

Speech Given by Laura Unger, Secretary Treasurer, CWA Local 1150
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I used to have a button that said, "Women who strive to be equal to men lack ambition." I would wear that on top of my t-shirt which said "In order to get ahead a woman has to be twice as good as a man - fortunately, that's not difficult."

While that t-shirt is a little tight on me these days, it does help us define some of the questions of women's leadership in the Trade Unions. Is that leadership only doing what men have done, only better? Are we asking ourselves can we develop a generation of women officials as over-paid, as separated from the membership, as gluttoned with banquets, as captivated with their periodic contact with the captains of industry as the great majority of the current generation of men union leaders? Sure we can. But a women leader who sees her job as doing the same as men ~~do now~~, only better, is just an officer, not a leader.

The question of leadership is a complicated one, certainly one that I'm still trying to understand. But I do not ^{think} that leadership is ~~not~~ simply an organizational, bureaucratic question. It's a political question. Can we really say that the current union leadership are the leaders of labor? Only about 18% of the work force, and that figure goes down day to day, are actually in labor unions, and I don't think the current union leadership even speaks for those few. They offer no independent agenda that speaks for the interests of the millions of working people. When they do claim to speak for the workers, like their headlong drive behind Mondale, that election showed how much their leadership actually meant. Only 51 of union families voted for Mondale. When you subtract that 96% of Black union members voted for Mondale against Reagan most white union workers voted against Mondale and for Reagan. What's scary is that the AFL-CIO leadership will probably do basically the same thing in 1988. The question for us is-if the current union leadership are not the leaders of labor would women leaders be any more so?

Of course we want women leadership in the trade unions. Leadership should come out of the pool of membership and we are certainly a large part of that pool. We have to fight against the systematical exclusion of women in leadership. But a trade union movement who has as its leadership almost exclusively white men is not a movement that can lead anyone or one that I want a scrap of leadership in. Fighting to change the exclusionary leadership of the Trade union movement is a good fight and that fight will help strengthen the labor movement. But that is just the tip of the iceberg.

I'm the Secretary-Treasurer of a local of 2500 men and women fighting a losing battle against AT&T. I ask myself every day, is it worth it? Is it worth the strain meetings at night and on week-ends put on my family? Is it worth hating to pick up the phone because it is probably a member with a real problem that I can do little or nothing about? Is it worth going through an election every three years? Is it worth leaving my friends on the job at AT&T where I can just complain about the union and fight our small winnable battles on the shop floor? Is it worth all the compromises and the work that doesn't get done that wakes you up at 4 o'clock in the morning when you don't have to get^{up} until 6? No it's not. It's not worth^{it} if all you are doing is making the membership records a little better, handling the same grievance for the twentieth time a little better, putting out a Local newsletter a little bit better. It's just not worth it if all I am is the same kind of trade union bureaucrat I've seen all my life -- only a little bit better.

We've got to be different. We should fight for leadership in the unions because they're ours; because we're working people; because the women's movement, organized, fighting for equality can change the labor movement. Either we're radicals as women in the labor movement or we're irrelevant.

Women are at the very core of the change in the economy. Our entry in such large numbers is a result not only of our need and desire to get out of the

home but of the impoverishment of the working class. Thirty years ago a man with a union job could support his family by himself. The standard of living has been driven down so low that a two union family does not bring in enough to make ends meet, and the fact is that most families are one union families or no union families.

One hundred years ago we fought for the eight hour day. In the phone company the regular work week is being raised from 37 and a half hours to forty hours, but that is not all. If management doesn't force us to take overtime many take it anyway because they need the money to make ends meet. I'm a technician. We make a relatively high rate of pay. A friend of mine at work with a new baby, with a two income family, is working 20 hours extra a week just to get the downpayment on a house. Women know that you can't have a decent family life when you're working 60 hours a week. We knew it a hundred years ago when our banner read, "8 hours for work, 8 hours for rest, 8 hours for what you will." At a conference of telephone workers I attended in Amsterdam the Danish Womens Union is putting forward a slogan for a 35 hour week. The slogan is, "Life Begins at 35." The point is that this is not simply a question of hours. It's a question of the quality of our lives, it's a question of child care, a question of affordable housing, family relations, it's a question of whether we will allow capital the unlimited right to destroy our lives and our families.

Womens leadership means seizing on the fights that huge number of women coming into the workforce throw at us. It means dealing with the totality of our lives and that means fighting for everyone. Our numbers in the workforce and the leadership we should exert should push the labor movement beyond the legally defined limits of wages, hours and working conditions. Our fight is to push it kicking a screaming into the fight for social justice. Womens leadership, if it is to be worth anything, must be leadership for basic change in our unions and in the relations between capital and the millions of working men and women.

There was a song written during the Lawrence strike, called "Bread and Roses."

It said: As we come marching, marching,
We Bring the greater days.
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler,
One that toils while one reposes.
But a sharing of life's glories,
Bread and roses, Bread and roses.

"The rising of the women means the rising of the race." That's what
womens leadership in trade unions has to be about. That's what going to
make it worth it.