



Not just a man's world: Women's political leadership in the American labor movement [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Although women have long played an important role in working class struggles, most leadership positions in unions have been held by men. Organized labor's recent shift towards social movement unionism has led to a sense of optimism among those pressing for more gender equality among labor's elite. Yet scholarship on gender and power in other settings, including political institutions, social movements, and formal organizations, suggests other factors may also play a role in determining women's leadership in labor unions. The current research, based on a rich dataset of 70 local unions, provides important insight into the political careers of women. Beyond an analysis of organized labor, this research has implications for understanding the interplay of gender and power in formal organizations and social movements more broadly.

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1. Introduction

Whether supporting male workers or leading their own struggles against discrimination in the workplace, women have long played an important, if understated, role in the American labor movement (Dollinger and Dollinger, 2000; Fonow, 2003; Hoerr, 1997; Milkman, 1985). Despite their many contributions, the sphere of institutional union politics has generally been reserved for men (Bergquist, 1974; though see Melcher et al., 1992). For example, Quaglieri's (1989) biographical survey of 29 important American labor leaders includes only two women, neither of whom occupied the top elected office of their respective union.

Yet in spite of this entrenched chauvinism, patriarchal norms of leadership have come under increased scrutiny in recent years. Perhaps the most significant advancement occurred in 1995 when reformist John Sweeney and his slate of "New Voice" candidates, including executive vice-president Linda Chavez-Thompson, assumed control of the America's largest labor organization, the AFL-CIO (the current VP of the AFL-CIO is Arlene Holt Baker, an African-American woman). In another sign of the growing political power of women, the "Change to Win" faction of unions that broke away from the AFL-CIO in 2006 was led by Anna Burger. And in 2010 Mary Kay Henry defeated Anna Burger to become the latest female president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), one of the most influential unions today. Given efforts to increase the participation of underrepresented groups at all levels of the movement (Needleman, 1998; Sweeney and Krusnet, 1996), it appears women and minorities have significant opportunities to exercise political power within labor unions (Chen and Wong, 1998; Milkman, 2007, for a historical discussion, see Dollinger and Dollinger, 2000).

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While there is reason for optimism, to assume that these recent changes will automatically bolster union women's careers may ignore other forces at play. Scholars interested in female representation in national legislative bodies have linked women's ability to secure elected political office to predictors ranging from the support candidates receive from their political parties to gender stereotypes held by the electorate. As I show below, given the parallels between the union careers of women and those in politics, this body of research has a number of important implications for understanding women's ability to achieve power in labor unions. Both outcomes are politically motivated and require understanding the broader context within which struggles over gender equality take place. As important, labor unions straddle the boundaries of formal organizations and social movements and there is considerable scholarly debate in both fields regarding the effects of formalization on gender inequality.

Both the formal organization and social movement literatures provide the theoretical framework to identify the mechanisms by which women are able to make meaningful progress in the leadership ranks of American labor unions. Specifically, I seek to assess what factors, both organizational and environmental, facilitate a woman's ability to secure formal office within the labor movement. The analysis builds upon a rich dataset of local unions, a surprising number of which count women among their political officers. The findings reveal that the women's union careers are contingent upon a range of factors, both internal and external to the organization. Beyond labor union politics, this research provides important insight into the relationship between gender and power in social movements and formal organizations more generally.

2. Women and the labor movement

Despite the masculine image of unions, cultivated in no small part by the overrepresentation of men in top leadership positions, women have long played a critical role in the American labor movement (Cobble, 2004; Foner, 1979, 1980; Fonow, 2003). Scholars of women and labor have paid particular attention to the ways female unionists have been able to forge a strong identity despite operating within an ostensibly class-based movement (Franzway, 2000; Healy and Kirton, 2012; Milkman, 1985). And while this "movement within a movement" has been a force for change beyond the shop floor— notably providing an important spark for modern day feminists (Cobble, 2004)—organized labor as an institution has been slow to recognize both the needs and contributions made by female members (Cobble, 2007; Fonow, 2003).¹

Not surprisingly, opportunities for women to assume formal leadership positions in unions have historically been limited (though see Cornfield, 1993; Healy and Kirton, 2012; Melcher et al., 1992). Therefore, considerable research on gender and unionism focuses on the supportive role women played in labor conflicts, such as organizing foodbanks during strikes (Beckwith, 1998; Fine, 1969; Juravich and Bronfenbrenner, 1999). When women join unions, they have pushed organized labor to confront gender discrimination in the workplace (Blum, 1991). Unfortunately these issues have not been a priority for many unions; thus, it is the labor movement as much as the employer that has been the target of women's activism (Cornfield, 1989; Deslippe, 2000; Fonow, 2003; Healy and Kirton, 2000; Hoerr, 1997; Kaminski and Yakura, 2008; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, 2003). Franzway (2000) employs the notion of the union as a "greedy institution" to show how gendered expectations regarding leadership roles disadvantage women in the union. Healy and Kirton (2012), in their extensive analysis of gender dynamics in American and British trade unions, find that women continue to face obstacles to formal positions of power. In order to overcome entrenched chauvinism, female activists have created their own institutions, like the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), to increase their political power within unions (Milkman, 1985; Healy and Kirton, 2000; Roth, 2003).

Despite this long history of discriminatory treatment, the political structure of many unions appears to be opening, and may afford women new opportunities to exert formal authority in the movement. Many of these recent changes are a direct reaction to fifty-years of membership decline that has spurred a number of unions to explore social movement tactics like civil disobedience in an effort to recruit new members (Clawson, 2003; Fantasia and Voss, 2004; Manheim, 2001; Voss and Sherman, 2000). The Justice for Janitors campaign conducted by the SEIU, which relies heavily on social protest and coalitions with community groups, is an example of this new approach to unionization and appears to have a positive effect on women's voice in the union (Cranford, 2007). This campaign, which sought to organize (mostly) immigrant commercial janitors in major metropolitan cities around the United States, combined contentious political tactics like civil disobedience with the mobilization of external groups to pressure the owners of these buildings to grant union recognition to their janitors.

Through a concerted effort to involve the rank-and-file in organizing drives (Lerner, 1991), these unions have created a more open political environment that affords historically excluded groups, including women, greater access to political power. Scholars, in turn, have viewed these developments with some optimism (Milkman, 2007; Needleman, 1998), which has been borne out by the ascending of women like Mary Kay Henry and Anna Burger to top leadership positions. Indeed, consistent with women's historical contributions to the labor movement, there is evidence that women have played a critical leadership role in this most recent effort to revitalize the movement (Kainer, 2009). Yet to assume that such changes will be enough to remove barriers to greater gender equality may overlook broader structural factors and other internal organizational dynamics at play. There is a considerable body of research on gender in political institutions, formal organizations, and

¹ Evidence suggests that women in other countries also have different expectations for unions than their male counterparts. Cooke (2011) explores how the changing economic arrangements in China have affected how women view the appropriate role of the state-sponsored union in that country.

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