Labor Education for Women Workers

Wertheimer, Barbara Mayer

Published by Temple University Press

Wertheimer, Barbara Mayer.  
Labor Education for Women Workers.  

For additional information about this book  
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60367

For content related to this chapter  
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2152640

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Well-groomed and smiling, the flight attendant of the 1950s and early 1960s played a traditional woman's role. Hers was one of the glamour careers for women, usually terminated by marriage after two or three years. Only a few airlines used men as stewards or pursers, largely on overseas flights. Behind the glamour lay rigorous training and close supervision by the airlines' management, who watched hairlines (above the collar), checked fingernail polish, and held regular weigh-ins. Warnings were issued for passenger complaints, financial problems, poor grooming, or other "unbecoming" conduct. Pilots kept a close watch on their "girls"—expecting deference and admiration both on the plane and off.

Then came Betty Friedan with *The Feminine Mystique*, and the civil rights laws of 1963 (Equal Pay) and 1964 (Title VII). The revolution in women's lives and women's expectations had begun.

In the airlines, the out-at-age-32 rule was the first to go, then the no-marriage and the no-babies rules. As a result, flight attendants began to see their job as a lifetime career—they stayed at work, baby or no. Seniority went up. In one major airline with 6,000 flight attendants, the average seniority rose from 18 months in 1968 to 9 years in 1978. As years of flying rose, the glamour wore thin for many flight attendants, who began to voice dissatisfaction with the role the airlines assigned them ("We move our tail for you"), with their wages and working conditions, and with their union contracts. They also began to ask for a greater role in union activities and for an equal voice in key decisions affecting them.

Most flight attendants had been organized into labor unions during the 1940s and 1950s, mainly in the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA). In recent years, some flight attendants have gone to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and a number of
Training Rank and File Leaders: A Case Study

other groups have founded independent associations. In 1973, ALPA flight attendants worked out a new status with their parent union and became an ALPA affiliate called the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA). In all of these unions, new thinking among flight attendants has brought continuing unrest and change.

Like many women, flight attendants now feel both able and anxious to "run the show" in their unions. They believe that for too long key activities were left largely in the hands of union staff, who were not flight attendants and who were male. In almost all flight attendant groups today there is "feminist" momentum, with feminists increasingly active in leadership roles.

These women realize, however, that active members and leaders need training—in negotiating, grievance handling, and union administration. In recent years, a number of flight attendant groups have devoted considerable time and money to training programs that build these union skills and increase their understanding of unionism. Most of the training programs for flight attendants in the last six years have been conducted either by the Extension Division of the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (Cornell University) or by the George Meany Center for Labor Studies. These two institutions have developed quite different programs, because each has worked with flight attendants affiliated with different unions. The Cornell program has worked with flight attendants in the Transport Workers Union and with some of the independents. The George Meany Center has worked for the most part with the Association of Flight Attendants. The AFA programs are described in this chapter.

Training Needs

The Association of Flight Attendants came to the George Meany Center in 1974 to discuss its training needs. Since that time a number of programs have been planned and jointly conducted by the union and the center. These programs have given center staff an unusual opportunity to develop approaches and techniques geared to this largely female group of young unionists, who regard themselves as white-collar professionals.

The impetus for the programs came from the 1973 structural change in ALPA that gave the flight attendants affiliate status with greater independence and responsibility. For years prior to this, ALPA had a Steward and Stewardess Division that covered flight attendants on all airlines with which ALPA had bargaining rights and contracts for flight attendants. Officers of ALPA and the Steward and Stewardess Division were elected. During this time, ALPA offices and ALPA personnel across the nation provided union services to the Steward and Stewardess Division, while
ALPA headquarters supplied contract negotiators to aid bargaining committees, and legal staff for handling the higher steps of the grievance procedure. Overall, this structure gave ALPA personnel considerable responsibility for decisions important to flight attendants, while ALPA also, in effect, was subsidizing union services that flight attendants needed.

In the early 1970s this arrangement began to wear thin. Career flight attendants, with their increased years of service, began to look critically at their contracts. Some of them felt ALPA staff who handled negotiations and grievances did not always understand their problems. Their distrust was reinforced by the fact that ALPA technical staff, hired to work with pilots, were male and had no experience as flight attendants. Furthermore, many feminist-influenced flight attendants wanted more day-to-day control over their union.

