Credit Programs for Working Women

By Katherine Schrier

The 1970s saw a rapid growth in the number, range, and availability of education programs designed especially for working adults returning to school. These are not the stereotypical continuing education programs on hobbies or vocational subjects, nor are they traditional courses offered through agricultural or cooperative extension services. This new wave of adult education responds to the needs of worker students who seek courses to help them advance on the job or in their labor organizations as they further what often are long-delayed educational goals. Our age of credentialism recognizes the ever-rising level of education of the American work force, the demands of increasing automation and specialization, and the training necessary to retain present jobs or to advance. It acknowledges the need for specific information and leadership skills in order to be effective in today's complicated labor-management relations and union organizations.

Fortunately for workers, education has become a buyer's market. Universities and community colleges, finding the traditional student population of 18- to 22-year-olds decreasing, are forced to reach out to attract the working adult who is returning to the classroom. New degree programs in labor studies are emerging, incorporating more flexible curricula, more convenient class times and locations, and credit granted for life experience. All of these ease the working adult on his—and, increasingly, her—way. In 1952, some 51 percent of women in the work force had completed at least four years of high school. By 1973, this had increased to 75 percent. The number of those with some college had increased from 16.6 percent to 25 percent in the same period. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Department of Labor) predicts that by 1985, 78 percent of all women workers will have high school diplomas, while the number of those with four years or more of college will have risen from 12 percent in 1973 to 17 percent.
A special report issued by the U.S. Department of Labor in December 1975, “Going Back to School at 35 and Over,” cited three main reasons for the return of adult workers to school. First, workers feel handicapped by obsolete skills and unable to compete with those who are more educated. Second, they want to keep up with new developments in their chosen fields. Third—and this relates particularly to the woman student—they seek skills needed to reenter the job market. Economic pressures lead more and more women into the labor force, but on the average they still earn less than two dollars for every three dollars earned by men. Education is seen as one way to remedy this discrepancy. One reason not dealt with in the Department of Labor report is critical to understanding the current demand for labor-related courses and the proliferation of evening and weekend labor studies programs offered by university extension and community colleges across the country. For all union activists, whether shop stewards who need to evaluate contract or health and safety violations, or union officers costing out a new bargaining demand, labor relations are growing more specialized and complex every day. To face management experts across the table and represent workers effectively takes more knowledge and skill than ever before. Among those seeking to become more involved in union affairs are women, who constitute the greatest untapped resource of potential leadership the labor movement has ever had.

Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations (NYSSILR) was chartered by the New York State Legislature in 1944 to bring education programs both to industry and to labor unions and their members. In addition to an on-campus undergraduate and graduate program in industrial and labor relations, the school includes an extension division with offices in New York State's major urban centers. At first its programs focused on such tool subjects as shop steward training, labor law, and collective bargaining, which were offered through short courses, conferences in union halls, or programs held at the university's extension centers.

But in 1968, in response to student demand for more in-depth information on labor subjects, the extension program took a new form. A two-year college credit certificate program in labor studies was launched in New York City, offered one night a week for three terms each year. Its purpose was to combine content that union officials and members needed in labor-related subjects with skill training that would enable them to put that content to work. The eighteen college credits earned through the twelve courses of this sequence are transferable to two- and four-year institutions in the city, particularly Empire State College's new Labor Division, while the format of the two-year labor studies program quickly proved replicable.
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Within only a few years, each of the NYSSILR extension districts had opened a similar program. More than 1,400 students throughout the state enroll each year in this labor studies sequence. Course offerings range from oral and written communications to labor history, from collective bargaining to science and technology for workers, from labor law and arbitration to the arts, and a host of other core courses and electives.

In 1972 the NYSSILR, with a grant from the Ford Foundation, undertook a year-long study into the barriers to the participation of women in their labor unions.1 Although women constituted 25 percent of all union members, only about 5 percent held top elected or appointed union posts. A subsidiary concern was that enrollment in the new labor studies credit program was overwhelmingly male. What held women back from participating in union and educational activities?

