

ORGANIZING FOR WOMEN'S ISSUES

*From AUD's **Manual for Survival for Women in Nontraditional Employment***

It is not easy to be one of a few women doing work that has traditionally been reserved for men. You may experience isolation and hostility, not just from management, but even from some of the men within your union who should be a source of support. The old boys network may be very much alive in your union. Women of color and lesbians may experience added discrimination and harassment. By getting together with other women in the union, you can gain the support you need to survive the stresses of life on the job. As part of a women's committee or caucus, you can overcome your individual powerlessness and fight effectively for equal treatment and responsive leadership in your union.

Working with Your Sister Unionists

Finding and getting to know the other women in your union, who are spread out at many different job sites, may not be easy, but it is well worth the effort. You will meet women in apprenticeship classes, at union meetings and on the job. If there is an advocacy or support group for tradeswomen in your area, you can find out about sister union members by attending their meetings. Supportive male co-workers may be able to tell you about women they have met on previous jobs. Some women have even been able to obtain information about other women from the union's office staff (who often are women). Whenever possible, be sure to take down the phone numbers and addresses of the women you meet so you will be able to contact them again.

Despite the solidarity women workers often feel with each other, you may have to overcome external or internal resistance to getting together. If there is more than one woman on a job, men (bosses or co-workers) may try to prevent you

from talking to each other by "dyke-baiting". Understandably, some of their tactics may intimidate many women, who fear becoming further alienated from the men they must work with alone on a daily basis. It will help in your organizing to be aware of how these fears inhibit you and your union sisters, especially when you encounter women who seem reluctant or uninterested in joining with other women. Try to fight these barriers and reach out to other women on the job. The camaraderie and support you will enjoy with other tradeswomen will help you deal with any harassment directed at you.

Once you have found each other, you can try to start meeting on a regular basis. You might want to begin by getting together informally, after work or around union meetings. At first, you may just be interested in exchanging experiences, sharing your knowledge and giving each other the support you need to survive. For example, you may talk about how to deal with degrading sexist remarks or harassment; how to resist being used as a "go-fer" or being given the most difficult, dangerous jobs; or how to get the training you need.

Forming a Women's Committee or Caucus

Depending on your level of energy, interest and commitment, you might want to organize a formal committee or caucus to undertake education and political action for women in the union. A women's committee or caucus in your union can serve the needs of women members in many ways. It can help women take the first step toward union activity by explaining how the union works and providing a supportive environment in which to get involved. This will help increase the overall participation of women in the union. It can:

- ✓ educate women members as to their legal rights on the job and as union members;

- ✓ organize to defend and support women in combatting discrimination and harassment on the job and in the union;
- ✓ mobilize women to advance their needs (such as affirmative action, pregnancy or parental leave, pay equity) in contract negotiations;
- ✓ improve representation on the job through use of the grievance machinery; and
- ✓ encourage women to become stewards or to run for office through leadership training and support.

However you proceed, discuss with the group the question of including male co-workers. You do not want to isolate yourselves and give the impression that this is an exclusive group which bars men from participating (although you may want to maintain a female majority). Form allies with male co-workers to show how your caucus or committee can enhance working conditions for all workers. Point out the issues that you can work on that are "gender neutral" and solicit their encouragement and support. In any event, decisions should be made by the group, not a few individuals.

You will have to decide whether you want to become an official union committee or remain an independent caucus or pressure group. There are benefits and drawbacks to both. As an official union committee, you may receive financial and organizational support making it easier to reach out to and interest more women in your activities. You may be able to get the names and addresses of all female union members, meet in the union hall, make reports at union meetings, post announcements on union bulletin boards, and publish articles in the union newspaper. On the other hand, local officials may try to restrict or control your activities, thus limiting your effectiveness.

Alternatively, if the union refuses to recognize your committee or you simply wish to remain independent, you have the legal right (under the LMRDA) to form a caucus without the backing or support of the union. As a caucus, you will have greater freedom to set your own agenda and

organize aggressively. Depending upon the membership's relationship with the union, the caucus' lack of ties to the officials may give you greater credibility with the members. However, the lack of financial and organizational support from the union could handicap your organizing efforts, making it more difficult to get the word out and build your group. It also may subject you to the open hostility of the current union leadership. A women's caucus may be more viable in a union which already has existing union member or dissident groups with which you could ally yourselves.

If you wish to create a formally recognized committee, first examine your constitution and by-laws to determine the procedure. You may need the approval of the Executive Board. To lay the groundwork, members of your group should make themselves known as good trade unionists by regularly attending union meetings and, if possible, volunteering for tasks. This will prove your seriousness and commitment to the union.

When you feel you are ready (even two or three committed activists may be enough), your group should draw up a proposal stating your reasons for forming a committee and your anticipated activities. Your arguments should stress to the leadership the benefits of granting your request. These may include satisfying their legal obligation to undertake affirmative action, or helping to strengthen the union. Then approach the President or a member of the Executive Board to ask for their cooperation in putting your proposal on the agenda of an Executive Board meeting. You may also present such a proposal at a membership meeting. If possible, you may want to make copies of your proposal available to members of the Board ahead of time.

