A GUIDE TO ORGANIZING WOMEN'S COMMITTEES:

Everything You Need to Know to Make a Difference!

The Berger-Marks Foundation

THE WORKER INSTITUTE
ADVANCING WORKER RIGHTS AND COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATION

Cornell University
ILR School

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January 2015 | Worker Institute

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Gray and Figueroa are the authors of the study, "Women's Committees in Worker Organizations: Still Making a Difference" (http://bit.ly/16iFiCh), on which the Guide is based. They are associated with Cornell University's Worker Institute, which brings together faculty researchers, educators and practitioners in programs to advance worker rights and collective representation.

About The Berger-Marks Foundation

The Foundation was established with a bequest from the estates of Edna Berger, the first female lead organizer for The Newspaper Guild-CWA, and her husband, the legendary Tin Pan Alley song writer Gerald Marks.

We seek to bring the benefits of unionization to working women and to assist organizations committed to those principles. The goal is to provide financial assistance to women who are engaged in union organizing and to assist working women who want to organize other women into unions through training, research and other resources.

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Welcome to the Wonderful World of Organizing!

This guide provides a step-by-step introduction to forming women's committees in unions and in other worker-centered organizations. Meeting the challenges involved in organizing co-workers with a comprehensive plan and a determination to succeed in meeting the goals of the mission is what organizing is all about.

Along the way, you will meet new people, develop bonds of fellowship and friendship, increase your skills, and learn to trust yourself and your sisters. Throughout the process, you and your sisters have the potential of strengthening your union or organization by bringing a sharp focus to issues that impact the lives of working women. You can serve as a beacon, a model, and an example for the women—and men—in your organization and beyond.

The recommendations here are based on an in-depth study of Women's Committees in Worker Organizations by Lois Gray and Maria Figueroa, faculty at Cornell University's Worker Institute, with funding from the Berger-Marks Foundation. The study examined the experiences of a range of local and international unions and worker centers to determine some of the most effective strategies, programs, and objectives of established groups. These serve as a guide for organizing an effective committee.

Decades ago, unions and other organizations limited the participation of women or organized them into separate unions. Such restrictions are not the case today.

So why create separate forms of outreach for women now?

The fact remains that genuine, systemic equality for women at the workplace, in their unions, and within the labor movement is still unrealized.

Take a look at your organization. If the answer to more than one of the following questions is "Yes," forming a women's committee might be an effective way to achieve long-unrealized goals.

- Is there a need to encourage more women to become active in the organization?
- Should the organization be addressing certain issues that it is not? For instance, pay equity, childcare, maternal leave, sexual harassment, and unequal access to promotions?
- Are women under-represented in leadership positions?
- Are there women with a strong interest in acting as catalysts to challenge the status quo, yet who are not involved in your organization's activities?
- Do you see a need for specific skills-training, such as public speaking, running a meeting, or mentoring potential new female leadership?

Mobilizing and organizing women to champion their interests—and ultimately, the advancement of their organization—is an effective means to hasten change.

So—get started—and enjoy the experience!

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The ABC's of Getting Started

Educate Yourself

The first step is to educate yourself about the history and experience of women's committees in your organization. If there has never been a women's committee, don't be afraid to start something new. Every seed that's planted and grows starts with an individual or individuals. Take the initiative. Do some research—and then put it to use.

What Do You Need to Know?

Has there ever been a woman's committee in your organization? Does your local or international union have a women's committee? If so, is there a representative from your local union affiliated with it? What are the rules for such a committee? How do you get it approved? Who do you have to convince that there is a need for such a committee? Has there been a committee that fell apart? If so, the experience of that group might have important lessons for you as you begin to organize. What were the pitfalls and barriers that resulted in that committee's demise?

Join With Others

Often, doing things with others is easier, more productive, and more fun. So find some sisters to puzzle things out and proceed together. Figure out who has an interest in changing things—those who take an interest in issues, who question the status quo and ask good questions—then try to enlist them in your project and make common cause with these like-minded sisters. It's possible that you may identify just one person who has an interest in joining with you to start organizing. Whether you start with just two, or more, the point is to begin. Start laying a foundation and others are sure to join you as the momentum builds.