At the same time, ALPA was increasingly uneasy over the status of the Steward and Stewardess Division. The jumbo jets that went into service in the late 1960s required many more flight attendants. The Steward and Stewardess Division's membership was growing dramatically. ALPA pilots began to wonder whether flight attendants' votes might someday determine their association's top officers and policies.

In 1973, the Steward and Stewardess Division became the Association of Flight Attendants, an ALPA affiliate. Each group was to elect its own officers. Bargaining rights under the Railway Labor Act were to be transferred from ALPA to AFA. ALPA agreed to subsidize AFA for its first five years. This agreement was not without opposition among AFA members. Flight attendants have relied on pilots for advice and help for many years. Some AFA members felt they would do better to continue under the old arrangements. They saw advantages in ALPA's financial resources and thought that backing in strikes would be more likely. Other flight attendants wanted to leave ALPA entirely and join another union or become an entirely independent association. Thus AFA began its existence without unanimous member commitment.

Flight attendants had seen the need for education early in their union's history, and had conducted programs using ALPA's training and headquarters staff. In 1972, the Steward and Stewardess Board of Directors passed a resolution mandating the training of all new local council chairpersons, but after the structural change in 1973, officers began to think seriously about a broader package of training to help both officers and rank-and-file leaders meet their increased responsibility in bargaining and grievance handling. They also felt that AFA leadership needed to become more union-minded, to understand and identify with the rest of the labor movement.
Training Rank and File Leaders: A Case Study

During 1974 and 1975, AFA officers and George Meany Center staff planned training programs to reach three groups in the union: negotiating committees, local council officers, and those involved in the grievance process at the higher steps. The first of these programs was held in mid-1974. From the start, AFA wanted programs that provided practical skills in specific subject matter (collective bargaining, local union administration, and arbitration techniques). Equally important, they hoped participants would come away feeling proud to be part of the labor movement and of AFA. Thus, like most labor education, the programs had goals in the areas of skills development, providing information, and union building, all of which had to be included in the planning.

A residential program with small groups was the best way to ensure that participants got acquainted with each other and got to know both teachers and AFA officers informally. The Center's campus facility in Silver Spring, Maryland, was ideal for this; AFA officers agreed to live on campus during the program whenever possible. Group size has ranged from fifteen to twenty-five. From the start, AFA has paid lost time and expenses for all participants. Each program has included flight attendants from a wide mix of airlines, a conscious move by the AFA to build unity and loyalty among its member flight attendants, who work on sixteen airlines. This is a concern because each airline tries to instill company loyalty in its flight attendants. By mixing people from different airlines in an environment that encourages discussion of problems and experiences across airlines, the program provides perspective and underscores the need to work through the union.

Programs began in mid-1974. The institutes on bargaining and on grievance arbitration were held until 1977, when they were discontinued because AFA was short of money. The local council training was held regularly, however, with a total of fifteen programs from 1974 to 1980.

In the AFA, each airline's union group selects a Negotiating Committee, usually four flight attendants who are active in the union. Often they have had little previous negotiating experience. The five-day Institute on Collective Bargaining was set up for members of these committees. Training emphasizes bargaining techniques. The first day began with a lecture/discussion on bargaining power and strategy. The group then divided into management and union teams and spent an entire day in mock negotiations. These negotiating sessions were videotaped and played back the next day, with extensive discussion and analysis by instructors. The final part of the program presented material on the airline industry, the Mutual Aid Pact, and specific bargaining provisions of the Railway Labor Act. This program has been conducted four times at the Center.
In usual airlines grievance procedure, grievances not settled at the local level go to a four-person System Board (two union and two management members), and then, if that fails, to a board of three or five persons that has one neutral member. Presentations at these boards are formal and resemble arbitration. The Center's program on grievance arbitration was designed for people who were handling grievances at the top airline level or who were serving on System Boards.

When AFA first started this advanced grievance program, officers considered training experienced flight attendants to become the "presenters" at board hearings, replacing the ALPA and outside lawyers who had been used in the past. AFA also sought to give its union System Board members a better understanding of their responsibilities on the boards, so they could be more effective during hearings and in executive session. As time went on, this latter aim became the major focus, since AFA decided to expand its legal staff to handle most of the presentations.

