CHAPTER 2

Promoting and Recruiting: Reaching the Target Audience

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Programs for and about union women require special recruiting and promotion for two important reasons: first, because women are underrepresented in conventional labor education classes, but do attend classes when recruited or when programs are tailored to their needs; and second, because programs for and about union women, unlike basic tool courses such as steward training, are not commonly understood or requested by union groups. When they are promoted and taught, however, they are often more useful for developing women leaders than tool courses.

Women’s Participation in Labor Education Programs

Most labor education programs collect statistics, but few analyze them for the sex distribution of students served. When they do, they find that women make up a smaller proportion of labor education classes than they do of the labor force (where they are 43 percent) or of the labor movement (where they are 27 percent). A 1974 survey of one state university’s four labor education centers included 20 percent female students.¹ In a three-state university labor education program consisting of a series of courses

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taught over several years, less than 15 percent of the 674 graduates were women.  

Women are underrepresented in labor education programs because they are underrepresented in the leadership; this means they are not part of the union's inside communication network. They do not hear about some programs and may not be encouraged to attend others, especially those that are considered part of the union reward structure. Being outside this network can also mean not being able to afford to go. Fees may be so high that only the person whose union pays her way can go, and if the union is sending only its officers, for example, most women will be excluded. Lost time is even more important than fees in assessing the cost of attending programs. Few women can afford to take time off from work, and most unions pay lost time only for leaders. Therefore, women are even less visible in those programs that involve time away from work.

Women also are underrepresented because most programs are convenient only to union members who have no household obligations. The majority of working women find it difficult to get home from work, make dinner, clean up, and get to an evening class. Many of these women have child care problems as well. Thirty-eight percent of the mothers of preschoolers are employed, and child care money often does not stretch to extra hours for union education programs.

Going home alone after late-night classes presents another problem, both for women in urban areas and for those who work in small towns and may live miles from their jobs and the union hall or university. In certain areas, even if a woman doesn't worry for herself, other people worry for her; some local union officers still hold to the belief that a woman should not be sent to out-of-town schools or meetings by herself. A woman who asks to be sent is told, "We would like to send you, but for your own sake, we can't send you alone."

The problems that lead to women's low attendance at programs can be summarized, then, in terms of women's exclusion from the leadership in many unions, their family obligations, and traditional restrictions on their movement. Fortunately, a number of programs and unions are experimenting with answers to these problems.

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Recruiting Solutions to Low Attendance by Women

Where communications in the union are restricted, special kinds of recruiting must be developed. These are the same techniques used when rank-and-file members in general are the target, but they are especially geared to reaching women.

For conferences and summer schools, very effective outreach can be done through union newspapers and newsletters, especially if the leadership wants to overcome the exclusionary effects of normal recruiting. When unions have printed open invitations to members in statewide union papers, they have been enthusiastic about the response from applicants who would never have turned up through ordinary channels.

Even national union papers help. In Pennsylvania, union women read about a Michigan women's program in a U.A.W. paper, wrote to Michigan, and were redirected to our programs.

For specific union audiences, some non-union publications are helpful. For example, flight attendants trying to start a women's program mentioned their plans in Ms. magazine and got inquiries from flight attendants all around the country. This is not to suggest that most union women in small-town America read Ms., but rather that imagination can produce valuable new ideas for outreach.

In the “old days,” labor educators publicized programs in places that are still useful in reaching women: bulletin boards in neighborhood churches, trailer parks, and laundromats. That is not to overlook publicity in fast food outlets, carryouts and pizza parlors, restrooms and lounges at work, and on bulletin boards at the supermarket. In a lot more places than West Virginia and Kentucky, the right radio station for announcements is the country music station.

Often, local groups undertake good programs that they inadvertently sabotage by bad recruiting. The good labor educator avoids this problem by briefing local education committees on publicity techniques, reinforcing this with a “how-to” flier on effective recruiting.

