CHAPTER 22

Labor Education and Women Workers: An International Comparison

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How can trade union education become more accessible to the thousands of women now entering the labor force, and, increasingly, the trade union movement? Innovations by European trade unions suggest new ways to tackle some of the old problems that have deterred women from full participation in union life, a participation that is greatly aided by trade union education. This chapter discusses how union programs for women workers in Sweden, Great Britain, Austria, and Germany endeavor to increase women's involvement in trade union affairs.

Trade union education in Europe has a considerable history and, compared with the United States, a more formal structure. The result is a sophisticated array of facilities, bolstered by laws allowing newly elected union representatives (or, in the case of Britain under a 1975 law, all union representatives) several weeks per term of office to attend formal courses, most of them union-sponsored. Many unions have large, often beautifully located, excellently equipped residential colleges where courses may last a few days to several months. These usually supplement evening programs and day-long or weekend courses sponsored by local district union bodies.¹

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the structure and financing of labor education programs in all of these countries, see Alice H. Cook and Agnes M. Douty, Labor Education Outside the Unions (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, 1958).

This chapter relies on the work done by the authors and Professor Val R. Lorwin, University of Oregon, during 1976-77. Financed by the German Marshall Fund, the study focused on women in trade unions in Sweden, Great Britain, Austria, and Germany.
But this system has tended mainly to reach an elite minority of highly paid, skilled workers, who for the most part occupy union office—even in Sweden, where the most strenuous attempts are being made to decentralize and democratize these programs. Among the large untouched majority of unionists are the women.

**Women's Participation**

Whatever differences exist in the structure of labor education, all countries face the same facts regarding women's training. While women often attend local programs roughly in proportion to their numbers in the membership, their participation in residential programs away from home falls off markedly. A study done by the Education Department of LO (the federation of blue-collar unions in Sweden) showed that women make up the following percentages of participants in trade union courses of varying duration:

- study circles (evening programs) 30 percent
- one-week courses 25-30 percent
- two-week courses 25-30 percent
- six-week courses 11-12 percent
- three-month courses 7 percent

Similarly, the figures in Germany show that while the percentage of women attending residential schools has been increasing year by year from 1970, when it was only 4.6 percent, in 1976 it was just 13.8 percent of the total enrollment.

Where eligibility for advancement in union office depends upon completion of prescribed levels of schooling, it is evident that women—whatever other barriers they have to surmount—will not be available for union office if they do not or cannot get the training.

Why are women consistently absent from the upper levels of union education? Why do they have difficulty in taking part in the elementary programs offered in the evenings?

The explanation lies in women's double burden of jobs and home responsibilities. Women find it harder to arrange to leave home for extended periods of time than do men. A Swedish study of 1,073 participants in programs at four union schools showed that 50 percent of the women attending had no children, while only 35 percent of the men were childless. Of the remainder, those with children, 50 percent of the women had children over 11 years of age, but 56 percent of the men had children under 6 years of age. While most men were fathers of young children, the women either were single or had put off coming until their children were able to some degree to take care of themselves.

Part of the problem is that husbands protest the inconvenience of a wifeless home, or may actually forbid their wives to go to a residential school.
where they will be living and studying with large numbers of men. Husbands can be a more formidable obstacle to women's going to school than children. When women at a course of the General and Municipal Workers in Great Britain were asked why they didn't participate more in education programs, the cry went up, according to an observer, "Our husbands!" In Birmingham, an informal meeting of women stewards in the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) made a similar response. Austrian textile workers noted a comparable problem in recruiting women to their courses.

Many women work part time. This is particularly true in white-collar and distributive trades and in government employment. These women often are passed over by selection committees as lacking permanent commitment to the labor force or to the union. (Some unions do not even accept them as members.) Even when women are full-time workers, union officers making selections for the schools may see them as inappropriate candidates for higher union education. Neither they nor the women have many role models of women in high- or even middle-level union office. Women officers in local unions are mainly stewards in predominantly women's departments, which men often see as unimportant to the life of the union and as not providing experience to prepare them for higher levels of union work.

Employers, too, are responsible. In several countries laws that call for the election of works councilors also provide for released time for their training. But employers rarely provide substitutes for persons who go off to school and thus throw extra burdens on fellow-workers, which in turn creates tension and difficulties at the work place.

