Training Women for Political Action

By Donna Mobley

Is politics too controversial for a short course conducted by a university labor extension program? Not if it deals with how the political process works and how working adults can become more involved in it. If there is a special need for classes that increase citizen participation, there is an even greater need for such classes designed to involve more women.

Although the labor movement has a reputation for great political clout, until recently most of the knowledge, experience, and power rested with the top leaders. Recently the AFL-CIO and a number of unions and employee associations have turned to more sophisticated operations, using computers to reach members by election district and building member activity across union lines. The fact remains, however, that the average unionist does little more than vote, and many do not even do that.

Except for the recent labor law reform campaign and state right-to-work referenda, few issues of importance to the labor movement touch members in ways that elicit significant mail to elected officials. Politicians complain constantly: "I receive a hundred letters from the other side for every letter from a union member." It is not easy to understand how the political system functions; workers believe that what they think doesn't matter. They do not know how to affect the political process, because it appears to be run almost entirely by the men at the top.

The operative word is men, in politics as well as in the labor movement. One would be hard pressed to decide in which system women are more poorly represented at the highest levels. A few statistics illustrate the point. Twenty-five percent of all union members are women, yet they hold as few as 7 percent of the top offices in national unions. And these are not the largest unions or the most influential posts. A report of the National Women's Education Fund, issued in 1976, revealed that while women comprise 53 percent of the voting population, they hold only about 8 percent of all
From 1776 to 1976, eleven women served in the U.S. Senate (compared to 1,715 men); 87 were elected to the House of Representatives (9,591 men); and 5 were chosen for Presidential cabinet posts (507 men).

But women are moving up, in both politics and labor unions. Almost every local union has a political action committee, and one of the areas in which women are increasing their participation is on this committee. Recognizing women's growing role in the labor movement, the AFL-CIO recently changed the name of its Women's Activities Department (WAD) of the Committee on Political Education (COPE) to Volunteers in Politics (VIP). Women in unions will no longer be relegated to a separate committee to make phone calls and do mailings. In order to be most effective, however, women (and men) must understand how the system works, where unions can exert influence, and where the talents of union members can best be used.

This chapter describes several short-course formats through which union women can develop a greater understanding of the political process. However, any course in political participation can be adapted to meet the needs of working women and to encourage their involvement. The instructor should include legislative issues of special interest to women to illustrate how the legislative process works; women in elected office and women who hold campaign staff positions should be among those invited to speak to the class; instructional materials must include articles about women in politics.

**Course Objectives**

A course in the political process aims to increase the political participation of the students by developing their knowledge and understanding on the one hand, and their skills and self-confidence on the other. When the students are women, it is especially important to strengthen their awareness that women can—and must—be part of the political process.

If the course is offered by a university labor extension program, the instructor must achieve all of these objectives within a neutral framework, without taking a partisan position. Luckily, maintaining such neutrality is not as difficult as one might suppose, as the instructor discusses political

2. While WAD was regarded as the ladies' auxiliary of COPE, both men and women members are encouraged to participate in VIP programs. One labor leader explained to me that the name was changed so that men wouldn't be embarrassed, since they were taking part in WAD activities.
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parties, candidates, and issues in terms of the process itself. Where the course is taught in and by a union, it can be assumed that the union will let class participants know of official positions, recommendations, and endorsements.

Course Content

Flexibility in course design and content is necessary in order to reflect the needs of participants and to focus on what is happening politically while the classes are in progress. But this is not to say that certain basic elements are not common to each course.

Introductory Session

An introductory session on politics includes how political decisions affect a woman’s life; why individual participation is important; how and why unions have been involved in political action; how unions and other interest groups decide which candidates to support; how campaign activity affects a group’s influence on legislative issues; and why getting out the vote is so critical. In this first session, the instructor learns which students have never voted (in some cases, never registered to vote), and which students are more experienced in political activities in their unions or perhaps in their communities or state party structures.

At this session, each student should be helped to identify her elected representatives and, using voting records and rating sheets, the class should rate some of their legislators. This is an invaluable technique to teach students how to check on the political positions of their representatives, as well as to indicate why unions and other organizations endorse certain candidates and how, in turn, those endorsements may affect a representative’s vote.

The introductory session is basic; the subject matter of successive classes varies. For example, if an election is coming up, the instructor might de-

3. In New York City, the League of Women Voters sells the inexpensive *They Represent You*, which can be used to identify representatives. The league is one of the best sources for information and materials. If there is no office listed in your telephone directory, contact the national office at 1730 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Instructors can make up a simple form for students to use in filling district numbers and representatives’ names. Voting records and ratings can be obtained from the AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education (815 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006), some unions, and many special interest groups.
scribe political parties and their structures, how campaigns are organized, and typical pre-election activities. If the state legislature is in session or federal legislation of special interest is pending, the class might turn first to the legislative process, examine how bills are passed, and role play how to lobby.

