

The Gender Gap Union Leadership: Strategies for Change

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INTRODUCTION

There is a saying in the labor movement: The leadership should look like the membership. More women and people of color are moving into top leadership positions. But, just as in other parts of society, women are underrepresented in union leadership. We address the extent of the gender gap in union leadership, why it matters, and what we can do to fix it.

HOW BIG IS THE GAP?

Currently, women make up 46 percent of the U.S. labor force and 44 percent of union members (U.S. Department of Labor 2007). So, if the leadership of unions looked like the membership in terms of gender, about 44 percent of leaders would be women. There is no one number that quantifies the extent to which women are represented in leadership. One issue is that there are many levels of union leadership: stewards, officers, and executive board members at the local level; international union staff and officers; state and local labor council leaders; and federation leaders. Data are available for some, but not all, of these levels. Starting at the highest level, one of three (33 percent) of the top officers of the AFL-CIO is female (AFL-CIO.org, 2009a), as are 21 percent of the members of the Executive Council (AFL-CIO.org, 2009b). Similarly, 20 percent of the Change to Win Leadership Council is female. One of the two female members, Anna Burger, is the chair (Change to Win, 2007).

Selected international comparisons indicate that women comprise 25 percent of the top federation officers in Australia, including the Presidency (ACTU, 2009); 40 percent of top officers in South Africa (COSATU, 2009); 50 percent in Canada (Canadian Labour Congress, 2009) and 67 percent in the United Kingdom (TUC, 2009).

Milkman (2007) examines top leadership within U.S. unions in 1978 and 2000 (see also Cobble and Bielski Michal, 2002). She reports that in 2000, 38 percent of AFSCME's top leaders were women, compared to 52 percent of their members. Using this information, we can create a women's representation ratio ($38/52 * 100 = 73$) that is one possible measure of the extent to which the leadership "looks like the membership". A representation ratio of 100 would be a perfect match, and a ratio less than 100 would indicate women are underrepresented. Of the nine large unions listed by Milkman, this ratio of women leaders ranged from 73 (AFSCME) to 13 (IBT). The data also indicate remarkable change over time. In 1978, for example, AFSCME's representation ratio was only 8, and two of the unions listed (CWA and IBT) had no women in top leadership.

At the local level, Melcher et al. (1992) find that women are well-represented as stewards, comprising 31.4 percent of stewards and 32.4 percent of members for a ratio of 97. However, only 14 percent of local union presidents were women (ratio of 44). Minority women fared even worse, with a ratio of 33. Chaison and Andiappan (1987) found that 34 percent of local union leaders in Canada were women. They also report that women leaders also tended to hold lower-level positions than the men, hold offices in smaller local unions, and have fewer hours and receive less pay for their union work. Similar findings were reported in a case study of a British trade unions (Ledwith et al., 1990) and by Chang (2005). Overall, the evidence suggests

that women have made progress at the lowest levels of union leadership (i.e., steward), but less so at higher levels.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Unions help to close the wage gap for women. For 2006, union women made about 30 percent more than non-union women (U.S. Department of Labor 2007). In addition, unionized workers are more likely to have health care benefits and pensions. Given the economic benefits to women of unionization, does the gender of the leadership matter?

We think it does, for a number of reasons. First and perhaps most obviously, women's earnings are still significantly less than men's, with U.S. women earning only about 81 percent of what men do. But unionized women earn 85 percent of what men do (U.S. Department of Labor 2007). Unions have done a great deal to equalize pay within a job classification; but many jobs are segregated by gender, and the jobs that are dominated by women tend to have lower pay. There has been relatively little protest about this inequity in recent years. Unions could do more to close this gap.

A second reason is that women might choose to advocate for different issues than men do. In the Melcher et al. (1992) study, 63 percent of male union leaders agreed with the statement, "Women's concerns are accurately represented by male union leaders." But only 27 percent of the women agreed with that statement. If women were well-represented in leadership, unions might focus more on issues such as higher pay for female-dominated work, as well as non-traditional topics, such as workplace bullying, interpersonal justice, and work-family balance.