But women's low participation in union education rests to a large degree on their family and work place circumstances. In addition, they lack self-confidence, and are reluctant to compete in a classroom with men who, they assume, are better prepared and more competent than they. Women have come to adopt the men's view that unions are essentially men's clubs where women are unwelcome, or at best only tolerated. Incidentally, many union schools, especially in their recreational facilities, do much to support this impression.

Women who do go to the schools find men the overwhelming majority and the formal classroom intimidating. In after-hours activities, they are often alone or in a small, socially isolated group. In class, the problems discussed rarely refer to many of the work place problems unique to women.

Some Second Thoughts

In the past several years, the rapidly increasing proportion of women in European unions has persuaded union leaders to look hard at the education
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system, which has long gone unquestioned as the product of a proud tradition. We found ferment everywhere among union women, impatient with the obstacles to their union educations—obstacles that so often were merely the result of a lack of flexibility in male union leadership. In response to pressure from women activists and to the silent reproach of hundreds of untrained, newly elected women union officers, European unions have begun to experiment with times, places, scheduling, child care facilities, teaching methods, constituency of course participants, and recruitment to courses, in efforts to bring in these women. Their enthusiastic response to almost any experiment aimed at making attendance easier speaks to a great unmet desire for training. Many of these experiments may be suggestive for American women trade unionists who seek ways to activate more of their women colleagues.

Reforms, Proposals, Experiments

Opening union education to women also opens it to other previously unreached groups of members in less-skilled job categories and among ethnic or linguistic minorities. Reforms that benefit both men and women generally can marshall union support more easily, as well as cement bonds of solidarity between men and women. Many of the experiments we saw or were told about were general reforms not directed particularly to women’s needs that nevertheless materially improved women’s opportunities for participation.

The most thoroughgoing proposal, made in Sweden, is to decentralize union education to regional and local levels, restructuring courses previously given at residential schools so that they can be taken in evening classes combined with weekend programs at county seats or regional centers. The residential schools are to become mainly centers for training teachers of study circles. The Swedes will continue their centralized course planning and preparation of course materials, along with the training of teachers, to assure uniform levels of instruction. Similarly, some Austrian unions are planning “materials banks” and educational guidelines meant to standardize local programs, regardless of the size or location of the group of workers.

To make classes more available to the workers who need them, many unions are emphasizing gaining released time for training at the work site itself. In addition to the legal allowance of released time provided in legislation for training elected union representatives in certain categories, Swedish metal workers are bargaining for additional time. In several contracts they have gained seven hours per year of paid released time; their goal is to raise this to sixteen hours. NUPE in England also is obtaining day-release
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for courses as part of its collective bargaining agreements, specifically in the interests of training its rapidly growing contingent of women shop stewards.

Some unions are changing from residential to local programs specifically to make training more accessible to women. Austrian unions in some instances are breaking their one- or two-week residential courses into periods of a few days, with short residential periods spent at the schools or even at locations nearer home. The Austrian textile workers, for example, have substituted for their basic eight-day residential course two three-day programs. The Swedish metal workers have shortened their courses at the central residential schools, and a number of Swedish unions offer study circles supplemented by weekend or three-day residential schools at the conclusion of the study circle program.

To reach union members at their work places, the central labor federation education department in Austria is adding an education officer to the roster of each works council. The effect, it hopes, will be to increase the number of women activists and to initiate more women into officer training programs.

The experience in general adult education with what the Swedes call “dialogue pedagogics” is penetrating trade union educational practice. Women, often shyer in a group than men, can be inhibited by formal classrooms where the teacher holds an authority position that replicates patterns of work and family patriarchy. The new methods stress active participation, research, and report writing in groups of four or five, with teachers assisting students. Women report that they feel less estranged and find themselves more able to participate as equals.

Correspondence courses have always played an important part in European trade union education. Now these have been combined with courses offered on TV. In Britain, the BBC has developed, with the Trade Union Congress and the Workers Education Association, a special “Trade Union Studies” section. Programs include study workbooks for use at home. Often groups watch the programs together and work their way through the materials with or without teachers. The special advantage for women is that study and work can be done at home or in small groups of neighbors or fellow workers.

New Approaches Directed Especially to Women

In addition to the released time programs discussed above, the Austrian white-collar workers in the private sector (GPA) now list among their bargaining demands the extension of released time to include substitute (deputy)
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councilors. A high percentage of these are women who, under this provision, will be better prepared to do their jobs in substituting for absent works councilors, and also more ready to run for the regular councilor office.