Political Parties, Campaigns, and Elections

The excitement of this part of the course mounts if an election campaign is in progress. This is when a local union, hoping to inspire its members to lend a hand in its political activities, is most likely to agree to sponsor this course.

Before discussing what goes on in a campaign and what is involved in an election, background should be supplied on the structure of the major political parties, which offices are appointed and which elected, how candidates are chosen, what groups and individuals hold political power and to what degree, and how individuals and unions can work within this organized political structure.

Since in most states registration is necessary to participate in politics, clarify voter registration procedures, the importance of registering union members and their families, and the need to get out the vote. Such a discussion leads naturally to analyzing political campaigns. Depending on the interests of the group, the class might examine how campaigns are staffed, what jobs are available for volunteers, and how to volunteer. Discuss both money and services as important campaign contributions that unions and other organizations make. Stress the importance to unions and to individuals of participating in political campaigns.

Students should learn to ask who and what the candidates seeking their support represent. What are their backgrounds? What groups are behind them? Why? If there is no campaign in progress, the teacher can refer to candidates in a recent election. Women (and workers in general) need to understand not only why they are underrepresented but also how directly this affects them.

4. AFL-CIO COPE (address above) publication no. 7C, Voter Registration Data, Registering the Unregistered, and Getting Out the Vote, includes good information on election day activities as well as voter registration.
5. The Manhattan Women's Political Caucus produced an excellent campaign manual, How to Work in Politics: Women's Political Jobs in a Political Campaign. For New York City residents, it also explains the political party structures and gives information about elections.
6. The Center for the American Woman and Politics of the Eagleton Institute of Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J. 08901, has some good materials
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The discussion of election procedures, like that of campaigns, should provide as much information as the class needs. Where students are not regular voters, review what happens when the voter goes to the polls. Who does she meet there? Since many local unions play their most active political role on election day, discuss what these activities are likely to be and encourage students to volunteer to take part.

Legislation Lobbying

The legislative process operates differently at the local, state, and federal levels, and time constraints will determine how much the teacher concentrates on one or another process. Whichever level is the focus, two subjects that need to be covered are how a bill becomes law and how appropriations are made. These should be illustrated through examples of legislation of particular interest to the group.7

To get a clear picture of the process, students must know how legislative bodies are structured, how legislative committees work, and how decisions are made at each step. Only then can they grasp the importance of elected officials hearing from their constituents, and the impact of lobbying.

The amount of time devoted to examining the job of the paid lobbyist depends on the group's level of information and the number of course sessions you have to work with. The roles of the individual as a constituent and of union members as an interest group need explanation.8 Demythicize politicians, and encourage union women to think of themselves as having the responsibility as well as the right to inform their representatives about how they feel on political issues.

Because unions can lose through legislation what they gain through collective bargaining, they constitute an interest group whose members will

7. Many unions have prepared simple handout sheets that show how a bill is passed on the federal level. In New York, brochures illustrating the legislative process on the state level can be obtained from any legislator. This may be true in other states as well. The League of Women Voters is another good source for such material, with brochures showing how the process works on the local level.

8. Information on lobbying is available from a number of sources, such as the League of Women Voters and various unions. The AFL-CIO Task Force on Labor Law Reform (same address as COPE, above) has published a booklet, Labor and Grass Roots Lobbying: A Manual for Congressional District Coordinators, that contains much useful information.
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understand the importance of acting in concert, whether through letter-writing campaigns or visiting elected officials. When, in addition, the students are women or members of a minority, their participation and voices are doubly necessary.

Variations

A course in the political process must accommodate the needs of the local union, the political calendar, and the students' interests. It can be taught in many formats: four two-hour sessions or six ninety-minute sessions, or it can be included in the curriculum of legislative institutes and summer schools. If the teacher is fortunate and can adapt it to as many as eight sessions, time can be allocated for role plays and other exercises to reinforce the students' self-confidence and political sophistication.

To illustrate the flexibility of form and content, one local union requested that the course inspire its new political action committee as it taught the basics of the political process. Therefore, I recast the course to devote more time to the techniques of building a COPE committee and to its role in the union.9 Another course, designed for a regional women's summer school where participants came from different states and a wide range of unions and labor associations, covered less specific material about local and state procedures. Since participants had been active politically, more time could be devoted to discussing campaign roles and lobbying techniques.10 Two of the women in the group, elected local officials themselves, made important contributions to the class, particularly in the encouragement they gave to others.

