

# *A Guide to Organizing Women's Committees*

## *Participant Outline*

This workshop will introduce you to *A Guide to Organizing Women's Committees: Everything You Need to Know to Make a Difference!* by Jane LaTour, with Lois Gray and Maria Figueroa, published by the Worker Institute at the Cornell University ILR School and the Berger-Marks Foundation.

**Objectives:** At the end of the 2-hour workshop participants will have

- Examined the *Guide* as a tool for developing or strengthening women's committees
- Explored what a woman's committee could do for the union or organization
- Reviewed some steps in creating a women's committee
- Discussed strategies for recruiting members to the organizing committee
- Practiced creating a plan to form or grow a women's committee

### **1. Who's in the Room and Where Are We?**

Stand along the appropriate line indicating either where you think your union or organization is in the process of establishing (line A) or growing (line B) a Women's Committee. Introduce yourself and your union or organization and say why you are standing where there.

### **2. Workshop Overview**

Listen to the review of objectives and agenda. What questions do you have? What ground rules are important to you to be able to participate fully in this workshop?

### **3. Introduction to *A Guide to Organizing Women's Committees***

Listen to this overview of *A Guide to Organizing Women's Committee*. What questions do you have?

### **4. Why Organize a Women's Committee**

What do you think should be the purpose of a women's committee? What do you think an effective women's committee might do for your members and for the union/organization?

### **5. Practice Planning Part I: Building the Organizing Committee: Who to Recruit**

In small groups use the handout, *Recruiting Your Committee: Possible Members*, and the accompanying worksheet, to review the list of possible members to recruit for the organizing committee. Choose your top 2-3. Be prepared to share your top 2 and why you chose them.

### **6. Practice planning Part II: Getting Started**

Working with women from the your union or organization, use the *Getting Started Worksheet* to begin planning the next steps in either growing an existing women's committee or starting a new one. Be prepared to share one next step you or your group will take.

### **7. Wrap-up**

Here – finally – is your own copy of *A Guide to Organizing Women's Committees*. Additional copies of the *Guide* and this workshop outline are available on the Berger-Marks website: <http://www.bergermarks.org/resources/reports.html>

### **8. Evaluation**

Please share what worked for you in this workshop and what you would suggest we change when we do it again.

Thank you for your participation and good luck with starting or growing your women's committee!

# *A Guide to Organizing Women's Committees*

## *Overview*

### **1. Introduction—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.

### **2. The ABCs of Getting Started**

Suggestions for education, recruiting, setting an agenda, considering the politics of the union or organization, finding allies and preparing a proposal.

### **3. Mapping out Your Mission**

Suggestions for determining the primary focus of the committee.

### **4. Selecting a Structure that Works For You**

Some sample formats for an effective women's committee.

### **5. Putting Programs to Work**

Developing an effective program that works for members.

### **6. Unsolved Opportunities—Busting Beyond Barriers**

Identifying and overcoming obstacles. Seeing challenges as opportunities.

### **7. Implications for Organizational/Union Policies**

Benefits to the union and all members of having a women's committee.

### **8. Achieving Goals—How to Get There**

Strategies for involving and activating women.

### **9. A to Z Guide: How to Organize a Women's Committee**

A step-by-step map for organizing or reinvigorating a women's committee.

### **Appendices:**

#### **I. Snapshots of Women's Committees**

Short descriptions of workers centers and union women's committees.

#### **II. Sample Survey**

Sample short survey to identify and rank members' concerns.

### **Resources and References**

A list of resources on working women's issues, organizations, and history.

# *Why Organize A Women's 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.

## **What can a women's committee do?**

A Women's Committee can take on many projects such as:

- Encouraging more women to become active in the union or organization.
- Moving the union or organization to address certain issues such as pay equity, childcare, maternal leave, sexual harassment, and unequal access to promotions.
- Increasing the number of women in leadership positions.
- Sponsoring or encouraging skills-training for women members, such as public speaking, running a meeting, running for office, or basic unions.
- Setting up a mentoring program for potential new female leadership.

