary, tutor, and teacher of recreation and music. She directed the Chicago workers' education activities under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Works Progress Administration, trained unemployed teachers as part of these New Deal programs, and, during the past thirty years, worked for the War Labor Board, the Wage Stabilization Board and the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor.

Although Larry Rogin did not teach at any of the residential programs for women work-
ers, he remained close to those activities through his long-term involvement with workers' education. An instructor at the Brookwood Labor College from 1935 to 1937, he has been active in labor education for almost half a century. He directed education programs for the American Federation of Hosiery Workers and for the Textile Workers' Union of America. Rogin headed the AFL-CIO national Education Department from 1960 to 1967 and is currently a program coordinator at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies.

What did the experience mean to the women who attended the residential schools for women workers? What was its impact?

LARRY:
The early years were years in which the labor movement was weak and declining. The women's schools were schools both for the development of the individual and for the broadening and interpreting of her experience. Most women workers, except in the few industries where unions existed (most obviously, the garment industry), were unorganized. So the women's schools had a mix of organized and unorganized women workers, some women who had no experience or knowledge about unions at all, and a good many who had been through pretty harrowing experiences and efforts to organize. The women, naturally, came away [from the residential schools] more union-minded. The ones that weren't union-minded were influenced very much by the activists who came from unionized industries.

MARGUERITE:
It enlarged their horizons to know what was going on, to understand why there was this great Depression and what they could do about it when they got back [from the schools]. And I think that was what was important. When they found out what needed to be done, they prepared themselves to do something about it when they went back. They just didn't sit back; they wanted to do something about it.

ALICE:
For many of the women, it was the high point of their whole lives. It put them in touch with ideas, books, and people whom they otherwise would never have met, not only the teachers but other working women from all over the country.

ESTHER:
In the first place, it gave the women techniques, which was important, techniques of speaking and organizing. It gave them an understanding of the
labor movement. We had to be so careful in recruiting stu-
dents. They would think, "Oh, it will help me get a better
job." No, but it will help you to understand your job. And that
was the rough part because many of them just wanted to
improve their lot. But, you see, this was a training ground for
these women to develop leadership. I think they needed that
opportunity. We had mock meetings, for example. They
said that they would never dare to stand up in union meetings
... in front of all the men. But we developed them. We'd put
on plays. They'd take parts; they played that they were
men. They experienced the kind of heckling they would
get. They took the parts of the boss, the citizens. We call it
roleplay. The whole point was to be practical ... where you
are today, not some theoretical something down the pike. This
brings it all back to me. It was such a wonderful experience.
Terrific. When I think of the women who developed out of
those schools, they became ter-
rific trade union leaders, it's
fantastic. It's something that
we have lacked until CLUW
came along. Those programs
developed a real source of lead-
ernesship.

ALICE:
And usually, during the last
week of the school, we really
tried to link these women back
into their communities by get-
ting them to think about where
they could work. If there was
not a union, what kinds of
organizations existed where
they could be active. Was there
a Consumers' League, a
YWCA? What was going on in
the churches, and so on. Many
of these women did become ac-
tive. And when unions became
more widespread, many of
these women went into posi-
tions as activists, and as of-
ficials.

Looking back at these programs,
were these schools feminist?
Were they thought of as feminist
at the time? In retrospect, what
do you think?

LARRY:
These early workers' education
activities were very close in
time to the climax of the femi-
nist movement, which was the
campaign for the women's suf-
frage amendment. The schools
for women workers started with
that as a background. There
was this success story. The
programs for women workers
were also related to the
Women's Trade Union League,
which was feminist, and to the
Industrial Department of the
YWCA. And so, yes, I'd say
they were [feminist-oriented]. I
don't know if we ever thought
about it that way at the time.
It's hard to go back and try to
recreate what a feeling was. If what you mean by feminist is getting an understanding of the problems of women and giving them a decent place in society, [the programs] were feminist.

ESTHER:
I didn’t think of it as feminist. We didn’t think in those terms in those days. I didn’t, anyway. Maybe others did, but I didn’t. But I remember the women’s focus. I know you’ve heard this song; I think it’s the first working girls’ liberation song. I helped write the music, and Fannia Cohn wrote the words. I worked so hard on it.