A third reason why women's leadership is important is that it could help the labor movement as a whole. Declining unionization rates, the current economic crisis, increased globalization and the dominance of neoliberal policies have put tremendous pressure on labor unions. Traditional union leadership has not been effective in addressing the crisis of job loss and decreased membership. A new type of leadership is needed. While we cannot predict exactly what leadership approach would be successful, the idea of building a broad pool of potential leaders to draw upon seems essential. If large groups of workers are excluded from union leadership (e.g., women, people of color), then we are needlessly squandering the talent and skills that might bring about a new, more effective response to this crisis.

Some aspects of women's leadership styles seem especially well suited to the labor movement. For example, studies suggest that women are less competitive and hierarchical than men. Instead, women are more cooperative, interdependent, and concerned about the welfare of the entire group (Winter 1988, Jacobs and McClelland 1994, Schwartz and Rubel 2005). Since unions are democratically structured organizations, a cooperative style seems appropriate. Women are also less likely to be tolerant of unethical business practices and unscrupulous negotiation tactics (Franke et al. 1997; Volkema 2004; Swamy et al, 2001), attitudes that are consistent with labor union goals.

Women are also more likely than men to be transformational leaders, which is characterized by being a role model, inspiring others, strategic thinking, innovation, and mentoring and developing others in the organization (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly et al.2003). Transformational leadership has been found to be more effective (Judge and Picollo, 2004). As capital has become globalized, some see a need for a global labor movement to serve as a countervailing force (Bronfenbrenner, 2007). An organizational and institutional change of that

magnitude calls for transformational leadership, and women are more likely than men to be transformational leaders.

For all these reasons, it appears that unions would benefit from having more women in leadership positions. In order to make that happen, it is helpful to understand how union leaders develop.

HOW UNION LEADERS DEVELOP

In contrast with the copious research on leadership styles and effectiveness, there is significantly less research about how adults develop their leadership skills over time (Avolio 2007). Work generated by Kieffer (1984) and replicated and refined in later studies (Kaminski et al. 2000; Kaminski 2003) addresses this issue. The simplified version of the model has four stages. The first stage is *finding one's voice*. This focuses on understanding oneself as a person with a legitimate role and opinions to offer in an organizational setting.

The second stage is *developing basic skills*. In the union setting, this might mean working on a committee, taking workshops to improve communication skills, or learning a technical skill that is central to the union such as grievance handling or organizing. Union activists in this stage benefit greatly from having a mentor. A second factor that particularly helps activists in this stage is belonging to a group of peers who meet regularly and are at a similar stage of development. The peers can be a huge asset to each other, because they can ask questions without fear of being embarrassed in front of their mentor.

The third stage of the leadership development process is *figuring out the politics* – and it is a stage at which even experienced leaders can stumble. Once individuals have the technical skills they need, they look for opportunities to use those skills. They start noticing and asking questions about how things really get done in the union. Depending on their interests, they might take on special projects or run for office.

The fourth stage in this journey is *setting your own agenda*. At this point, the new leader has mastered the technical and political skills, and sets their own directions. They initiate and lead projects that others carry out. Once a leader has reached this stage, they typically become a mentor to others.

This four-stage model has considerable conceptual overlap with a different model of women's union leadership development. Ledwith et al. (1990) identify three issues to be resolved – entry, consolidation, and directing – over four stages in a union career: activist, local leader quasi-elite leader, and elite leader. Although the two models are organized differently, they share many overlapping ideas. The models are compared in Table 1.

In the Ledwith et al. union career model, the *activist* stage deals primarily with issues of entry and corresponds to finding one's voice. In this stage, members initially become active, typically for one of three reasons: family background that valued union activism, injustices of mistreatment of workers or being sponsored or encouraged by union leaders. It is perhaps in this stage that the two models most closely correspond.