In surveying a cross-section of New York City unions with large numbers of women members, the researchers found that many personal barriers—such as family responsibilities—were shared by women and men, but that these constituted more of a barrier to participation for women. Such job-related barriers as active union women’s feeling that supervisors were harder on them than on the men seemed to lend themselves to programmatic remedy. However, the findings that led to the development of a special education program for union women were related most closely to the barriers that prevent many women from competing with men for union posts and responsibilities. Women displayed low self-confidence and feelings that they lacked competence and necessary union-related information; they desired education and leadership training to develop the skills they needed. Women wanted this training more than the men surveyed, and minority women wanted it most of all.

In response, the ILR investigators designed a program that would provide both the skills and the information women sought. Again with Ford Foundation funding, two kinds of courses were developed: short courses in such specific skills as effective grievance handling and public speaking, and an evening college-credit program that provided an alternate first year to the two-year labor studies sequence. Here women unionists could study together and build their self-confidence in an environment of mutual

1. For a detailed account of this study, see Barbara Wertheimer and Anne Nelson, Trade Union Women: A Study of Their Participation in New York City Locals (New York: Praeger, 1975).
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support before they went on to the second year of the ILR School's labor studies program. 2

Trade Union Women's Studies

Structure

A labor advisory committee, formed at the program's outset, represented unions with large numbers of women members. This ensured that the courses to be offered would reflect the needs of women unionists. Because most women wear more than one hat, combining full-time jobs with home and family, an early starting hour of 5:15 P.M. was decided on, with students encouraged to bring a supper sandwich for the coffee break. This enables students to take care of family responsibilities before too late in the evening, with less travel after dark—an important consideration for the urban woman.

The school year is divided into three twelve-week terms. Each applicant meets with the program coordinator for a personal interview to ensure that she understands the program's purpose, course sequence, and attendance homework requirements. Although admission is open, applicants who need remedial help may be steered into a program that provides this first, then re-involved in Trade Union Women's Studies, which operates at a first-year community college level and prepares students for a return to academic work.

Content

The curriculum of Trade Union Women's Studies is developed around the union experiences of the students and the knowledge and skills they need to participate more effectively in their labor organizations. It recognizes that, while almost all of them have completed high school, they return to school with trepidation and often with rusty study skills. This, and knowledge of their family and work responsibilities, helps to determine the course sequence and the nature of the homework assignments.

The six courses, two each term, include one content course and one skills-development course as an integrated unit, graduated in degree of difficulty:

2. Out of these initial programs for union women grew a wide range of research and education services that led to the formation in 1977 of the Institute for Education and Research on Women and Work, part of the ILR Extension Division.
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Term 1: Writing and Study Skills (refresher course; develops research techniques); American Labor History (special emphasis on women's role).

Term 2: Oral Communications (develops poise and self-confidence); Union Organization and Administration (how unions function; operating within union structures).

Term 3: Collective Bargaining (constructing and costing out contracts; the bargaining process); Social Behavior and Work (the psychology of leadership).

All courses require written assignments, but these are staggered so as not to fall due at the same time. Each term's content course requires the heavier reading, while the skills-development course focuses on reading combined with preparation for class participation (writing assignments, public speaking, leadership “games”). Often the skills course will deal with an assignment for the content course. For example, in Writing and Study Skills students learn how to prepare a research paper, based on a labor history assignment. Assignments are grounded in the union experiences of the students. For example, a series of worksheets was designed to implement one goal of the Union Organization and Administration course, the development of an in-depth understanding of the structure of the local union. The worksheets deal with such subjects as how union dues are used, provisions of pension and welfare plans, local union grievance procedures, how committees work in the local, and the role of women in each student's own union. Students explore these areas between classes and share their findings during class discussions. The Collective Bargaining course involves extended mock bargaining over a contract issue important to women workers. Oral Communications assignments involve preparation for various kinds of speaking occasions that students are likely to encounter in the union.