(singing)

In the black of the winter in 1909,
When we fought and bled on the picket line;
We showed the world that women could fight,
And we rose and won with women’s might.
Hail the waistmakers of 1909,
Taking a stand on the picket line,
Breaking the power of those who reign,
Pointing the way, smashing the chain,
And we gave new courage to the men
Who carried on in 1910.
(I love that)
And shoulder to shoulder,
We will win through the ILGWU

I think it’s terrific. It’s 1910, and the women did it. I will never forget the story of the strike of 1909–1910 as long as I live. Great strong feminists were they. But I didn’t think of them as feminists. I just thought of them as strong women.

MARGUERITE:
With my interpretation of feminist, I wouldn’t think so. They were concerned about things that women were concerned about but it was not a separatist school. Their husbands came up sometimes from New York City, came for weekends to Vineyard Shores. There was certainly not anything in the teaching that was just feminism . . . that came along later. The programs were about their status and stature as women workers.

ALICE:
I think they saw the possibility of what their rights could be. And, in this whole atmosphere, feminist issues, and feminist assertiveness had its effect. And the effect on trade union women was to make them respond to what really, in my view, was a new kind of institution. And it focused not simply on remedial education . . . but training women to play a really influential role in an important social institution—the labor union.
LARRY:
The schools for women workers were special because of one very important reason: they were women’s schools and the staffs were women. Not entirely, but the majority of teachers were women. So there was a concern for women as part of society, women as people. They were free to express themselves in every way; they didn’t have to be afraid if they talked about certain things that some man would come in and tell them what to do, or would be critical. The programs were unusual in this regard.

Why do you feel the schools were successful?

ALICE:
In eight weeks, one can do a great deal. It is possible to raise difficult and controversial problems and have time to work them through. We tried not to shy away from difficult problems. One issue was the race question, which at that time had not been faced up to in this country. Later, when I was working at the Southern Summer School for Women Workers, we were not allowed to have black women because the laws of the state forbade the integration in any way in the same institution of white and black persons.

By the end of the third week of the school, even if the issue had not come up, we felt that we as the faculty must raise the question of race relations in the South. We needed at least three weeks to work this issue through so that we could arrive at some understanding of what the problems are, and how white women could deal with these issues with their fellow workers. That length of time was very important to us. And I think it became an intense experience for the women who were involved in the schools, certainly for us as teachers. It did really have the effect of changing lives, changing the directions of life for those who participated in the programs.

LARRY:
The longer-term school was a much more effective device but I don’t know how you could accomplish it now because of cost. In the old days, if you had a job, you never had seniority. There were no union contracts, so if you went away for six or eight weeks, either you got a leave, or you got another job in the same industry, or you went back to your old job. Nowadays, going away for six or more weeks can cause all kinds of problems unless your union sponsors you.

ESTHER:
It was interesting to me, this tremendously strong, democratic process that Hilda Smith
insisted on: the faculty having a say and the students having a say. Having grown up in a more authoritarian back­ground, I couldn’t see how you could suddenly give power to people like that. And we did have problems with it. It was during the roughness of work­ing through the democratic pro­cess that we decided to proceed with supporting the Seabrook strike, and events like that. I think that probably I, for one, didn’t have the judgment and the maturity at that time to make some of those decisions. But, majority ruled out—in one way it was good and another way it was bad, but on the whole I think it was good.

You really have to begin to have faith and trust in people. It was a great experience for the young women to think that they had a say in shaping the schools’ policies. I think it was rough, but it worked.

MARGUERITE:
The teachers were excellent. They didn’t come to the schools to teach, or they weren’t accepted unless they were very interested in helping people grow. We had good faculty at the summer schools. They were real people in themselves, not just teachers, but people who had a feeling of really being part of the world as they helped the students feel part of the world. They were not pessi­mists. They were helping to en­large the vision of the women to see what kind of a world it was and what they could do to even make it better.

It was informal. The classes were not so large, and they were able to communicate indi­vidually, particularly in the residential schools like Bryn Mawr or Vineyard Shores. You’d have more time; you’d see more people. Everybody was working towards a common goal, and the faculty met almost daily. If there was a problem with one person or another, they could deal with that problem and help them get over it. It was an extraordi­nary educational experience.

LARRY:
The programs then were not in­stitutionalized; people were not being trained to fit into some­thing. If you take our union education now, we train people to fit into unions, and, to some extent, that is true in the women’s schools and programs today. But the schools and programs we are talking about in the early period, existed when unions didn’t amount to much in the society and the people who wanted to build un­ions were exploring changes in the structure, changes in the philosophy of the labor move­ment. I think this meant that they were much more open.