Teaching Methods

Some lecturing is necessary, but I suggest keeping it to a minimum, eliciting as much class discussion as possible. When the subject is politics, there is seldom a problem getting students to participate.

9. Do It: Organizing a Local Union COPE Committee (COPE publication no. 5C) is available from AFL-CIO COPE; and ACTWU Action, "Congressional District Committees: Blueprint for Action," is available from the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, 15 Union Square, New York, N.Y. 10003. ACTWU and the AFL-CIO Education Department (same address as COPE, above) have additional information on organizing committees and keeping members interested.

10. Linda Joy, The Majority Wins: How to Build a Program for Legislative Change (available from Majority Wins, P.O. Box 954, Lansing, Mich. 48904), is an excellent manual for groups involved in promoting legislative programs.
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As time permits, it is useful to include role-play exercises, particularly in lobbying. This seems to work best when the instructor assumes the part of the legislator. Depending upon the size of the class, students practice lobbying as individuals or as committees, each of which provides an enjoyable as well as effective exercise.

Outside speakers can be a useful resource, time permitting, particularly if they are elected officials who can describe their role in the legislative process, or union staff involved in lobbying and political action who can give specific illustrations of how and why unions work in politics.11

An important exercise is writing a letter to an elected representative about a legislative issue. Although students often do not expect outside assignments in a not-for-credit course, most are ready to do some homework, especially if it is as brief as writing a letter or preparing an argument on an issue for a role play at the next class session. If a campaign is in progress, students can begin without delay to participate in political activities sponsored by their unions or as individual volunteers, and report back to the class on their experiences. The local union referred to above immediately involved the students in literature distributions and election-day activities, and was delighted with the response.

Another example of “instant involvement” is the class of department store workers that met when the state senate was debating whether retail stores should be closed on Sundays. Some class members attended a committee hearing, reporting back on the testimony of union representatives and that of the opposing forces. Such activities make the legislative process vivid and real. A useful simulation exercise groups the class members into legislative committees that act on proposed legislation as if they were elected officials.12

11. In New York City, we are fortunate in that we have women elected officials who are willing to take the time to come and speak to our classes. For example, then-Senator Carol Bellamy explained to one class how the New York State legislative process works. She served as a role model, and also described how a bill is passed as only an insider could. She emphasized the importance of messages from constituents in influencing a legislator’s vote.

12. Ralph Johnson of Indiana University’s Division of Labor Studies, TROM5, Room 53, 2101 Coliseum Blvd., Fort Wayne, Ind. 46805, has prepared a six-session course in which participants simulate a senate legislature, playing the roles of senators, lobbyists, and members of the press. Don Dodd and Jack Rabin, “The Equal Rights Amendment: A Simulation” (available from CESCO Press, P.O. Box 43411, Birmingham, Ala. 35243) is a game in which participants play the roles of members of the Senate Judiciary Committee of the fictional state of New Columbia.
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The teacher’s goal, whatever the method, is to familiarize class participants with how the political system works and at the same time build confidence in the possibility of affecting that system.

Controversy

Because the subject is politics and because discussion is encouraged, the teacher must be prepared for disagreements among class members. Plan to focus on the process rather than on issues or candidates. But no matter how neutral the instructor, political debates occur. In such cases, point out the diversity of opinion even among people who share the same basic interests. The class is a microcosm of voters in general, and neither unions nor women are a monolithic group. If partisans of both sides are of equal ability in articulating their arguments, assign them positions in a role play that requires them to think through the opposite point of view. Does it increase their understanding of what those arguments are?

It is important to avoid the hostility and hardening of positions that inevitably follows when anyone is placed on the defensive.

Follow-up

The political action course (described above) provides a model for follow-up activities. The local’s officers used the teacher as a consultant on how to further the committee’s activities, and invited her to conduct a special briefing session when committee members traveled to the state capital to meet with their representatives. Initially, the committee met on a monthly basis. This was a useful tool for developing the local’s program of political involvement, but regular meetings were difficult to sustain, and have been sporadic over the long run.

Another kind of follow-up was a post-course “speak out on politics” put on by a local the week before a major election. Members who had participated in the course conducted the meeting, spoke knowledgeably about candidates and issues, and effectively explained to the assembled group the impact of politics on their lives.

As a side effect of developing and teaching this course, I have had the opportunity personally to assist union women’s political involvement in a number of ways: through phone calls to me requesting information or seeking encouragement, as well as through my own active participation in the political process. What is true of adult education in general holds for this action-oriented course in particular: it is addictive. A little leads to the desire for more, in this case for advanced courses that build on the knowledge and experience gained in the basic program.
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Success Stories

Former students are now volunteers for political candidates, are members of their unions' COPE committees, and work on the legislative committee of the Coalition of Labor Union Women. When the Democratic party held its convention in New York City, several women from the first political process course conducted by Cornell's Institute on Women and Work took part in activities sponsored by the National Women's Political Caucus, along with other women from all political parties. Women from these courses now write letters and speak on issues important to them. One former student has run for her local school board, and another has been a candidate for the state legislature.