First Steps: Planting the Seed

The push to set up a special program or committee for women can begin in one of several ways: It can start with women in positions of leadership, with women on staff, or with local activists, all of whom are looking for space to discuss their issues and ways to achieve official recognition. Identify your mission by selecting agenda items that generate the most interest. These can be issues related to your workplace that need to be addressed, such as flex time or programs to provide awareness and support for issues related to women's health. The need to identify an agenda that will generate interest and other willing partners in organizing your committee is crucial.

Women's committees contribute to integration of women into the mainstream of organizational activities.

Photo © Myyfifi

Understand the Political Process

It's important to keep in mind that unions are political institutions. All of the players you'll be interacting with hope to stay in office. So find the overlap—the place where it is in their interest to support your goals. Another tip: Remain diplomatic. Always try to achieve the desired result without alienating officials who may need to be brought along gently. Unions are also bureaucracies of a sort. It's up to you to learn how things work—officially and unofficially. Another avenue to establishing an effective committee is to build relationships with allies as well as increasing visibility and awareness of the contributions from women in the union and through the work of the committee. Inevitably, leadership changes within organizations—either very slowly or sometimes more dramatically. A successful committee should aim for the ability to navigate changes within the organization—a four-legged or three-legged stool is stronger than a two-legged stool.

Broaden Your Base by Finding New Allies

Sometimes you'll find unexpected allies. If so, find ways in which they can contribute to your project. There is a long tradition of women organizing at union conventions and in other forums such as summer schools for trade union women, classes, or conferences. In these settings, women discuss issues of unequal treatment on the job, and a host of other issues. These venues provide an opportunity to swim in a bigger pond and discuss matters that concern you outside of your normal channels. It's a good opportunity to learn what others are doing and to take a page from their books. Cross-fertilization—sharing stories and learning from others' experiences is an important part of building something new and strong. Another important source of support comes from male members of your organization. One decision each committee needs to address is whether to allow male members to attend meetings and participate in the work of the committee. Some very successful women's committees have taken this approach, while others exclude men from participation. The subject deserves a healthy discussion and needs to be a part of the decision-making process.

Prepare Your Proposal

A key step is to prepare your proposal and the arguments to support it ahead of time. Give this step serious thought. Marshal your facts and set them out in a clear, comprehensive format. In other words—make a list and be prepared. Here's a short and handy formula, the Five Ps: Prior Preparation Prevents Poor Performance. That way, if you meet with opposition, you will be ready.

Pay-Offs for the Organization and Participants

As part of your brief, think through what is to be gained from organizing a committee for women. What follows is a short list of benefits for the organization and for the women who are members. You likely can add to this list from your own experience.

Benefits for the Union/Organization

More women get involved in organizational activities, resulting in unity in bargaining and enhanced effectiveness in political action. Research shows that women need independent space to identify and create their own culture where they can speak out about concerns and identify strategies to engage with and change the dominant culture.

Benefits for the Members

- Develop a greater voice in decision-making—women-only groups create opportunities for women in many ways, including mentorship and preparing them to take on leadership roles. Participation empowers women.
- Representation in leadership—women's committees can play a role in politicizing women to become a successful constituency within the organization.
- Issues such as pay equity and family leave become a priority.

Starting Small is an Option

Many women's committees have started off by bringing women together in social settings—for example, getting together to socialize at a bar after work, meeting up at a fast-food restaurant—or a coffee house. Informal gatherings provide many benefits. Women get to know each other better and build a level of trust. Discussion leads to a better understanding of the issues that will bring people together and motivate them to take action. Then at some point, it will be time to move toward a more official status.

Recruiting and Identifying Participant/Members

There are many strategies for reaching out and building participation in a women's committee. Here are some examples:

Your organization has many built-in opportunities to carry its message to members. These might include newsletters, radio programs, e-mail, and Websites. Enlist these forms of communication in your mission. Start by including your announcements for meetings, activities and summaries of what your group is doing. Use these ready-made formats to get your message out, attract new members, and let others know what they are missing. At some point, they might choose to climb aboard.

The organization can provide contact information for members of the group. The initial contact should identify your purpose and inquire about an interest in taking part in organizing a committee.

You can ask to be placed on the agenda at meetings to announce your goal and inform members of your activities.

You can place an announcement in your organization's newsletter and include contact information. Always assign someone to take photos and write up your programs for the union newsletter/website. These articles can attract new members and gain credibility for the committee.

Spread the word about meetings by placing announcements in strategic places—worksite bulletin boards and women's rooms are ideal for posting information.