Whether or not the students are already active as stewards or executive board members, self-confidence is developed as information is provided. Many women have been socialized not to take risks, such as those required in running for union office, unless they are sure of winning. Men, on the other hand, are conditioned to take those risks and not to condemn themselves unduly if they lose. Part of the purpose of Trade Union Women's Studies is to teach women how unions work, how to set goals for themselves, and to encourage them to accept the risk of losing. That involves a willingness to come back and try again if need be. The role models presented by the teachers and students in the program, and the examples built into course content, combine to develop this self-confidence.
Support Services

From the first contact with the program coordinator, students learn that there are support services available to them: individual course counseling, follow-up when they miss a class, homework assignments sent to them, tutoring when needed. Recently a remedial and tutorial writing center has been opened, utilizing specially trained peer counselors. This service is available to students at no cost. An on-site library and trained librarian are additional resources. The Trade Union Women's Studies Alumnae Association keeps the group in touch after "graduation" for continuing support, through meetings, conferences and programs it sponsors, and through a newsletter.

Follow-up

A planning session is offered to each completing group to discuss the range of options available for further education. Strong efforts are made to keep in touch with students after they leave the program, through the Alumnae Association as well as through periodic follow-up questionnaires and personal contact.

Recruiting Students

Union support of Trade Union Women's Studies has been important from the beginning. The program's Labor Advisory Committee helped shape and design the courses, and has been a key factor in recruiting. Unions, especially those with substantial numbers of women members, increasingly count on women for support, participation, and as volunteer leaders. Encouraging women's involvement in their labor organizations should be high on union agendas, and many unions that appreciate this do support attendance at the program through full or partial scholarships, as well as recruiting efforts.

Unions announce the program in their newspapers. Union staff help in recruiting. Sometimes union-negotiated tuition refund programs reimburse students' expenses.

By far the most effective recruiters, however, are the students themselves, who publicize the program among their fellow workers. Recruiting also takes place through the local chapter of the Coalition of Labor Union Women and through the annual regional summer school for union women sponsored by the University and College Labor Education Association's Committee on Programs for Union Women. Mailing lists provide another publicity vehicle, since these include names of union women who have
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attended recent conferences and short courses offered through Trade
Union Women's Studies.

Students tend to reflect the city's occupational mix. Many are from the
clerical and service sectors. They tend to be between 35 and 50 years old,
to have finished high school, and to be the sole support of their families;
three out of every four are members of a minority group.

Developing a Corps of Teachers

Who teaches in this program? Women who can meet both Cornell's
rigorous standards for resident faculty and the program's own demands.
These latter include experience working with adults, empathy for the goals
and motivations of the students, and subject matter competency, both
theoretical and practical in terms of the students' union and work struc­
tures. This is a tall order. To fill it, the program coordinator conducts
teacher-development programs and asks potential teachers to observe
ongoing classes to familiarize themselves with the backgrounds of the stu­
dents they will teach and with techniques and methods of workers' educa­
tion.

The program coordinator monitors the classes and obtains a written
student evaluation half-way through each term. Student representatives
elected by each class meet with the coordinator for additional discussion
and suggestions. Evaluations are obtained from teachers as well. In addi­
tion, the coordinator works with each teacher on her course outline and
textbook selection, and on providing additional materials or classroom
aids.

Teacher orientation sessions provide an opportunity for interchange
among the program's part-time faculty, and for discussions of methods,
techniques, and new films or filmstrips. Even so, some teachers just do
not work out, or are unable to add this new commitment to their schedules,
and must be replaced. The recruiting process is continuous.