If you think of the experience
of six weeks of very close association with other concerned women and faculty, I think it must have been a remarkable experience for all of them. It was the living together, the working together on projects, and the evenings together—the whole thing had a tremendous impact.

Was there a special need for women's schools in the Twenties and Thirties? Do the same needs exist today?

ALICE:
I think it is a different need. Back in the Twenties, the need was, to a great extent, that of immigrant women who never had education in this country and were doubly or triply handicapped for that reason. Many of the men in the labor movement were also immigrants. However, I think with the rise of the women's movement in this country, it became apparent that this important social institution, the unions, were not responding with equality to the special needs of women.

MARGUERITE:
Today life has changed again. Women have more freedom but they need a lot more too. Unions are important, but they're more a part of the country. I think that women's rights, equal rights, are not yet a part of the country. This is the emphasis that must be taken. I think some of the methods that were used then, when the faculty really tried to understand the problems of the workers, was the key.

ALICE:
Thanks to the recent equality legislation, to the existence of the Status of Women Commission, the work of the Women's Bureau, union women see the possibility of what their rights can be. And in a sense, this whole feminist atmosphere . . . has had its effect. The effect on trade union women is to make them respond to what, in my view, is a new kind of institution. Labor education for women workers today is training women to play a really influential role in an important social institution.

LARRY:
I think I'm probably in a minority among men in the labor movement in this. I think that the society, the situations, and the unions haven't changed enough as yet. . . . I see a role for women's schools concentrating on training for skills and building support systems. . . . I don't think that it's the only education that is needed but I think it is still very useful. The role models are needed. There aren't enough role models as yet of women in unions, in administrative, key positions. I
really feel that the need isn't over.

What contributions did the women's schools make to the field of adult education?

LARRY:
The schools for women workers, even more than union education in general, approached people through their jobs and through their institutions. While the problems that women face in society were part of the focus, what stands out was the development of educational methods that came out of the women's schools. There was a heavy focus on teaching methods that would be effective. I think that was because of a different view of how people developed. A lot of that came from the YWCA where the industrial secretaries were basically group workers, not teachers.

I think that there's still more attention in the women's schools and programs today on teaching methods than there is in the general labor education field. It is very interesting that the early schools for women workers were the sources of most of our literature on teaching methods. You don't see anything coming out now that deals with the kinds of teaching problems that the articles and pamphlets addressed at that earlier time.

ESTHER:
I think that it had a very great impact because we were really experimental in method. And that's where Hilda Smith was absolutely magnificent. I don't think that anyone has really analyzed the contributions that we made in the methods of teaching. I'll never forget sitting down with Jane [Hilda Smith] and having her explain that what we had to do was to have the students see the whole world and where they fit into it. This was important. These were all new concepts to me; an old gym teacher was what I was. She had the vision and I don't think there's been anything else like it.

We started the use of "role play." We started that back in the Twenties and Thirties long before there was anything else like it. I'd go to conferences later and say, "My word, that was figured out at the Bryn Mawr Summer School." I had to laugh at role playing. We never had a title for it. We'd just ask, "What was it like when the cop did this?" "What was it like when the boss said these things?" We acted out the whole thing . . . . a living newspaper.

We didn't have textbooks. It was the experiences that were our textbooks. In recruiting students, the only things that they needed to be able to do was read and write. The pro-
gram was all built out of their lives and it began with who they are and where they are. I think that is a lesson I learned there that helped me all through my life. If I am studying unemployment, I go to the unemployment office and talk to the people. You have a user concept. You don’t start way up there and come down. I learned that at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers.

ALICE:
I think that what we used to call a discussion method, which Eleanor Coit so strongly advocated, has become more an accepted means of teaching in the universities than it was at the time the women’s schools for women workers were pioneering in that field. Certainly in the WPA days, the attempt to train teachers . . . unemployed public school teachers, to teach labor education, was an effort to bring them from the textbooks and lectures into dealing with real problems, and drawing materials for the future.

What was the impact of the early schools for women workers on the field of labor education?

ALICE:
Hilda Smith went from Bryn Mawr and work with the summer schools to Washington, D.C., very early in the Roosevelt administration, after the WPA was established by the government as a means of providing employment. She went to work in that program and visualized that workers’ education could be nationwide, and could reach unemployed workers through training unemployed teachers.