Palm cards are one way to get the word out—prepare these small cards and distribute them to active members to hand out to allies and those who will see to it that they are given to potentially interested participants.

Make sure that all active members introduce themselves at meetings. Announce future plans so others can get involved.

Speak up and reach out! Building your organization is an ongoing process. Be creative and try new approaches, such as asking stewards to help with recruitment. Build your organization—and then keep building.

Social Media—such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or texting—can be a great tool for organizers. Identify which, if any, of these media your target audience uses and be sure to establish a presence there. If you're not familiar with these online forums, connecting with someone who is offers another outreach opportunity.

Surveys

The first task for many women's committees is surveying members to help identify those with an interest in expanding the committee, determine the level of activity they are willing to contribute, see which issues are of greatest interest, and establish the committee's mission. How will the work be structured? Do potential members want the committee to have a mixed focus of social and political activities? Which issues receive the greatest response and elicit the most interest? What kinds of involvement are potential participants willing to take on at the outset?

Composing and distributing a survey (see the Appendix for a sample survey), compiling the results, and determining how to publicize the findings can introduce the committee, convey a sense of the work involved, and help shape the structure and outline of the committee's mission. In short, it can serve a number of key roles, while introducing participants to the role of organizer. Keep it simple and straightforward, so it is easy to complete.

Move on to the next steps without losing momentum—provide duties to people who indicate an interest in organizing. Top the agenda with the items of greatest interest. Use the survey to start building a consensus—for your mission, structure and work.

Remember to provide leadership—a rudderless committee will founder and fade away. Every project needs direction and leadership. The task is to figure out what form that will take.

A successful committee should aim for the ability to navigate changes within the organization—a four-legged or three-legged stool is stronger than a two-legged stool.

Photo © Workers Defense Project

Mapping Out Your Mission

Because women's committees can aim to achieve many goals, it is helpful to determine the committee's primary focus. This allows you to organize your work within a framework—it provides a roadmap. As you gain experience, you can expand your objectives. But it helps to set out some primary goals.

Here are a list of objectives you may consider incorporating in your mission:

- Stimulate women's involvement in and support for organizational goals and activities.
- Encourage women to become active in the politics of the organization.
- Develop and promote official and unofficial mentoring within your organization. Mentoring provides many benefits, personally and organizationally, and is a tangible path to developing new leadership.
- Respond to women's job concerns and provide specific training to address the issues so as to create true equality in the workplace and in the union.
- Train women for leadership roles by enabling them to gain experience and supply opportunities for women to attend union conferences and trainings. Identify and provide input on collective bargaining issues to the union's negotiating team regarding issues of concern to women.
- Initiate organizational and public policies relating to issues of concern to women.
- Community outreach.
- Networking.
- Support for charitable causes.

Examples abound of women's committees that have incorporated these objectives as part of their mission. Rather than itemize them, focus on your goals—one step at a time. The fundamental and underlying principle of creating a successful mission statement is to derive your mission from members and from those who form the activist core and who will provide the leadership. There should be a close fit between the two—participants need to see their goals and wish lists reflected in the overall design of the work if they are expected to help build and grow the organization.

Photo © Highlander Research and Education Center

Selecting a Structure that Works for You

Many of the decisions regarding structure will be guided by your organization's constitution and bylaws and models that may already be in place. A further constraint is the level of financial, logistical and other support from the union/organization.

The structure of the committee largely depends on where it fits in the overall structure of the union/organization—its relationship with the leadership and the resources available. The following are some general formats women's committees follow.

Steering committee/board of advisors. Led by a steering committee or board of advisors, committees following this model meet monthly and hold membership meetings on an agreed-upon basis. The steering committee or board determines the frequency of membership meetings based on its knowledge of members.

The Worker Center model. Worker Centers typically employ their own distinctive structures. In the case of UNITY, the Housekeeping Cooperative set up by the Workplace Project, the cooperative was structured as an autonomous entity, with a separate board of seven members or directors, elected by the membership. The head of the project serves for one year. Decisions are made on the basis of consensus and everyone participating has equal input. To become a member of the cooperative, a four-week course is required on how to run a successful cooperative, as well as a training class on housecleaning skills. In the case of Restaurant Opportunities Center—New York, the women's committee is one of four formal committees that have a full-time staff person assigned to handle day-to-day matters, run bi-weekly meetings, and meet with women members to discuss their concerns.