It has proved invaluable to involve union practitioners as teachers or
resources. The students thrive on meeting and talking with women who
are leaders, who have come up through the same channels the students
are discussing in class, who have collective bargaining experience, who head
pension and welfare programs or who are labor attorneys or organizers.
Special efforts are made to recruit minority women as teachers.

Admittedly, recruiting is easier in large urban centers than in smaller
communities. Although not easy, it has proved possible even outside these
centers to find women with the experience and academic credentials
necessary. As the program grows, however, so does the need to provide a
continuous training program for those interested in combining worker and adult education methodology with their experiential or academic qualifications.

The program coordinator would, if pressed, confess that she seeks some “extras” from the teachers she recruits: a willingness to come early and stay late, to give her phone number to students so they can call her at home if an assignment is not clear or if they miss a class and need to catch up. Sometimes teachers need to meet with students who may have fallen behind in their work. In short, there is far more to workers’ education than any teaching contract ever spells out.

Since the program’s inception in 1973, a roster of more than fifty part-time extension faculty has been developed for the New York City–based Trade Union Women’s Studies.

Financing the Program

Initially developed through a long-term Ford Foundation grant, Trade Union Women’s Studies has gradually been institutionalized until today it is part of the annual budget of Cornell University’s Extension Division of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Program tuition fees cover teaching costs and some administrative expenses. However, the need persists for scholarship funds for women whose unions do not cover tuition. This reflects the lower incomes of women workers and the fact that a majority of the students in the program are single heads of families.

Longitudinal Survey

Because this is a continuing program with roots in a research project, there is ongoing interest in results, learning what happens to women who complete the program. Do they continue their education? Do they formulate different goals when they are in the program from those they had on entering? Do they move up on the union leadership ladder? A preliminary survey after three years of operation yielded affirmative answers to each of these questions. Many students do continue in the second year of labor studies offered through Cornell’s extension division, but with a difference. Observers found that these women participated twice as often in class discussion in the mixed male-female group that they attended the second year than did women who had not spent the first year in the union women’s program. Their educational goals came to include the possibility of earning an Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree, most electing to concentrate in labor studies.
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The initial survey also showed that women had made substantial gains in union, community, and political leadership roles. They appeared at public meetings as panelists or speakers, testified at hearings, ran for political office, took leadership roles in the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and, often, moved into leadership roles in their own unions at a number of different levels. Although the students credit their participation in Trade Union Women's Studies for their success, its actual relationship to their advancement is hard to measure. Nonetheless, their increased self-confidence and expertise seem to contribute. As Sonyia Leggett, a program graduate and now Secretary-Treasurer of New York Metro Area Postal Union, the largest postal local in the world, puts it: "When you came to your work as shop steward (after completing the program) you got a different kind of respect. It gave me a whole new outlook. It led to where I am now."

Some Problems to Address

The program is not without problems. The students come to it overextended in their responsibilities: jobs, family duties, often personal or family illness to cope with, and union and community activities, to which they now add weekly course attendance and several hours of homework. In addition, these last two call for the use of reading and study skills that often need honing. But tutorial and remedial work take added time. Sometimes the bind they find themselves in is just too much, and as many as 25 to 30 percent of entering students leave the program before completion.

Even though the program's retention rate is well ahead of the national average (50 percent of all college students are likely to leave before finishing their schooling), it is still a matter of concern to program staff and faculty. Additional support services are needed, but cannot be funded. Professional counseling would help; so would more remedial and tutorial assistance.

What adult students really need, men as well as women, is time off from their jobs for school. Professional and managerial employees often get this as a standard fringe benefit; blue- and white-collar workers rarely do. It would eliminate some of the pressures and fatigue, and help students, who travel from all parts of the city, to get to class on time.

Student selection procedures need to be examined. Open enrollment has been the policy, the only criteria being commitment to the program and the ability to do college-level work. Program staff are reluctant to give this up, for it results in a diversity of students that enriches the experience for all.
group members. Though a more selective admissions procedure might mean higher retention, it might also mean a different kind of outreach and student mix.