## **Why have a women's committee?**

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

## **Benefits For The Union/Organization**

- More women get involved in organizational activities – more members to do the work of the union or organization
- Greater unity and power in bargaining
- Enhanced effectiveness in political action.

## **Benefits For The Members**

- Develop a greater voice for women in decision-making. Participation empowers women.
- Increase the voice of women as a recognized constituency within the union or organization.
- Increase the number of women at all levels of union leadership and decision-making.
- Issues such as pay equity and family leave become a union or organizational priority.

## *Recruiting Your Committee: Possible Members*

You and a group of your union/organization sisters are interested in starting a women's committee. Although the membership of your union/organization is about 50-50 women and men, issues of specific concern to women have not been addressed in bargaining or action priorities and women do not participate in leadership in the same numbers as men. The union represents a diverse membership, but the union/organization's leadership body has eight members – three of whom are women and all but one of whom are white. One of these women is part of your small organizing group and has stressed the need to recruit key women to the organizing committee. So far you have identified five potential recruits for the committee. They are:

### **Union women**

#### **Samira James**

Samira is a long-time dedicated worker who has never been active in the union. She is well liked by her coworkers and is someone other members go to with personal problems. Recently Samira has become the guardian of her three grandchildren and she is having a difficult time arranging for after school care, taking time to attend school meetings during the day and handling having a sick child who needs to stay home.

#### **Marina Lopez**

Marina has only been a union member for two years. She was, however, elected a shop steward a year ago, and has been both assertive and successful in this role. When Marina heard about the possibility of forming a women's committee she stated very publicly that it was "a silly idea" and that the union should be putting its efforts into fighting management, not union brothers.

#### **Anna Chan**

Anna is new to the union, but she has been involved in the labor movement for quite awhile. She was very active in the union at her old job, was a delegate to her Central Labor Council, and was a member of CLUW (the Coalition of Labor Union Women). She has not been happy with your union's "lack of attention" to women's issues, and as a result has not wanted to be involved.

#### **Laura Kahn**

Laura was an active union member until about a year ago. She has recently helped move her aging parents into assisted living and her mother has been experiencing major health issues. She is overwhelmed by the time needed to provide care and support for them and has no time to give to the union

#### **Jamie Tracy**

Jamie is a young woman who has recently gotten involved in the union, showing up at a rally for workers rights. She has been active in the immigrant organization in her neighborhood, working around legislation to allow undocumented immigrants to get drivers licenses, but does not know much about unions.

## *Recruiting Your Committee: Possible Members (cont.)*

### **Workers Center Women**

#### **Samira James**

Samira is a long-time worker center member, but has never taken on any leadership responsibilities. She is well liked and is someone other members go to with personal problems. Recently Samira has become the guardian of her three grandchildren and she is having a difficult time arranging for after school care, taking time to attend school meetings during the day and handling having a sick child who needs to stay home.

#### **Marina Lopez**

Marina has only been a member for a year. She was, however, selected to be an organizer on the center's current project, and has been both assertive and successful in this role. When Marina heard about the possibility of forming a women's committee she stated very publicly that it was "a silly idea" and that the workers center should be putting its efforts into fighting for everyone's rights, not just women's rights.

#### **Anna Chan**

Anna is new to the workers center, but she has been involved in organizing in her community for quite awhile. The last job she had was at a daycare center and she has strong feelings about issues mothers face. She has not been happy with the workers centers "lack of attention" to women's issues, and as a result has not wanted to be involved in leadership.

#### **Laura Kahn**

Laura was an active workers center member until about a year ago. She has recently moved her aging parents into her home and her mother has been experiencing major health issues. She is overwhelmed by the time needed to provide care and support for them and has no time any longer to give to the workers center.

#### **Jamie Tracy**

Jamie is a young woman who has recently gotten involved in the workers center, showing up at a rally for workers rights. Her last job was at a unionized grocery store and she was active in the union's work to pass legislation to raise the minimum wage.