Putting Programs to Work

Keeping in mind that most of the work of a women's committee is undertaken by volunteers, it's important to develop a program that reflects the amount of time and energy the participants can contribute. Some groups have found that a mixture of substantive programs along with fun events and recreational activities works well.

Even a traditional activity like a bake sale can increase awareness of women's issues. One group sold its baked goods at two prices: One dollar for items purchased by men, and 77 cents for items purchased by women to highlight the pay disparity that persists between men and women.

Some groups establish traditions that come to assume a special place in the hearts and minds of the members. For example, the Women's Committee in the District Council of Carpenters holds an annual holiday party each December and collects toys for children—it's a huge hit! In Local 1 of the theatrical union (IATSE), the Sisters Committee hosts an annual brunch for members as well as invitees who have participated in regular group meetings. In 2014, committee organizers developed a video and set it up on a carousel to run throughout brunch, showcasing photos of speakers and events to highlight the full range of the committee's activities in its three-year history.

Many unions sponsor conferences for women members. Other educational programs include the annual Summer Schools sponsored by the United Association of Labor Educators (UALE) and labor education programs for women offered by colleges and universities.

The list of activities organized by various women's committees offers many possibilities. Learning from others' experiences is an important vehicle for increasing awareness of the possibilities. It is not necessary to "re-invent the wheel"—others have gone before you. For examples, read the Snapshot section (Appendix I) at the conclusion of the manual for a look at some of the programs created by established women's committees in trade unions and worker centers.

Strive for inclusion.

Assess your work—your development and progress.

Allow room to create a sense of the special nature of your group.

Photo © AFL-CIO

Unsolved Opportunities—Busting Beyond Barriers

No doubt, you will meet obstacles as you attempt to organize within your organization. It's important to remember that every challenge presents an opportunity for resolution—it's a problem awaiting a solution.

Some of the barriers encountered by others as they sought to organize include the following:

- **Opposition or indifference** on the part of male local leaders and members.
- **Internal political power struggles** can sometimes stand in the way of action in areas of the union/organization where there are power struggles.
- **Lack of dedicated resources** to support the work can be a major barrier to expanding and upgrading the women's activities.
- **Coping with a work environment** in which women face unequal treatment on the job and/or are in the minority.
- **Turnover in leadership**, such as a change in political administrations, can jeopardize programs that tackle issues of inequality which the women's program is seeking to ameliorate.
- **Balancing home and work responsibilities** and finding time for "extras"—that is, organizing—is a constant challenge for working women. Lack of time is one of the major reasons why women find it difficult to make a contribution to their unions/organizations.

Although problems likely will crop up, there are many approaches to finding a way around them. When a building trades' union refused to share membership information with women trying to organize a women's committee on the grounds that it would violate confidentiality, women devised a palm card to give to both female and male allies, for distribution when they encountered women on the job or at union meetings. The refusal to share basic membership information is one obstacle with a long history that continues into the present.

Lack of a dedicated source of financial support is another problem that arises when the union/organization is not yet fully committed to establishing a women's committee. This problem points to the necessity of arguing the case for a committee on an ongoing basis—both with individual members and with key leadership. A record of activities that produce demonstrable results can be an effective persuader and has great potential to change minds. The space for creative applications of imagination and intelligence is wide open—find a way around barriers to achieve your goal. As Mary "Mother" Jones advised back in the 19th century: "Don't mourn, organize."

Another option is to caucus and independently organize women outside the official parameters and structure of the union/organization. When barriers are firmly in place, this might be the way to proceed. There are other considerations when figuring out the road ahead. Decades of organizing by women preceded what has come to be accepted as the official history of the Women's Committee in the District Council of Carpenters. There are many other models that fall into this category. Consult the "Resources and References" section for materials that develop this approach.

Implications for Organizational/Union Policies

The experience of the national and local worker organizations that provide the bulk of the case studies for this manual shows that:

- Targeted programs for women are particularly helpful in organizations where women constitute a small minority of the membership and must struggle for recognition on the job and in the unions.
- In groups where women have reached a balance in the share of membership but continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles, the opportunity for networking and leadership development plays an important role in motivating women to participate, gain experience and training, and begin to express their views.
- Even in groups where women constitute a majority of the membership and have achieved leadership recognition, women's committees are valued as a voice for their concerns.
- Rather than dividing the membership, women's committees contribute to integration of women into the mainstream of organizational activities.
- Case studies examined in the survey/study demonstrate that separate outreach plays an important role in involving women and tapping their potential for leadership in worker organizations—an outcome essential to the growth and power of workers' organizations.