The second stage, *local leadership*, corresponds to developing basic skills. Having a mentor or sponsor was also identified as key in this stage. In the union career model, the key challenge at this stage was consolidation of power bases. Resistance from male members, both in the workplace and in the union, was a common issue.

Table 1: Two models of how union leaders develop

	Four-Stage Model		Union Career Model	
	Stage	Issues	Stage	Issues
<i>First stage</i>	Finding your voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling like your opinion matters • self-esteem • family background • threatening events 	Activist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family background • response to injustice, change initiated by management • sponsorship
<i>Second stage</i>	Developing basic skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communication skills, union skills (e.g., grievance handling) • working under the direction of others • importance of both peers and mentors 	Local leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consolidation of power • importance of sponsorship for women • importance of peers for men
<i>Third stage.</i>	Figuring out the politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning how things get done • leading projects 	Quasi-elite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • importance of sponsorship and support from members
<i>Fourth stage</i>	Setting your own agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing and leading projects • mentoring others 	Elite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family and childcare issues
<i>Authors</i>	Kieffer, Kaminski et al., Kaminski		Ledwith et al.	

The third stage in the union career model is moving into the *quasi-elite*. Women who succeeded were supported both by mentors who were above them in the hierarchy and by rank-and-file members. This is perhaps one version of “figuring out the politics,” the third stage in the other model. Finally, the fourth stage of both models, *elite* activism and setting your own agenda are very similar.

HOW CAN WE INCREASE THE RATIO OF WOMEN UNION LEADERS?

Recent work by Eagly and Carli (2007) suggests that no single strategy alone will result in a balance of female and male union leaders. Instead, multiple strategies must be employed to achieve an increase in the proportion of women leaders. Models of leadership development are helpful for identifying points at which current union leaders—male and female—can take action to increase the number of female union leaders. The suggestions below have been drawn from a variety of sources, including Eagly and Carli (2007) and the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (2007), and are grouped to correspond to the four stages of the model.

First stage: Finding your voice. The primary goal in this stage is to encourage participation and ensure that the newly active member feels that the union values her voice.

1. Reach out and encourage participation. This preliminary stage assumes that the potential leader is a relative newcomer—someone who would benefit from some socialization to the values and norms of the context (Kwesiga and Bell, 2004). Local leaders—stewards and officers—can have a significant impact in encouraging non-active member to attend a meeting or otherwise participate in the union. And they can help socialize the newly active members into

the union leadership. Simply reaching out to new members on an interpersonal level can have a large impact, and foster a far more inclusive environment that is welcoming rather than adversarial.

Second stage: Developing basic skills. There are several strategies that union can put in place to help women develop basic skills: training, mentoring, and establishing a cohort.

2A. Offer training and development for everyone, including targeted training for women and minorities. Union leadership requires a range of skills from technical knowledge in areas such as labor law to interpersonal skills such as conflict resolution and communication skills. The skills can be developed through training. Women activists may benefit from training specifically targeted at women. Women's schools offer a collaborative, supportive environment in which to learn. They also have women instructors as role models. There are a number of union women's summer schools or conferences offered in the U.S. Prominent among them are the four regional women's summer schools co-sponsored each year by the United Association for Labor Education (UALE) and the AFL-CIO. A number of universities and labor unions offer their own programs as well. (See Greene and Kirton (2002) and Kirton and Healy (2004) for their analyses of women's schools in Britain.)

2B. Create a cohort / peer group. Union activists in the second stage can benefit from having a group of peers who are going through the same learning process. A large local union could, for example, hold workshops for newly elected stewards, and as a group teach them about grievance handling and member mobilization. Having a set of peers that meets regularly and is dealing with the same issues creates a network that can provide both technical and social support for years to come. A cohort of new women leaders might be especially effective. Melcher (2008) reports that one union in Massachusetts followed this strategy by deliberately choosing to send a group of women to leadership development training at the same time. The group formed a strong bond, worked together over time, and supported each other as they rose through the leadership ranks.