An astonishing number of states had these programs. It was the result of these programs, I think, that state universities were ready to pick up workers’ education programs when that time came. All of these things, I think, grew directly out of the WPA and constituted a kind of transition from the summer schools for women workers to the university labor education programs.

LARRY:
I think there is a similarity in giving confidence to people. There is a concern for their problems, an awareness of the difficulties. And there’s some training to help them solve these problems.

What are some of the differences between that early period in workers’ education and the activities in the field today?

ALICE:
A difference is the very high use today of university-trained people as teachers, and the
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movement into the universities as the major educational resource for these schools. The early schools were conducted under independent auspices but they were also often held at college locations and brought in university teachers.

A much more vocationally-oriented training goes on in most of the schools for women today. The "how to" courses, the bread and butter courses, compare with the attempts of the schools in the early years to provide a background with considerably more depth on the general subjects: economics, history, literature, even psychology. Now that kind of teaching does not often exist today and it couldn't work very well because the courses today are so much shorter.

Did the women's schools of those years have any impact on the labor movement?

MARGUERITE: Yes, I think the schools had an impact on the labor movement. In the first few years, there weren't many union people involved. There were women from the ILGWU and from some of the other unions. In 1929, when I was just coming into the field, that's when unions were just coming in, and the schools had a great deal of influence on them. The labor movement wasn't that aware of women coming into the work force, so the schools took the lead in helping unions recognize women. The unions were invited in and a comraderie began to exist between them and it gave the young women new ideas and I think it gave the unions an idea of how women could help.

LARRY: Did it impact on the labor movement? No, because during this period and also during the beginnings of the big growth of the labor movement in the Thirties, the role of women was submerged rather than expanded. If you take the unions in the period in which I first got involved with unions, you saw the unions struggling. There was still some role for women, but they were gradually forced out of it . . . when the unions grew, with a few exceptions.

But if you look at the unions in the textile industry, there were more women. When the Textile Workers Organizing Committee was set up, we had, I guess, two women on the executive board. It soon became one, and then none. And the same thing was true in the garment unions. There were many more women in the garment unions in the Twenties but they tended to be pushed aside. Before institutions became established and viable, there was much more room for
women in them than afterwards.

ESTHER:
I don't think the labor movement thought of these programs as a way of women gaining movement. I don't think they cared about it at that time. I think they saw these activities as an educational force. At the same time that Hilda Smith was working to expand labor education services, the trade unionists began to do far more in education. We all began to work on a national labor extension services bill, that Hilda worked on so hard, to try to get support for labor education.

There were a lot of things going on and I think the labor movement awakened to the fact that they had to have schools for their members and perform other educational activities. The summer schools began to admit men and the schools became not just for women. I think it affected the way the labor movement looked at these programs.

What were the contributions of middle-class women?

LARRY:
The people who started the women's schools did not come out of a trade union background. While some of the staff in the women's schools had some background in labor problems or in organizing and working with unions, a large number did not have that experience and tended to get involved with the unions as through their experiences in the summer schools. It required a real concern for many of these middle-class women. Many stayed in and around the labor movement and made their careers that way; others stayed in labor education.

You need to look at the decline of the women's schools coming in a period when they couldn't raise the money to keep them going. It needed little money to keep the institutions going in the early days but then it began to take more money. I look at the Brookwood [Labor School] experience. I don't know if it was the same experience for the women's schools but I think it reflects part of it. Money was contributed to Brookwood, much of it coming from outside the labor movement. As long as there was no strong union movement challenging the society, when workers were downtrodden and didn't have much hope, you could raise money from outside sources.

ESTHER:
You see, we raised the money for all these scholarships at meetings and teas. I went to so many teas raising money to get
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scholarships. The money that was raised there came mostly from the upper class. I think that it was a little bit of the "lady bountiful" image, helping the poor working girl who is at the factory. I can remember going to those [fund-raising] meetings and talking about these bright young women who were just hungry to learn. But then, of course, the husbands of some of these [wealthy] women got angry because we were teaching the young women workers about trade unions.

Marguerite:
A number of these wealthy women, a lot of whom had been active with the Women's Trade Union League, and carried on in that tradition, they might not have known the deep principles of the schools but they thought it was a wonderful idea and they supported it. Middle- and upper-class women would have meetings and make contributions to the schools. Bryn Mawr alumni in many cities set up committees to raise funds and select women to attend the school. A lot of people were supporting the schools and that's why in 1933, during the Great Depression, the schools went under because they couldn't afford to contribute any more. They'd give teas and bridge parties to raise funds. In many cases, they didn't understand the principles of unions but they thought these are poor girls, working hard, who need to have a break and get to know more about the world. It was a desire to help other women look at the world and give more to the world.