Program fees or lost time pay may not sound like a recruiting problem, but effective publicity must be coupled with ways to finance women in programs once they have learned that the programs are available. Pilot programs for union women, such as Cornell's Trade Union Women's Studies, which was funded by a Ford Foundation grant, built in scholarship money. The good results encouraged planners of other working women's programs to aim for low fees even in unsubsidized programs. Low fees enable union women without political clout to pay their own way or to convince the union that fees are reasonable. Lost time calls for other
Promoting and Recruiting

solutions. Some institutions schedule women's programs so that a minimum of lost time is involved: resident conferences may be planned for an extended weekend rather than the traditional Monday through Friday.

These suggestions are made on the assumption that women may not get much union help in seeking special education, and for the time being that is a realistic assumption; but it is important to work toward getting union support for women's programs. This is discussed in the section on promotion, below.

How should planners accommodate problems caused by family obligations or travel restrictions? Program planners need flexibility: in one community, perhaps, classes should start at eight rather than seven, to help women who must clean up after dinner, or classes should be held immediately after work, to avoid problems of late-night urban transportation or distances between work, home, and union classes. In some locales, avoiding week nights entirely and concentrating on Saturday sessions is the solution.

Recently, labor educators have begun to include child care in some programs. Where this is available, recruiting literature should mention it. Thirty years ago, the Y.W.C.A. and similar groups made memorable contributions to the education of homebound mothers by running children's programs concurrently with adult programs. A similarly imaginative approach to reach today's working mothers may be necessary.

Many unions believe that they best serve the needs of their women members by refusing to send any woman to an out-of-town program by herself. While this problem undoubtedly will resolve itself as society comes to accept women's independence, in the meantime unions could be urged to send two women to a program. Continuing to keep program costs low can facilitate this.

Promoting Women's Programs

To offer or support a program for its women members, leaders of a union must be convinced of the need for the program, or of its value and interest to their membership. The advantage to unions in promoting programs for or about union women is that women's programs strengthen the union itself by increasing the skills and interest of women members.

Unions must underwrite the cost for their members to participate in programs for or about union women, sponsored by groups of unions or by universities, and encourage this participation. Labor educators can urge unions to sponsor women members in classes, conferences, and institutes, as one way to give recognition and reinforcement to people who are accustomed to receiving little of either. Women traditionally serve the union
FRIEDA SCHOENBERG ROZEN

without reward and are seldom elected to high office or sent to national conventions. Sending women to education programs, even when lost time is involved, is a relatively inexpensive way to reward them and encourage them to continue in their union service. This direct appeal has worked successfully with a number of union leaders.

Some union leaders, recognizing a pattern of exclusion of women, are trying to remedy it by sponsoring their own special programs and conferences directed at their female members. These have been local, statewide, regional, or national meetings that examine women's issues. The results have been rewarding for the unions, particularly in terms of developing new activists and getting out the message that the unions know there is a problem. This approach can be suggested to other unions. Many union leaders are aware of the rising discontent among women members, and are prepared to build on the successful experiments of other unions.

In some unions there have been no women's programs only because no one thought of them. In other places, the barriers are greater. Labor educators are familiar with leaders who perceive any special discussion of union women as a symptom of "dual unionism" or as an outsider's attempt to disrupt the labor movement. Here the proponents of women's programs will have to use each available opportunity to make the point that these programs are intended to strengthen the union, not divide it.

In an example of such an opportunity, a union group may have been forced by actions brought under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to become an advocate for its women members. Perhaps the unionized plants in the area previously did not hire women on the shop floor, but under affirmative action pressure, the company has hired some women. Latent hostility to the employment of women in jobs that formerly were held only by men erupts in the union and is reflected in area newspapers. The union finds itself having to deal with conflicting pressures. At this point, the alert labor educator suggests that a program of information on the equal rights laws and on today's women workers is a positive way to deal with the furor. Examination of the facts opens the way to reevaluation, and possibly to acceptance, however reluctant. There are possible pitfalls in the situation, but it could provide the opportunity to prove the value of this kind of programming, if it is planned with great sensitivity. In many labor communities, picking up on a cue like this would be more effective than urging programs tailored to reach women members in particular. Here the programs would be about, rather than for, women workers.