Several unions have turned to their own kinds of affirmative action to ensure that more women are admitted to their courses. Standard practice has been to make sure that at least two or three women were enrolled in every course. Now, in such unions as NUPE, with its majority of women members, most of whom are new to trade unionism, the central office takes the responsibility of deciding on admissions. From among nominees offered by the locals it chooses persons not previously or not recently trained, and women. The union seeks to enroll not less than equal numbers of men and women in each program, a situation in which women cannot feel isolated and in which they have more opportunity to shape the nature of the discussions.

Greater women's participation, some unions have found, is simply a matter of invitation. At a British weekend school for new women stewards, women told of their difficulties in finding out what courses are offered. The problem is that unions mail information to chief shop stewards or presidents of works councils who either sit on it or pass it on to their buddies. Women don't hear of the programs unless some special effort is made to reach them. In Austria, the women's divisions of GPA and the Metal Workers have greatly increased the number of women taking training by creating "hot lines" between the women's officer at headquarters and the women shop stewards throughout the country. When a course is to be offered, women can find out about it directly and quickly without having to depend on the man at the head of the local organization.

Trying to meet both women's difficult and often rigid domestic schedules and their transportation problems is not easy for course administrators. But we found many efforts being made. To avoid weekends, when women often have to do their shopping and major housework, classes can be scheduled on weekdays with the union or the employer paying for lost time. In Bielefeld, a major textile center in Germany, the union's women's division organized a support network where retired women members provide transportation and child care for both weekend and mid-week programs.

In NUPE, many women members work part time. A study showed that while 59 percent of men stewards had no previous training in their union duties, 78 percent of the women lacked this training. Some of the men had experience in other unions before coming to NUPE, but the women for the most part were either working for the first time or having their first experience with union officership. Moreover, they were reluctant trainees. One reason, the union discovered, was that their reimbursement for class
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attendance was paid on the part-time scale, although classes were held for full days with no provision for their extra child care and transportation expenses. NUPE experimented in one of its divisions with half-day training for twenty instead of ten weeks, but the prospect of a twenty-week commitment overwhelmed many women. Finally, the union tried rewriting its program into a ten-week format with an accelerated half-day course. Thus the union made clear its willingness to alter training time to make it as flexible as possible, adjusting it to the daily routines and circumstances of members.

Child Care at Union Schools

Women's attendance at classes, indeed even at meetings, frequently depends on their ability to arrange for child care. Unions are beginning to experiment with providing this. The most pressing need occurs, however, when a woman wants to participate in a residential course of several days or weeks. Brunsvik, the oldest of the five LO schools in Sweden, introduced child care for its students (notably, for both men and women) several years ago with a kindergarten accommodating about ten children. Recently a study was made of thirty benefiting parents over a period of a year and a half. Many had been skeptical before trying it out, but afterwards all but one were strongly in favor of the program. Rather than isolating parents from other students, they said, the children's presence tended to create a more intimate bond among all participants, breaking down the formal, anonymous atmosphere and even reducing the drinking in leisure hours! Participants valued the shared responsibility of helping with children in the evenings during their free time.

A variety of child care options have been tried elsewhere. Some Swedish unions provide babysitting grants to course participants who have children under age seven. The German white-collar union (DAG) school in Walsrode arranges with a local kindergarten to accept children daytime for the length of each course.

The common objections that unions raised to explain their failure to take responsibility for child care were, first, the cost of maintaining centers at the schools (although some schools were designed and built to include such centers) and, second, the burdens placed on parents and presumably mainly on mothers during evening hours. These objections were not based on prior experience, but rather on an unwillingness to experiment. While residential child care may not be the best answer for either children or parents, as some women we talked with contended, help in solving the child care problem certainly would aid many women otherwise excluded from union-sponsored training. Unions are, again and again, considering the alternatives open to them.

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New thinking about the significance and impact of trade union activity on family life has led unions and other institutions in some countries to experiment with programs that draw in the whole family. The German Ministry on Family, Youth, and Health subsidizes "family seminars" in unions and in other community organizations, to which husband, wife, and, in some cases, children are recruited. The goal here is not primarily to provide babysitting, but to educate husbands and wives together on the aims and problems of trade unionism and on the implications for the family of women's work role. Some unions have had rewarding experiences in including children in discussions with their parents. The Swedish Metal Workers Union has just rewritten its education program to emphasize the concept of "the trade union family," and experiments along this line are being undertaken in Austria and Great Britain as well.