You can use these findings as you formulate your proposal and marshal your arguments to explain why a women's committee is desirable in your union.

Turn lemons into lemonade and don't be daunted by obstacles.

Set new boundaries and keep reviewing your goals and mission.

Photo © AFL-CIO

Achieving Your Goals—How To Get There

The key ingredient to achieving the twin goals of involving and activating women is to find and address their concerns. Grassroots outreach is essential. Members must recognize they are part of the program. The approval and organizational support of top officers also is essential for success. How to achieve both—this is the real challenge.

Here are a few examples that you can learn from and borrow:

- Advisory Committees that recommend action to the executive/leadership board.
- Involvement of union officers in programs sponsored by women's departments (in national unions) and women's committees (at the local level).
- Union-supported training programs that focus on the skills and knowledge women need to achieve their objectives. These can include leadership training—public speaking, how to chair a meeting, Robert's Rules of Parliamentary Procedure; how to cope with sexual harassment and bullying; career development.

The Five Ps:
Prior Preparation Prevents Poor Performance

Photos © USW Women of Steel

STRENGTHEN
Working

A to Z Guide: How to Organize a Women's Committee

Getting Started

Anyone with the willingness to take the initiative—member, staff, or officer—can organize a women's committee.

Shape and Structure

If your union/organization has guidelines for setting up such a committee, they will determine the shape and structure of your committee. Another consideration that needs to be thought through is whether the committee should be official, unofficial, or outside official channels.

Mission and Members

You can start organizing by discussing how to proceed and assessing the needs and desires of the potential members informally, in a social setting, or more formally, through a survey.

Many Models

Leadership is an essential ingredient! Figuring out how to make this happen must be a strong component of planning. Otherwise, the operation will flounder and fail. Much of this decision-making might depend upon your union's mandates—the constitution and prior history. Some committees use an Advisory Board model, some a Chair/Co-Chair model. Whichever model best fits your committees' needs, leadership is essential to keep things together and moving forward.

Make Space for Members

With any leadership structure, there must be space for membership participation and initiative. One way to do this is through establishing subcommittees, such as finance, recruitment, programming, publicity. Subcommittee members then assume responsibility for these areas of work.

Reach Out

The membership or participants should feel included, welcome, and know that their input is desirable. There are many ways to do this, but it's essential that people feel they are a part of building and shaping the committee and do not get the sense that all tasks and planning fall to a few people. Paradoxically, a handful of people typically carry the load. The important thing to remember is that the open-door policy works best. Continue to solicit members' ideas, suggestions, and contributions, and make this effort an ongoing part of the process.

Meetings

It's important to set an agenda for every meeting and to share it. Also key: Start and end meetings on time, so that people with busy lives can know what's required from them. It's also essential to have a regular schedule of meetings—another way to ensure that people can plan their lives. Meetings should not be scheduled so frequently that those involved feel burdened or overwhelmed. But they also should not take place too infrequently, since you need to meet often enough to keep the momentum flowing. Another system is to rotate the days of the week for meetings. In this way, people with obligations such as classes or work on a Monday night, for instance, will be able to attend meetings on another night.

Photo © AFL-CIO

Getting the Work Done

Some groups select or elect a group of officers who assume positions such as Chair or Co-Chairs (to chair the meetings, guide the group); Secretary (to take minutes of meetings and prepare them for distribution); Treasurer (to keep track of the finances and report on them). Other groups use an informal structure, rotating tasks. This method allows members to develop their skills, such as chairing a meeting, preparing the agenda and taking minutes. Subcommittees are a good way to get work done, with people assuming a specific area of responsibility and preparing reports on their activities to report to the group at large. As noted previously, the committee needs to "blow its own horn," that is, someone should be assigned to take photos and write up committee programs for the union newsletter or website. There are many ways to do this—by having a communications committee, assigning someone to be responsible for communications or assigning this to the secretary.