Another approach to unions that resist programs about women workers is through their need to organize the unorganized. As the female proportion
Promoting and Recruiting

of the labor force expands, and as more unions move to organize in clerical, white-collar, and service sectors, unions recognize that their new constituencies are female. Union staffs, officers, and members will need to examine more of the issues relating to these women workers. They will want to take a new look at blue-collar women as well, as some of them move into skilled jobs. As unions formulate plans for future organizing, educators may find them more receptive to programs about women workers.

A favorite subject of union leaders is how to increase participation in the union. Here is the opportunity to suggest that involvement can be increased by tapping the union's female membership, looking at its problems and encouraging women to aspire to leadership. This argument will be even more on target in the future as women make up a larger proportion of union membership. Unions will have to look to women for the volunteer leaders and paid staff so necessary to their survival.

These examples are used to make the point that, even with unions unused to or uneasy about sponsoring women’s programs the case can be made that “there is something in it for you.” That is, we promote programs for exactly the same reasons and in the same ways as we promote all labor education: it helps build effective unions and makes workers competent to participate in them. As people see education’s relevance to their lives, they are drawn to it and get more from it. For those of us who have met with discouragement when urging programs about women, possibly in the wrong context, it is important to keep a variety of approaches in mind—another tack might work, this time may be better than last time. Of course, this problem is not limited to programs for or about women!

Often the labor educator can move toward programs for—away from programs about—women. Part of the job of promotion is to make a good case for women’s classes. Union leaders and even some labor educators may not be convinced of the need for education programs that are designed to bring women together for leadership training and to discuss issues of special concern to them. It is useful to think back to the debates about the need for black studies programs and black students' need to develop an outreach to each other. The campus argument also raged over women's studies and offering classes that appealed almost exclusively to women.

A prominent labor educator recalls the same argument a few decades ago over whether unionists should attend labor education classes with management representatives or by themselves. Interestingly, that discussion is new and fresh in Sweden, as labor unions argue over implementation of that country's new labor law and the best way to educate workers to its use: whether in classes with management representatives who
also have to learn about the law, or in separate, segregated worker groups. In the past few years the same discussion has held sway with regard to union women.

Effects of Sex Composition on Learning Groups

Fortunately, there is an accumulating body of research on the effects on groups of their sex composition, which we can use to evaluate our positions. Most of this research examines the behavior of men and women in artificial task groups.

Rubin and Brown looked at over 100 studies of bargaining behavior that included analyses of the sex variable. Although numerous studies found no relationship between sex and bargaining, there was sharp conflict in the findings of the rest: some found that males bargain more cooperatively than females, while others found the opposite. Rubin and Brown reconciled the conflict by pointing out that in these studies, females respond to cues from their fellow bargainers more than males, while males focus on reaching goals or on winning rather than on the responses of their fellow bargainers. This means that women bargain more cooperatively if they get certain interpersonal cues, while men bargain cooperatively if that is an acknowledged goal. For our purposes, the implication is that women are more sensitive to others than men, and may be distracted from seeking success by trying to deal with relationships within the group.

Webber directly studied women's performance in female-majority and female-minority task groups. His subjects were graduate students in management schools. Each of 83 groups spent several months working on case studies. The women were more likely to strive for leadership and to make contributions in female-majority than in female-minority groups. Webber concluded that, to learn and develop skills most effectively, women should be in female-majority situations. “Critics of this recommendation could maintain that it is unrealistic, that women in real organizations will usually find themselves surrounded by males and they should be trained to work with them . . . but the counter argument is that exercising leadership in predominantly female groups while in training is better than exercising no leadership at all in male majority groups. It could build skills and confi-


Promoting and Recruiting
dence that would be helpful later in real organizations.” From these findings it appears that leadership training groups are more useful to many women if they are also women’s groups.