Courses for Women Only

Courses designated for women only are controversial. Their critics say they are segregationist and often of lower quality, and thus handicap rather than help women. Their defenders see them as necessary to introduce women to trade union life in a supportive atmosphere where they can talk freely, learn how to participate effectively in public meetings, make mistakes without undue embarrassment, and possibly even have some consciousness-raising and assertiveness training.

On the whole, Swedish unions have abandoned women's programs in favor of "equality programs" to which men are recruited as well. Nevertheless, it was in Sweden that we found the most outspoken and determined efforts on the part of women, mainly in the white-collar unions, to set up women's committees, women's study and consciousness-raising groups, and even women's caucuses at district levels. As a consequence of these self-generated programs, women had won office and gained official recognition within the unions for support of women's conferences and programs. In the metal industry in a few large union locals, men have come to see that if they are to succeed in recruiting women to trade union training, they will have to organize special women's courses. Customarily only two or three women have turned up in the standard mixed courses, but special programs have attracted fifty or more women to each course.

In Germany, special women's courses account for a high percentage of all the women trained in the Federation's schools. In Great Britain, TASS (Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Staffs) of the Amalgamated Engineering Workers has used regional women's courses focused on "how to get equal pay" to help mobilize its rank-and-file white-collar women for
union work in general. Though TASS's regional women's committees include men, these yearly courses have been reserved for women in order to create a women's movement within the union. From these classes, TASS women have gone on to organize other women, as well as to revitalize the life of the union locals generally. In Austria and Germany, women's courses on such topics as women's pension rights, maternity leave, vocational training, and legislation have encouraged women unionists to join with other women's groups for more effective lobbying on behalf of legislation.

Integration of Women's Issues into Trade Union Education

As valuable and successful as women's courses may be in supplying the necessary support women need to rise in today's male-dominated union world, lasting change in the union—as in the labor market and society in general—will come only with the education of union men on the "woman question."

When the Swedish blue-collar unions abandoned their separate women's division and education programs about 1965, it was with the understanding that "equality issues" would become part of the general curriculum. The metal union led the way in revising its courses so as to eradicate sexism and to present subjects such as child care, equal pay, and equal access to jobs, among other issues, as topics vital to the lives of workers of both sexes.

Similarly, the German metal workers' school added a course on how women's work challenges traditional family patterns. This unit in the program includes a film, *Lohn und Liebe (Wages and Love)* that raises issues used for later class discussion. The Women's Division of the union, evaluating this approach, admits that it has not increased the number of women attending the central training schools. But at its 1976 conference it reported that "joint school programs have proven to be an appropriate platform from which to formulate a single set of interests and to make a larger circle of male union officers aware of the special problems of women's employment." The metal workers' union also has developed two model courses on the special problems of women and the union and made them available to its education directors. Other German unions are adding material on this theme to their regular curriculum. The Women's Division of the Chemical Workers' Union, for example, has course modules available on three topics: "Fair Job Classification," "Women's Wages," and "Healthy Working Conditions."

A somewhat different approach, used by the Austrian metal workers' union, is to bring men into established women's courses. This union has
renamed its women's courses "Courses on Women's Problems," and actively recruits men to them. The German Federation School at Hamburg-Sasel succeeded in enrolling as many as one-fourth of the students from among its male members, and its director reports that men gain a new understanding not only of the problems discussed but of what it means to be a member of the minority sex in a group. For the first time men heard women speaking up, and learned about their views of living in a male-dominated work environment and union. For their part, the women were surprised and gratified to see themselves leading discussions with men present.

Conclusion

The increase in women in the work force since World War II has challenged the traditional roles and status of women in work, home, and union. As with other institutions, unions and their leaders have been slow to respond to the change or even to recognize it as a continuing phenomenon. But women's new legal status, which insists that they are neither second-class citizens nor reservists in the army of wage earners, has penetrated unions as it has other institutions of the labor market.

Unions are coming to recognize that their continued growth depends upon active recruitment among this indispensable body of workers. Successful recruitment requires integrating women into all levels of union activity and decision making. As women's self-confidence grows and their rights become more deeply rooted, they will not be satisfied merely to be dues-paying non-participants in organizations that determine the conditions of their work lives. They will insist on holding union office, and on training to prepare them for it. They will have to begin by putting forward proposals and demands to this end, and by suggesting methods and programs that suit their needs and aspirations. The experience of other countries, rich and ready to draw upon, speaks to many of the needs and problems of the American labor movement.