Improved teacher development, now under way, should strengthen the faculty's ability to respond to special student needs. Methods of integrating course materials even more closely, and analysis of techniques for presenting these materials, form part of this development program. Teachers are encouraged to talk over classroom and student problems they are experiencing, and to exchange ideas.

**Program Replication**

A number programs, similar in design but each with a different emphasis, have been developed in the Metropolitan New York area and in five additional locations where NYSSILR has extension centers. These program models include:

*Trade Union Women's Studies for New York City Employees.* This program is sponsored by District Council 37 (DC 37), American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, at its own headquarters. A union of 105,000 employees of the city, DC 37 has for the past eight years had a negotiated Education Fund covering more than three-fourths of its members. As a result, the union has been able to offer a wide range of courses and services to city workers, from training in vocational and academic skills to a college in its own headquarters where a two- or four-year degree can be earned. The Education Fund Trust Agreement with the city reads:

The purpose of the Fund is to provide covered employees with programs of training and education related to preparation of such employees for greater job effectiveness and career advancement . . . .

Some 3,000 union members receive tuition assistance through the fund, and an additional 2,500 attend classes regularly at union headquarters.

Although three out of every four city workers eligible to enroll in these education programs are women, and 80 to 85 percent of the actual enrollees are female, until recently there were no programs specifically designed for the woman worker/unionist/student, no program for the woman who wanted to learn leadership skills or acquire more information about the specific problems of women in the work force.

In January 1977, DC 37's Education Fund contracted with the Institute for Education and Research on Women and Work to bring Trade Union
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Women's Studies to DC 37 headquarters and make it available to city employees. Course materials were adapted to relate directly to the needs and problems of New York City employees. Tuition costs, but not books and materials, are paid for in full by the DC 37 Education Fund. DC 37's support services, including a library, vocational and education counseling, and academic tutoring for students who need it, are also available at no additional cost.

Public Service Women's Studies. The Institute for Education and Research on Women and Work sponsors a similar year-long program adapted to the career advancement needs of women who work for the New York State government. It now operates in five urban centers where there are substantial numbers of state employees. With the full cooperation of the Civil Service Employees Association, AFSCME Local 1000, as well as state administrators, clerical women in levels up to Grade 12 can earn college credits while they enhance their skills and prepare to complete their degree work in linked institutions that grant two- and four-year diplomas. The acute need for this kind of program is evidenced by the fact that, since it opened, there has been a waiting list each term in every location. Women know they are in the work force to stay, and are eager for opportunities to sharpen their skills and move ahead. Partial tuition refund monies that are available to state employees are important in enabling them to participate.

Career Development Women's Studies. This institute program, designed primarily for clerical workers in private industry, also looks toward job advancement. Both Public Service Women's Studies and Career Development Women's Studies were made possible initially by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

An Off-Campus College for Women in Banking. The latest program on this model takes the year-long format to a major bank where, as part of a consent agreement for affirmative action, upper-level clerical workers without college degrees attend courses that earn them nine college credits as they develop skills in math, oral and written communications, principles of management, human relations, and the structure and development of organizations. Job promotions are possible — though certainly not guaranteed — as are opportunities for obtaining business-related (or other) degrees in any one of a number of educational institutions in the metropolitan area.

Conclusion

These new programs, based on a model that has been tested, both in its initial form and through adaptations, indicate flexible and sound replication possibilities. As the number of working women who seek to return to
school grows, universities and colleges will look increasingly to ways of attracting this student population. Hopefully they will develop and offer programs to meet the special needs and concerns of women workers.

Today 54 percent of all part-time students in higher education are women; but this does not include most of the women in blue-collar, clerical, and service occupations. To reach them requires special outreach, programs offered at convenient times and locations, moderate tuition fees, and certain support services. These are a must if education for working women is to become a viable option and a utilized opportunity.