“Self-awareness group” research suggests that women benefit more in single-sex groups when studying sex-role issues (problems relating to the leadership skills women need to move ahead in the union). Carlock and Martin found that mixed-sex group participants are more concerned with relations within the group or class than with analyses of problems they face outside the group itself, for example, on the job or in the union.5 If they are women, they are likely to play more passive roles than they do in single-sex groups.6 In addition, Carlock and Martin conclude that discussion of sex-role issues produces too much stress in mixed-sex groups. Since those are the very issues that women must deal with when training for more active union participation, they need single-sex learning situations in some subject areas.

These studies help us separate those subjects for which women’s classes are important from those for which separate groups might not be necessary. Certainly if we ourselves are convinced of the value of separate groups in selected areas, we can be more successful in promoting them with unions.

Recruiting for Women’s Programs

Recruiting to women’s programs presents some additional special challenges. When a program is for a local area or sponsored by one international, many of the suggestions listed above apply. The union’s commitment to the program is demonstrated by its decision to sponsor it, though back-up in recruiting as well as program planning and execution may well be involved.

When a program involves more than one union—for example, when it is sponsored by a university labor education program, a state labor federation, or a group of unions, universities, or union women’s groups—responsibility for recruiting must be shared and coordinated to reach the maximum number of women, but in a reasonably economical fashion. The target group is scattered, often over a wide geographical area. Some suggestions for this kind of program follow.

1. Try to get official co-sponsorship from organizations whose recruiting help is desired.

5. This confirms Rubin and Brown’s findings.
2. Issue a press release to accompany fliers or other advertising. If possible, the press release should include information that makes it particularly relevant to recipient unions: mention of their members who participated in earlier schools or who will teach in this one, or the number of people from this state who are involved in the planning. Send the release to women’s departments of internationals or state federations, to editors of appropriate union papers, followed with a personal contact wherever possible to help ensure that a story is carried. If the state federation of labor or some union internationals do periodic mailings, they will be willing to include information on the school or program, so you should time your release to coincide with these mailings.

3. Develop a mailing list. Cull names of union women from registration lists of other general conferences and education programs over past years. Request names from local union leaders or educators of women who should be notified. Include names of those who attended women’s programs in the area over the last few years. This list should be put on reproducible labels so that it is easy to use again. One warning: direct mailings to individuals are more effective when publicity about the program also is sent to the union of those women who receive the mailing. Some union officers are uneasy about requests sent to their members until they have received word of the school themselves.

4. Publicize the conference or institute at other programs. The labor education institutions or unions co-sponsoring a school will be holding other programs in the months preceding the school, providing a good place to publicize the women’s school. Often men will tell women in their local about the program, if they hear about it while they themselves are attending a conference they enjoy. Women at one particular conference may want to come to another, or will tell friends and co-workers who couldn’t come this time.

5. Regularize recruiting. The greatest difficulty in recruiting for a multi-sponsor conference is in institutionalizing the procedures. A conference that becomes an annual event is the biggest challenge the first year. It is hard to duplicate that effort a second or third year unless techniques are developed that make the job manageable. Comprehensive notes should be kept of what has to be done. These should be passed on to each year’s chairperson. Mailing lists should call for as little additional typing as possible. Wherever possible, sponsors should create a permanent recruiting committee. One way might be to form a women’s committee in each state federation of labor. Program participants one year should be recruiting assistants the next. No matter how successfully procedures are institution-
Promoting and Recruiting

alized, coordinating responsibility must be assumed by caring individuals—most often the labor educators who initiate and staff such schools or programs.

The growing importance of women's programs, and the excitement that comes from watching women move from participating in them to greater and more effective involvement in their unions, is the surest guarantee of continuity. Special programs to train and advance union women are becoming a recognized component of labor education.

The best techniques for recruiting and promoting education programs are also the best for recruiting to women's programs. What is needed is extra imagination, special sensitivity, and a great deal of enthusiasm!