2C. Create and maintain mentoring programs. It is well-established that effective mentoring can add greatly to the development of all leaders—men as well as women (de Vries et al., 2006). Formalizing mentorship programs helps ensure that women have access to mentors.

Third stage: Figuring out the politics. In this stage, emphasis shifts from individual skill development to building an understanding of the organizational context and power structure.

3A. Create and maintain mentoring programs. Mentoring can be as valuable in the third stage as in the second. In the third stage, mentors help women understand the power structure and how to accomplish goals within it.

3B. Offer appropriate roles. We recommend that leaders avoid "tracking" women into certain, less valued roles, and instead, develop them so that they can achieve "clout" jobs (Burke and Vinnicombe, 2005). In local unions, women are more likely to be recording secretaries than presidents. They are likely to chair a committee that organizes parties and picnics, rather than one that organizes new members. Women need to actively seek – and incumbent leaders need to nominate women for – roles in grievance handling, contract negotiations, and organizing.

3C. Provide opportunities in the broader labor movement. Activists who attend program and events outside their own local union can gain a broader perspective about how unions work.

Fourth stage: Setting your own agenda. As women advance to higher levels of leadership, they are more likely to be one of a few, or perhaps, the only woman at that level of the hierarchy. Interventions in this stage – reducing tokenism and institutional changes – are designed to increase the number of women at these levels, and help those that have arrived stay in their positions.

4A. Reduce tokenism. Women face increased pressure when they are in the position of being the only woman at a given leadership level. As Kanter (1977) has noted, when representation in a group is not balanced, this creates problems for the individual in question (Chesterman & Ross-Smith, 2006; Li et al, 1999). Having several women on a committee of 12 or so can be very different from having one woman members First, the tone of the committee is likely to change since the presence of women in leadership roles can change the degree of collaboration and collegiality (Ross-Smith et al, 2005). Second, having several women members enables the male members to see each woman as an individual, rather than as the stand-in for all women (Yates, 2006). And third, when an issue has different implications for men and women, having multiple women on the committee makes it more likely that the women’s views will be heard and not dismissed.

Kirton and Healy (1999) report that a large British trade union, the Manufacturing, Science and Finance union (MSF) achieve a women’s representation ratio (described earlier) of 103 on its National Executive Committee in part by reserving four seats for women. While this is a controversial practice, it has been effective. Without these seats, the representation ratio would be 75. Women can only hold the reserved seats for two consecutive terms, after which they are assumed to be better known and more likely to be elected to one of the regular seats. A similar strategy was used by the Ontario Federation of Labor. It improved the gender leadership ratio. In addition, one union leader said it “changed the issues raised, changed who gets to hear what we talk about, and changed rank and file perceptions of who has power; in fact, it has put the discussion of power itself on the agenda” (Briskin 2002).

4B. Sustain commitment through institutional interventions. Women and people of color who devote their careers to the labor movement need to see a reciprocal commitment from the labor movement that supports them in leadership roles. Towards this end, the AFL-CIO passed a diversity resolution in 2005 that calls for a range of efforts to increase the diversity of union leadership, including

- Requiring that delegates from each union to the AFL-CIO convention generally reflect the gender and racial composition of its membership
- Requiring diversity in AFL-CIO-sponsored conferences and trainings
- Making the AFL-CIO a model of hiring practices for women and people of color
- Urging unions to report annually on the representation of women and people of color in their membership as well as in staff and elected leadership positions at all levels.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that women union members need to see themselves reflected in the leadership of the labor movement. We also believe that the labor movement needs the type of leadership that women offer. And while many union leaders would agree with us, progress has come very slowly. We think that it is unlikely to speed up in the absence of specific strategies and changes in organizational structures and cultures. By aspiring to—and ultimately achieving—a leadership that looks like its membership, unions and union leaders can fully develop the careers and

potential of all of its members, rather than limiting this to a select few. And we believe it can make unions more effective overall.

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