The five-day Grievance Arbitration/System Board program began with a day-long lecture/discussion by an expert (often an arbitrator) on how to prepare for a hearing. For two and a half days participants, divided into management and labor teams, worked to prepare and present actual cases before actual arbitrators familiar with the airline industry. These presentations were videotaped, played back with the arbitrators present, and the arbitrators made specific comments and suggestions. Class sessions on the role and use of witnesses and the responsibilities of System Board members complete the institute. The center conducted four of these programs.

The program for local council officers has been held more often than the others, in part because this training is mandated by the union. Fifteen local council seminars have been held, some two and a half days in length, some three and a half days.

The heart of AFA's structure is the Local Council (LC) in each domicile base of each airline. These councils, similar to local unions, vary in size; for example, the United LC in Chicago has 2,000 flight attendants, while the Frontier LC in Salt Lake City has fewer than 100. Each council elects a chairperson, vice chairperson, and secretary, and appoints a number of committee chairs. The council is the basic communications link to flight attendants, and provides the key place for participation by members in the structure of AFA. All grievance handling begins at the local council level.

Local council officers often lack experience when first elected, making it essential that the training program cover a multitude of subjects. Over the years content has changed to reflect the needs of the union: For example, the 1978 training program focused on officers' duties (the union's constitution, organizing the council, working with members and committees),
Training Rank and File Leaders: A Case Study

grievances (role-playing cases, using videotape playback and discussion), and the AFA and unionism (labor history, collective bargaining, headquarters services, air safety, civil rights laws).

In the beginning, the Labor Studies Center provided most of the teachers for the Local Council training, with AFA officers handling some sessions and providing backup for others. As AFA officers and staff gained experience they took on more teaching, and they now lead sessions on bargaining, grievances, communications, and the like. Today the program is taught largely by AFA; this has been one of the most positive outcomes of the training.

Teaching Techniques

Role-playing has been used whenever possible. This not only provides hands-on experience for the novice, but also encourages participants to become involved with each other and to work together. Videotape is a valuable learning tool when a skilled instructor conducts the discussion. Participants can see the situation—and themselves—when the heat is off. Class discussion can pick up on important points and help everyone learn how to handle them. Used tactfully, video playback is a confidence builder—most people look better than they expect on TV. If the mock situation has been handled poorly by participants, discussion can focus on the problem presented by management and how to handle it, rather than on the mistakes of the participants.

But not all subjects lend themselves to this method. Lectures and discussions are used often throughout the programs. Labor Studies Center staff focused on building the comfortable, informal atmosphere familiar to all labor educators, and on setting a time frame within which speakers stopped for questions and group participation.

Because so many women are used to seeing themselves as followers, staff consistently made it clear that all wisdom did not reside up front with the instructor. Participants were encouraged to contribute from their experiences, and instructors were selected who understood this approach.

Unionism and Feminism

Throughout the program, AFA and Labor Studies Center staff focused on presenting an image of unionism with which flight attendants could identify. This meant emphasizing women in the labor movement and professional and white-collar jobs. In a labor history session based on the film The Inheritance, for example, the discussion leader pointed to the role women played in the early garment strikes. Discussing developments in
labor since the movie was made, she reminded the group of the feminist revolution and told them of the rising numbers of teachers, TV performers, and other white-collar and professional people coming into unions today.

Since 90 percent of flight attendants are women, and since many of them are influenced by feminist thinking, feminist posters ("Don't Call Me Chick") decorate the classroom. Books about women in labor history are described and sold. Staff emphasizes that union leadership tasks require the same kind of brains and competence that women are now using in many new fields.

To counteract the media picture of the labor leader as a middle-aged white male, women instructors and speakers were used wherever possible. Flight attendants expect to see able women leading their own union—to this group the program has added women arbitrators, women labor educators, women labor lobbyists, and the like.

These various instructors provide a range of role models. Some participants identify with a lively, forceful personality, while others are relieved to know that a low-key woman has been successful in negotiations or grievances. Using women as role models also builds confidence: they discuss their early problems or fears in entering union activities. One such woman, who described how she was thrown into her first job with no experience and no help, was asked, "How did you get through those first months?" She replied, "I cried a lot." This kind of candor is reassuring.