Programs

An essential ingredient of planning activities is to incorporate input from participants. The group needs a mechanism for members to submit their ideas and make a contribution. Whether it is by placing an item on the agenda to solicit suggestions for program activities, or through a survey or other methods, input is critical for the success of the group's well-being. One good source of ideas for programs is borrow liberally from groups with a good track record. For example, some committees have focused on women's health issues. There are wonderful resources available to provide expert assistance and materials in organizing educational programs on women's health. Groups such as Planned Parenthood, the state or city health departments and the American Cancer Society all have local branches available. Some hospitals offer community outreach programs that you can tap into for assistance in organizing your program. Some committees we surveyed regularly reach out to community resources when putting on programs, such as women's studies departments at local universities. There are always experts for each topic your committee might want to tackle. Advocacy organizations and college and university programs will eagerly contribute their expertise to helping you address these issues.

Broad Tent

While it's true that, as the slogan says, "You can't please all the people all the time," it's important to strive for inclusion. Many voices are stronger than a few. Always keep in mind that you want participants to feel welcome as you work your plan. This means that you need a mechanism enabling you to continue to solicit input from participants on a range of the issues such as recruiting new members and planning activities. There is always room for creativity and input from all.

Progress Assessment

Think about how you plan to assess your work—your development and progress. Numbers are one key measure. Make sure you find a way to keep track of the various indicators of your work. How many people attend a meeting? Variety of events? Number of speakers, etc. Evaluations are another tool. What do people like and what suggestions do they have for improving future events? Collect, evaluate and distribute the information and find ways to incorporate the best ideas.

Archiving for Activists

Organize your records and start from the outset, to keep a record of your work. This includes a full set of records—minutes from regular meetings and subcommittee meetings, reports, and publicity announcements. This includes hard copy documents and social media tracking. Collect it and keep it together in one location. There could be an official archivist for the group—someone

with an interest in history and a sense of order. Archiving your organization's history means documenting the work you do and maintaining a paper trail. Storing this collection is an important item to figure out in advance.

Traditions

Every organization creates its own ways to mark anniversaries, celebrate milestones, and bring people together to bond and to forge a common identity. Some examples include:

- Annual brunches (Stagehands/IATSE Local 1),
- T-shirts. Women Electricians, Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3 printed t-shirts, with their slogan, adapted from Star Trek: "To Go Boldly/Where No Woman Has Gone Before."
- Labor Day Parade Contingents. United Tradeswomen in New York City established a tradition of participating as a group in the city's Labor Day Parade—just one of many traditions the group created to forge their common identity.
- Special programs. Clerical Employees Local 1549/District Council 37 had a tradition of putting together an annual evening of "Herstory" programs. The program featured women's labor history through skits, speakers, music, and quizzes—a night of fun to recognize women's contributions to the labor movement.

The main point is to allow room to create a sense of the special nature of your group—that which unites you and brings you together.

Reaching Out

There are many sources of expertise, information, educational programs and resource materials available to learn from and be inspired by—you do not have to re-create the wheel. Universities and colleges in your area with Labor Studies and labor education programs offer many resources. The Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) is a national organization with many local chapters across the country that offers support and many resources for organizing. Books, movies and reference materials are available in abundance, so find them and put them to use. A handy formula goes like this: Educate yourself; educate others; educate your organization. Women have been organizing within the labor movement for more than 200 years. So make this history and wealth of experience your own. Stock your shelves—both mentally and physically—with these treasures and then—put them to use.

Only Connect

If you enjoy official status in your union, it's important that you maintain good ties to the officers and/or officials or whichever body you are reporting to and that you share your reports and programs, even in the planning stages. An open door policy works best.

Create a Checklist and Check Items Off on It

Everyone from organizers to surgeons recognize that checklists are useful, even essential. Creating a checklist for your work, whether a big project or a smaller one, such as organizing an event, helps you to think through each step, and helps you avoid skipping some essential piece. From beginning to end, add every step to your checklist—and then put it to use. Check off items as they get done. Checklists assist with setting deadlines for specific tasks, such as inviting speakers or getting out press releases.

Development

Despite any barriers you may encounter, keep going. Turn lemons into lemonade and don't be daunted by obstacles. Stay positive. It's impossible to organize anyone or any thing without optimism. Remember that a key component is to develop leadership skills and knowledge of everyone involved. Set new boundaries and keep reviewing your goals and mission. Assess your progress and bring in new ideas and people. This ensures that your organization will stay fresh.