How did the change to including men in the programs affect the women's schools?

Alice:
The change came with the massive organizing of tens of thousands of people who had never been organized before. I think there was a real pressure then to bring men into the schools because they actually needed this education. But I think that the real pressure came from the needs of the unions and the fact that the schools themselves were changing.

I was at the Southern Summer School for Women Workers when it changed over to include men and we had only three or four men there the first summer. It was still predominantly a women's school; there were women faculty and most of the students were women. I don't think we felt any change in emphasis or curriculum at that point. When the Bryn Mawr school changed, it was after it had moved to Hudson Shore. I went back in 1942 and by that time, it was accepted that we have coeducational schools. I don't remember thinking that
it was continuous with the old Bryn Mawr Summer School [for Women Workers]. It became a different school, and not just because men were there. There were shorter sessions. There was a closer link to reality in teaching about organizational problems, collective bargaining problems, and labor law. I think there was a conscious decision to change from a more humanities-based program to "how to" classes.

By then, evening classes in the localities were much more available, thanks to the WPA programs and the labor colleges in the big cities. When I look back and when I did some research on what was actually taught at those schools, I found that they were very practically oriented. They taught parliamentary procedure, public speaking. The effort was to offer trade unionists the chance to express themselves with some coherence on their feet and to be able to think through problems and present them with some logic.

How did the experience of teaching at the schools for women workers affect you personally and professionally?

ESTHER: Personally, along with other experiences of the period, it changed my life completely. It gave me a whole new direction. I left my old profession completely and wanted to throw my lot with the labor movement. Here I was out of college, graduated with honors, and I didn’t know a thing about the labor movement. I just didn’t understand the world. I became converted to the trade union movement at that time as the avenue for accomplishing the things that I believed in. I became converted.

Politically, it did mean a lot to me. I was the recreation director at the Bryn Mawr school and of course I went to all the classes. The thing that I did that was creative was to translate their economics classes into rhythm and to dance and to drama. I am told it was a terrific original method which added to the teaching of economics and labor history.

ALICE: Beginning with my teaching at Commonwealth College, these programs gave me an exposure to the ways of thinking of working-class men and women and it certainly shaped my professional interests. When I had the opportunity to go abroad to do my graduate work, I chose to do my dissertation on labor education. And while I never got my graduate degree because Hitler interfered with that, I went through the process and thought of myself from
that point onward as a professional labor educator. I began then to have the interest that has been consistent ever since of comparing this country with Europe, my interest in comparative labor movements, particularly in labor education.

My experience with the labor movement and then in Germany—all that experience became part of a single role that made it possible for me to move right into an academic setting [at Cornell] and I was also active in the extension work at Cornell, teaching classes to trade unionists and doing research on labor unions.

MARGUERITE:
I had gone to the YWCA camps for a number of years where I was a counselor. And the YWCA told me about the Carhart Overall girls' strike, what troubles they were having and that it would be interesting if some of us just went over to chat with the strikers. That was kind of a start for me. My family was startled at the time. I took economics and labor problems at Wheaton College and got more and more interested. Ernestine Friedmann was teaching there and she took me once a week to the Boston Labor College where she was teaching economics and current events in the evenings to working people and she used me to help tutor them. At Wheaton, we also set up an arrangement with the young women at the Bedford Textile Mills there and we'd have regular meetings.

Ernestine asked if I wanted to be on the staff of the Vineyard Shores School which I certainly did. After being there several years, when that school closed down, I got a fellowship from the University of Chicago to study labor problems. And that really affected my career. The more I read and the more I heard about labor problems, the difficulties workers had getting decent wages and working conditions and how much they were being cheated out of the good things in life, it just sent my life in those directions.

These women and men—the pioneers of labor education—have had a profound effect on the development of contemporary labor education programs. Today, as in the past, schools for women workers address concerns and build skills, confidence and leadership unparalleled in any other kind of program. In these programs, women of different unions, generations, racial and ethnic backgrounds understand common experiences and shared differences.

Meeting and working with
these pioneers has been a rare opportunity to learn history from the people who lived it. In sharing their experiences with us, they provide a new generation of worker-educators the opportunity to carry this proud tradition forward. And thus we keep the spirit and soul of the movement alive.