Conducting the Program: Special Aspects

The program was carefully structured and conducted with attention to schedule, which flight attendants expect from their training on the airlines. Equally important, the general tone of warmth and friendliness helps participants to feel comfortable with each other and with the instructors, freeing them to talk and to participate. This atmosphere also builds group spirit and encourages people to share experiences across airlines.

Adult education techniques, when used well, contribute to this. Question and discussion periods were built into the lecture sessions; buzz groups, case problems, and role-playing provided opportunities for participants to talk to one another rather than to instructors. Socializing in the bar, at meals, and in dorm rooms was encouraged, and both AFA and other instructors made an effort to be available for informal talk.

The opening session always is important in setting the tone. Participants and instructors briefly introduced themselves, followed by an exercise to get participants acquainted. In this exercise, called "Cost and Promise," members were asked to think through what it had cost them to come to the
program (left husband or baby, gave up skiing weekend), and then to spell out what they needed to make the training worth the cost. Participants divided into groups of four strangers, all from different airlines. (Here we made the point that one value of the program was the chance to get to know about problems of workers on other airlines.) Groups talked over the Cost and Promise areas, combined their thinking on pieces of flip chart paper, then one person from each group reported. This takes about fifty minutes and serves as a good icebreaker; each person suddenly has three “buddies.” It also helps the staff learn what students have on their minds. The program planners can add items that seem important and have been omitted, or individual needs can be taken up in informal discussions.

**Materials**

When the program began, little material was available on the airline industry, the Railway Labor Act, or flight attendants’ problems. Cases for arbitration and grievance-handling sessions had to be developed with the union. For other subjects, instructors adapted what standard materials they could.

AFA, however, had begun to prepare materials for its Local Council officers, since they had a deep concern about their training needs. In 1975, they published an extensive *Handbook* that deals with all aspects of union administration; in 1976 they produced a *Grievance Handbook*. These publications now are used as the basis for training, and serve as a ready reference for local leaders throughout their terms of office.

**Meeting New Needs**

As AFA officers and staff became more sophisticated about workers’ education techniques, they began to see more clearly how to relate them to the needs of their members. Evaluations, sometimes oral but more often by questionnaires sent from AFA headquarters, were conducted with participants, and these yielded additional and valuable insights. AFA input in program planning increased; the union recommended changes in content and experiments that involved different ways of teaching some subjects.

To meet the special need of those handling grievances in the initial steps at the local level, programs were designed for locations closer to the membership. For these “Grievance Handling Road Shows,” AFA staff and experienced leadership have served as instructors and traveled to bases along the West Coast. The union also has conducted one session to train negotiating committee members.
Marjorie B. Rachlin

One problem that affects the training program remains unsolved, although AFA currently is wrestling with it. Turnover among local leadership is high. The problem is more serious for flight attendants than for those in other unions because they are young and mobile; their work prevents them from getting together as a group. Flight attendants are in and out of airports, each one flying different hours and days. This makes union leadership a frustrating job. Local Council officers have trouble reaching members. Forced to operate on the telephone to a large extent, they rarely get a feeling of group support. Most leaders use their homes for offices, since few locals have a permanent office. When one set of officers is voted out, there is little continuity; the next set has seldom seen the former leaders run the union.

AFA is tackling the problem in several ways. Negotiating committees are trying to win lost time for grievance handling, paid by the airlines. This was negotiated successfully in the contract with United Airlines in 1978. The union also is assigning staff negotiators—experienced flight attendants who have negotiated on their own airlines—to advise new negotiating committees. Finally, AFA hopes to take its training programs to key cities and to develop, in addition, refresher courses for local council leaders who have been through the basic course.

AFA is a young union, still developing structures and traditions that will best serve its membership. Flight attendants themselves are in a process of change, as more and more see flying as a lifetime job, and realize the union’s importance and its need for good leadership. Today flight attendants who have high seniority and a career commitment to flying are running for local and airline-wide union office. Once there, they want to become experts in union work. Training and education will continue to have a high priority for the union. AFA leadership and staff have learned much about workers’ education techniques from their experiences with the Labor Studies Center. This will carry over in the programs they develop and conduct on their own, as well as those they continue to hold at the center.