We hope this guide proves helpful.

After you have put the manual to use, we'd like to hear your story, how you got started, the strategies you developed to cope with obstacles, and any suggestions you have for others as they attempt to organize a successful, productive committee.

Please share your experiences with us by emailing ***bergermarks@gmail.com*** *so that others can benefit from what you learn.*

Snapshots of Women's Committees

The first set of snapshots looks at two programs established by Worker Centers in the New York Metropolitan Area specifically to meet the needs and concerns of female members: the Workplace Project of the UNITY Housecleaning Cooperative and the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC).

Workplace Project, UNITY Housecleaning Cooperative: Members of the Workplace Project Women's Committee, the Fuerza Laboral Femenina, created a workers' cooperative, a project that resulted from responses to a survey seeking to identify the most urgent issues facing members and women in the community. The survey was followed by a pressure campaign against private for-profit agencies that were charging excessive fees without guaranteeing a minimum wage or a contract with the employers. Creation of the cooperative enabled women to develop their skills in addressing issues of gender equity. The work involved in keeping the cooperative operating as a viable economic entity served as a training ground for its members.

Restaurant Opportunities Center-NY: The Sept. 11, 2001, tragedy at the World Trade Center led to creation of the ROC as a way to secure employment for restaurant workers who could no longer work at the site. The mission encompasses workplace justice campaigns to expose poor working conditions and force restaurant owners to improve them. The group conducts research, trains members for a variety of restaurant positions, and puts forward "high road" practices to treat workers fairly without impeding the employer's profitability. In 2007, the ROC-NY women's committee emerged after a workplace justice campaign found that one of restaurant employees' major grievances was sexual harassment. The women's committee is one of four committees functioning in ROC-NY, and the only one that focuses on a distinct subdivision of the group. A full-time staff member is assigned to handle day-to-day planning. The committee developed a Peer Education Sexual Harassment training program, and members who participate in the three-day workshop get compensated for the 25 hours of training. The committee also developed Career Ladders for Women, a program enabling women in ROC's job training classes to discuss the challenges they face in an industry where the majority of workers are male.

The second set of snapshots looks at three women's committees in local unions in New York City: the Carpenters, the Transport Workers and the Stagehands.

Carpenters: Eleven women are on the Steering Committee, which meets monthly. Twenty-five to 50 women attend the quarterly general meetings. Attendance at general meetings fluctuates, based on the subject of the speaker. In 2002, the union allowed the formation of the women's committee and was very supportive, providing mailing lists and other needed data. The union leadership at the time also paid for the costs of the women's committee, encouraging members to offer food at their meetings and hold the meetings at the union hall. The union also contributed the time of a staff person who had attended the national conference for women and then spearheaded the drive to form the committee. Although men wanted to attend committee meetings, the Women's Committee decided to preserve a space for women to come together and talk about issues of concern and address problems without men in the room. The women's committee ran a formal mentoring program, with both men and women serving as mentors. This program was especially effective in helping apprentices within their first few years to learn the ropes of the union and the industry.

Local 100 Transport Workers Union: The Women's Committee has maintained the same basic structure since it was officially established in 2004. The committee chair is appointed by the president, along with two co-chairs, representing different sections of the membership. Union members are invited to participate. Meetings are held monthly. Locating a meeting space has been a problem. While no regular budget has been established, the local union has funded a variety of activities, including sending women to conferences such as the Northeast UALE Women's Summer School. One of the strengths of the Local 100 Women's Committee is its attention to issues of women's health, including a women's cancer awareness workshop; on-the job harassment; and a need for maternity-related benefits.

Stagehands Local One IATSE: Local One's women's committee originated at the UALE Summer School. One of the members attended, was inspired, and followed up by surveying her fellow members at small dinners and through word of mouth for the next year. She found that there was a strong desire to form a women's stagehands group. The Local One Chapter of IATSE represents 3,100 stagehands in the entertainment industry, and traditionally, membership has been passed from father to son. Women still constitute a very small minority in the union—about 5 percent. The Sisters Committee has found many allies throughout the membership, including union brothers who support their female co-workers and the committee. The committee holds a formal meeting every other month and on alternate months, it schedules social events. The committee has continuous access to the union president, and male members are invited to attend committee meetings. The presence of union officers at some of the meetings has helped the committee integrate into the larger union community.