One of your members with speaking rights (apprentices may not have the right to speak from the floor) should prepare a brief presentation and think through questions that might be raised. If you are acting without the support of the union leadership, be sure to have as many supporters as possible present at the meeting. If the proposal is turned down, you should consult outside groups to help you appeal or

apply political pressure to your union officials (See Appendix, Resources).

Maintaining Your Committee or Caucus

Once you are established, you can get down to business. Announce your formation. Reach out and try to involve as many women as possible. Try to hold regular meetings at a time and place convenient for as many women as possible. If your members are in different locations or working odd hours, you could try to alternate the location and time of your meetings. Depending on your size, you will have to think about developing a leadership core, or dividing up responsibilities. You should figure out what resources you have (who has a computer, a typewriter, etc).

There are many different activities you can undertake, depending on your priorities and the needs of women in your union. In addition to the ongoing exchange of experiences and emotional support you will provide one another, you will almost certainly be called upon to defend women who are experiencing problems in the apprenticeship program (not getting properly trained, or threatened with termination), with the hiring hall (not being referred to jobs), or on the job (being sexually harassed). In such cases, you can submit letters of protest to the appropriate union officials; secure similar letters from outside advocacy groups; circulate petitions; or help the member file internal charges or prepare a defense to charges filed against her.

You may develop campaigns to pressure the union to adopt a sexual harassment policy; conduct training on sexual harassment for members; present demands for an anti-discrimination clause or parental leave provision in contract negotiations; or combat pornography. You can organize orientations for new members and apprentices and sponsor education and training workshops (with the support of outside groups). You should continue to attend union meetings and to speak out about women's concerns in the union. At some point you may want to raise a

problem, such as inadequate changing facilities for female workers, at a meeting. This requires careful advance planning. It's a good idea to have a specific, realistic proposal for correcting the problem; maybe you will focus on one job site and ask for one enclosed area to be set aside for women. Try to locate other members who share your concerns and would be willing to work with you to improve the situation. Meet with your supporters ahead of time and brainstorm about solutions. Write out resolutions and statements. Assign speakers to address the meeting. Rally all the support you can for your proposal ahead of time, and make sure that people who support you turn up at the meeting.

Proposing a change in the by-laws to the membership requires even more careful preparation. By-laws must not be in conflict with the international constitution, and usually amendments are subject to the approval of the national or international. Additionally, some unions only allow by-law amendments to be submitted once a year. Generally, an amendment proposal must be submitted at one meeting, read at the next meeting, and then voted on at a third meeting so that members have time to consider, debate and mobilize their forces for the vote. Check the language of the proposed amendment very carefully to make sure it says exactly what you want it to say, and nothing else. Check other unions for similar provisions and see how they are written.

No matter what your issue, given your small numbers you can increase your impact by working with male allies. You undoubtedly have heard some members complain about lack of contract enforcement. If you work with male co-workers on those issues that affect all workers, such as unsafe jobs, they will be more likely to help fight for the needs of women workers.

It will take a lot of work, patience and perseverance to maintain a dynamic, effective women's committee or caucus. Some tips:

- ✓ Set up a structure and share responsibilities.
- ✓ Teach and encourage all members to become leaders so the success or survival of the group is not dependent on a few charismatic people.

- ✓ Be democratic in all your decisions.
- ✓ Try to work through differences and deal with personality conflicts head on, so they do not become destructive.
- ✓ Don't expect results too quickly.
- ✓ **Recognize and celebrate your successes.**

Dealing With Issues That May Divide

Tradeswomen, like all workers, come from different walks of life. Your group will include women of different backgrounds, races, national origins, religions, sexual orientation, ages, and political beliefs. While it is important to unite around those issues you have in common, it is also important to recognize and deal with differences. Women of color should be supported in fighting discrimination based on their race as well as on their gender. A campaign against racial discrimination can strengthen your group and broaden its support by appealing to male workers who face the same problem.

Similarly, straight women who are called lesbians can find common ground with their gay co-workers. Confronting the problem head-on by talking about how "dyke-baiting" can be used to divide women will be more beneficial to the group than avoiding the issue. If members of the groups recognize the strength of different points of view and treat each other with respect, differences can unify rather than divide.

Strategic Planning

Step 1. Small Group Discussion: Get people together at lunch, at someone's home, or a special meeting, to have an open discussion about the problems you face. Get everyone's ideas out; get everyone to participate.

Step 2. Selecting a Problem: You can't solve everything at once. Pick one or a related group of problems to work on. Two key points:

- 1) Start small -- pick a problem you think you can win.

- 2) Use a democratic procedure.

Step 3. Selecting a Plan of Action: This may be difficult. Again, get everyone's ideas out and decide democratically. Some tips:

- 1) Build on what people are already doing.
- 2) Talk it through step by step.
- 3) Work hard for consensus; avoid coercion.
- 4) Talk to others who have experience with the issue to avoid past errors.

Step 4. Carrying Out the Plan: It's important to get as many people involved as possible. Get others to share responsibility.

Step 5. Evaluation: This may be the most important step. You can learn by doing and then discussing what worked and what didn't.

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