## *Recruiting Your Organizing Committee: Possible Members Worksheet*

Review the brief biographies of potential recruits to your women's committee organizing group. Rank them 1-5, with 1 being your top choice. Indicate what you think each woman would bring to the work. Be prepared to share your top 3.

| <b>Member</b>       | <b>Ranking</b> | <b>Why choose her?</b> |
|---------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| <b>Samira James</b> |                |                        |
| <b>Marina Lopez</b> |                |                        |
| <b>Anna Chan</b>    |                |                        |
| <b>Laura Kahn</b>   |                |                        |
| <b>Jamie Tracy</b>  |                |                        |

# *A Guide to Organizing Women's Committees: Getting Started*

- **Why Have a Women's Committee?**  
What is the purpose of the committee? Why do you want to have a women's committee?
- **Educate Yourself**  
What is the history and experience of women's committees in your organization? Is there or has there ever been one in your organization? What are the rules for establishing such a committee? Where can you find this information?
- **Planting the Seed**  
The push to set up a special program or committee for women 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.
- **Join With Others: Building An Organizing Committee**  
Find sisters who have 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.
- **Understand The Political Process**  
Unions and organizations are political institutions. People in leadership usually want to stay there. Find the overlap—the place where it is in their interest to support your goals.
- **Prepare Your Proposal**  
Prepare your proposal for a committee and the arguments to support it ahead of time.
- **Expand The Committee**  
There are many strategies for reaching out and building participation in a women's committee. The *Guide* gives a number of examples, including hosting social events, taking on issues and using social media. Surveying members to help identify those with an interest in expanding the committee, determine the level of activity they are willing to contribute and see which issues are of greatest interest is a good early activity.
- **Broaden Your Base By Finding New Allies**  
Movement conferences and other forums such as summer schools for labor movement women and workshops can be valuable resources.

# *A Guide to Organizing Women's Committees: Getting Started*

This worksheet is best used by the entire organizing committee to begin planning, but if your whole group is not in the room this will give you an idea of how to start. If you are just beginning this process, start with Question 1. If you have an existing committee that needs to be revitalized, begin with Question 5. This process should continue with the organizing committee.

## **1. Educate Yourself**

What do you already know about the existence or history of a women's committee in your union or organization?

Where can you find this information?

## **2. Join With Others: Building An Organizing Committee**

Who else do you know who has an interest in changing things—who takes an interest in issues, who question the status quo and ask good questions? If you don't have specific women in mind what kind of women are you looking for? How will the organizing committee reach out to each of these women?

## **3. Establishing The Committee**

What needs to be done to formally establish a women's committee?  
Who will do what?



#### **4. Expand the Committee**

What can the organizing committee do in the next few months to reach out to build participation in the committee?

#### **5. First Action**

What's a possible first event or action you can do to raise the visibility of the committee, to engage more women and to give the committee an opportunity to work together? Would it make sense for you to do a member survey about issues, concerns and interest in participating?

#### **6. Broaden Your Base By Finding New Allies:**

Where can you go to find information and support – both inside and outside your organization?

## *Recruiting New Committee Members*

### **How do I get someone to consider joining the committee?**

- Ask them. Few people will volunteer their services. People usually wait to be asked.

### **Who should ask them?**

- If possible, someone they know and trust; someone whose interest they respond to - a friend, someone influential in the union or organization. But, if you cannot get someone else, ask them yourself.
- Ask in person. **Face-to-face contact is the best way to get results.**

### **What do I tell them?**

- Tell them what exactly you would like them to do. Be clear about the responsibilities of being on the committee.
- Ask what they would think about having a women's committee and want to do to move the committee forward. Listen to their concerns. Respond to the questions they raise.
- Ask them to do something they are comfortable with and that they feel they can do well. Later they will be ready to move on to new tasks.
- Let each person know their help is needed - you need them and the committee needs them.
- Let each person know how what you are asking them to do fits in with the whole effort. People want to know and understand the things they are part of and work best when they know that others are depending on them.
- Be positive

### **What should I do after they commit to joining?**

- Thank them! Let them know that their participation is important.
- Make sure they know what the next step is.