The next set of snapshots provide highlights from women's committees in AFSCME District Council 37 locals, with a brief look at some of the programs they have organized to educate and empower the women in their unions.

AFSCME: District Council 37 Locals

Local 375 Civil Service Technical Guild: The Women's Committee of Local 375 has a long and interesting history. Women pioneered in city employment in civil service professional roles and feminism infused their work. Years later, another generation displayed the same interest in grasping their history in the long struggle for equality. The Committee invited Columbia University History Professor Alice Kessler-Harris, author of many books about the history of women workers, to address their group and opened the meeting to other women's committees and union members throughout District Council 37.

Local 1655 Metropolitan Transportation Authority Clerical-Administrative Employees: Members organized an evening out, beginning with a pizza dinner and followed by the movie, "North Country," a fictionalized account of the first major successful class action sexual harassment lawsuit, which was brought by women miners in northern Minnesota. The committee chair asked each woman to bring a written paragraph to their next meeting that reflected their reactions to the film. These responses formed the basis of a discussion with a guest speaker about the movie and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Local 2627 Electronic Data Processing Personnel: Hosted an evening program that featured the film, "With Babies and Banners: The Story of The Women's Emergency Brigade," followed by a discussion. The film describes how women in the UAW supported sit-down strikers at the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan, in 1936-37. The evening also included an exhibit of books and materials on women's labor history.

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The last set of snapshots looks at the experiences of women's committees in three International unions—the Electrical Workers, the United Auto Workers, and the United Steel Workers:

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW): The National Women's Conferences sponsored by the union since 1997 seek to encourage women members to get involved in the life of the union, to develop their leadership skills and to promote solidarity among members by reaching out to male members about issues of concern to women. Participants in the conferences express the following as priority goals: 1) equal treatment on the job—for example, women's access to apprenticeships in construction; 2) protection from sexual harassment at male-dominated worksites; and 3) opportunities for women to move into union leadership positions.

United Automobile Workers (UAW): In 2013, the UAW's Women's Department, along with the AFL-CIO, introduced a "War Against Women" program at the union's annual women's conference at the UAW education center in Black Lake, Michigan. The event was prompted by reports that UAW women continued to face various forms of sexual harassment in predominantly male UAW-represented worksites. The program addressed a wide range of behaviors, including catcalls, propositions, and challenges to women's workplace grievances by male bargaining unit members. The UAW had the vision to see that women continue to be underrepresented at all levels of the union, which pointed to the need for deeper and more widespread women's leadership development and commitment to carry them out. Since then, the UAW Women's Department has been working with the AFL-CIO to take the "War Against Women" program into the field and encourage men and women in the UAW's regions and locals to acknowledge and address structural sexism and provide opportunities for action and change.

Women of Steel—United Steel Workers (USAW): The Steelworkers have instituted numerous new initiatives to increase the participation and activism of its female members and to increase the number of new women in the organization. In 1998, then USAW President George Becker appointed a special assistant to the president for women's issues and programs to develop, coordinate, and direct these initiatives. Women's committees have been developed and linked by regional councils and an International Women's Committee composed of a coordinator of women's programs from each of the Steelworkers 12 districts. In 2000, nearly 800 participants came together in Pittsburgh for the first International Women's Conference to lay the foundation, and the USAW held a second one in 2001 to build global solidarity and building grassroots alliances. Additionally, the Steelworkers in Canada developed an innovative, educational course on women's leadership that has been adopted and modified for use throughout the United States. These relatively new initiatives, loosely packaged as Women of Steel, an activist arm of the USAW, involve a range of actions—conference resolutions, women's committees and specific campaigns such as the union's domestic violence program in Canada.

Sample Survey

May be distributed to discover the priority needs and interests of women in your organization.

Dear Sister,

To assist the Women's Committee in planning for the next year, please let us know your priority concerns. Rank items listed below (1), (2), and (3).

Equal pay
Family benefits
Maternity leave
Safety and health
Training in job related skills
Sexual harassment
Women's health
Leadership training

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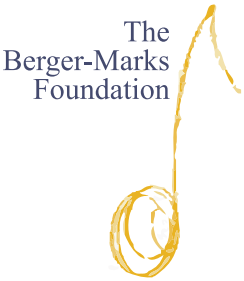

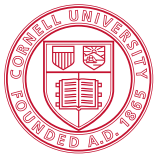

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