A high point I will never forget, perhaps my greatest "success story," occurred during a course on Union Women and the Political Process. The student involved was a man who was attending with his wife. The class happened to meet on the night following the 1976 Presidential election, and he announced to everyone that both he and his wife had voted for the first time in their lives the day before, only because of what they had learned in class about the importance of political participation. Here is a course that encourages students to use the knowledge and skills acquired through the classes immediately and directly. It brings results.

Six-Session Course: Union Women and the Political Process

Each session meets for ninety minutes.

Session 1: Your government and how it works

This session focuses on governmental party structures, emphasizing the influence and participation of unions at various levels. It looks at the systems for selecting delegates to the national political conventions and at the conventions themselves.

What officials are elected at the national, state, and local levels? When? How long do they serve?

Who "runs" the Democratic, Republican, and other parties in the state?

What is a district leader? County leader? Party leader? How are they elected or appointed?

What is a political club? Should you join one? Should you start you own? How would you do it?

How will the next President be selected? How are delegates chosen to attend the conventions? What happens at a political convention? Why are they held?

What does all this have to do with unions? With union women?

Sessions 2 and 3: Running for office

Political campaigns are the subject, with case examples of women running for office, their campaign needs, and the jobs that need doing (the role of volunteers).
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It includes how to assess candidate qualifications, looking at candidates' records, weighing issues. Where possible, a woman who has been elected to office or directed a candidate's campaign will speak at Session 3.

How do unions choose the candidates they support?

What can a union do to help its candidates? What can individuals do?

Who should run for office? What office? Where do you begin?

What are the requirements? How do women with jobs and families find time for politics?

Looking at candidates' records: questions to ask.

Sessions 4 and 5: After the election—how government works

These sessions focus on the legislative process and the points at which union women (and unions in general) can impact on that process. Lobbying and how it works, with simulation exercises. Current legislation of special interest to unionists and to women workers will be discussed in relation to lobbying and letter writing.

How are bills introduced? How do they become laws? How much influence does your candidate have after she or he is elected? Committee structure and how it works.

How do unions work to get bills passed?

What is lobbying? Should you be doing it? How? What do you need to know before lobbying? How do you testify before committees?

Session 6: Where do you fit in?

The final session centers on student involvement in the political process. A poll will be taken to identify issues of importance to members of the class, and results announced. Discussion will be based on how students can participate in their union's political and legislative activities. At least one union leader will be invited to talk with the group about labor's concern with working women's issues.

What issues are important to you as a woman? As a union member?

What are some ways to work through your union and through the Coalition of Labor Union Women on issues important to working women?

How can union women get male leaders more interested in women's issues?

THREE-SESSION WORKSHOP:
UNION WOMEN AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Each session meets for two hours.

Unionists know that gains made at the collective bargaining table can be lost at the voting booth or through adverse court decisions. This workshop seeks to sharpen the skills of union women for effective participation and influence on the political

13. Based on workshop materials prepared by the Institute for Education and Research on Women and Work, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, for the First National Women's Conference of the Communications Workers of America, September 1978.
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scene at the local, state, and national levels. Participants will discuss how the political process works and how to influence it through lobbying, running for office, and helping to elect candidates concerned about labor and working women's issues.

Session 1: The political process
   How the political process works
      A. Political Parties
      B. Nominations
      C. Elections
   Where women are in the political process
      A. In elected office
      B. In political action
      C. As the silent majority
   How bills become laws

Session 2: Lobbying
   What lobbying is
   Eight ways to lobby
      A. Monitoring bills
      B. Attending legislative committee meetings
      C. Testifying at public hearings
      D. Visiting legislators
      E. Writing letters
      F. Petitions
      G. Telephone, telegraph
      H. Other methods (more direct action)

Session 3: Electing good women candidates
   Should more women run for office?
      A. What women office holders say
      B. Gains when women are elected
   Qualities to look for in candidates
   Special problems of women candidates
      A. Money harder to raise
      B. Support and backing of regular organizations often lacking
      C. Other
   Some advantages of women candidates
      A. Women know their communities better
      B. Women are readier to start at the grassroots political level
   Where to begin
      A. Get involved: the precinct level as step 1
      B. Help run someone else's campaign
      C. Read
      D. Build a support network
      E. Develop self-confidence; encourage others