

# WOMEN **ORGANIZING** WOMEN

HOW DO WE **ROCK THE BOAT**  
WITHOUT GETTING **THROWN OVERBOARD?**



**EXPERIENCED UNION ORGANIZERS DISCUSS THE  
CHALLENGES THEY FACE AND RECOMMEND WAYS  
TO RECRUIT MORE WOMEN ORGANIZERS**

The  
Berger-Marks  
Foundation

*Dedicated to Organizing Women into Unions*



## A MESSAGE FROM THE **BERGER-MARKS FOUNDATION**

**In November 2004** the Berger-Marks Foundation invited 21 women who were lead union organizers to a retreat where they could discuss the challenges women face as organizers and suggest ways to recruit more of them. The New Orleans forum ran 1½ days and included local and national union organizers from 9 AFL-CIO affiliates. (Organizers from the Communications Workers of America composed the largest group, in part because CWA hosts the independent Berger-Marks Foundation.) Another major union had its participants cancel on the opening day of the retreat due to an organizing campaign emergency.

The experiences of the 19 women who did attend fill these pages, along with their recommendations about how more women could be enticed to become union organizers and what would convince them to stick with it.

The report was prepared by Sue Schurman, National Labor College (NLC) president, who facilitated the discussions at the retreat. She relied on the candid comments these women made and the recommendations they offered when asked. The foundation's trustees and an NLC staff member helped coordinate the discussions and took verbatim notes in plenary and small-group sessions.

The idea for the New Orleans forum fit perfectly with the Berger-Marks Foundation's mission: Organizing women into unions and supporting women as union leaders. The trustees — all women — recognized that too little attention has been given to why more women don't become and remain union organizers. The timing seemed right to invite experienced women organizers to help explore why. The retreat also dovetailed nicely with the first event sponsored by the nascent foundation in 2003, a women-only Organizing Institute.

The Berger-Marks Foundation began when a small group of women agreed to start a scholarship fund to honor union organizer Edna Berger, the first woman organizer for The Newspaper Guild-CWA. Later, the foundation amended its name to include a memorial for her husband, Gerald Marks, a songwriter and a regular entertainer at Newspaper Guild conventions and other union functions. Edna was too busy organizing journalists at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Amsterdam News* and the *Daily Racing Form*, among other publications, to write songs. But royalties from Gerald's prolific Tin Pan Alley catalogue, including his most famous song, "All of Me," have helped fund the foundation and its activities.

It was a great honor for us to learn from the experiences of these amazing 19 women who are doing valuable work for the labor movement in this country.

In Solidarity,

**Louise Walsh**, Chairperson  
Global-Communications Office Director, AFL-CIO Solidarity Center

**Linda Foley**, President  
President, The Newspaper Guild-CWA

**Carolyn Jacobson**, Secretary-Treasurer  
Coalition of Labor Union Women

**Yvette Herrera**, Trustee  
Assistant to the Executive Vice President, Communications Workers of America

**Kitty Peddicord**, Trustee  
Vice President Emerita, American Federation of Government Employees

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**The Berger-Marks Foundation** owes a debt of gratitude to several people, without whom this retreat would not have been possible. Their participation, support and assistance during the planning, execution and follow-up to the New Orleans forum were key to its success.

First, the foundation salutes the 19 outstanding women who took time off from work and away from their families to participate in this 1½ day retreat. (A list of participants and their unions is in the Appendix.) Their experiences and insights, captured in this report, are invaluable learning tools for the larger labor movement and to the foundation itself as it develops programs for union women.

Additionally, the foundation is extremely thankful to Sue Schurman, president of the National Labor College. Sue contributed her vast knowledge and skills not only as the retreat facilitator but as the author of this report with critical help from her NLC colleague Melanie Lipomanis. Sue also provided indispensable guidance to the trustees in developing the retreat agenda.

The foundation is grateful to the administration and staff of The Newspaper Guild-CWA who were always willing to lend an extra hand to the independent foundation; their assistance was especially important during the planning process and contributed to the retreat's smooth execution.

Finally, the foundation would like to thank Sheara Reich, who coordinated all aspects of the retreat and transformed the trustees' vision into an on-the-ground reality.

Many thanks to all those mentioned above.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**In the United States**, workers are losing their freedom to form unions and bargain collectively. Employers routinely intimidate, harass and fire workers who dare voice support for a union. Not since before the National Labor Relations Act was passed 70 years ago have we witnessed such ruthless and brutal opposition to workers' right to form a union in this country. Human Rights Watch, in an extensive investigation into workers' freedom to form unions, concluded that:

“The legal obstacles tilt the playing field so steeply against workers' freedom of association that the United States is in violation of international human rights standards for workers.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite this relentless opposition, thousands of men and women organizers devote themselves to helping workers obtain a union — a voice in the workplace. It is demanding, stressful and emotional work.

For women who want to become full-time union organizers, there are additional difficulties. These additional constraints and demands pile on challenges and stresses to what are already challenging and stressful jobs.

The time demands and travel typically associated with union organizing create the biggest obstacle for women who want to become organizers. Family life, and indeed all relationships, often takes a backseat to the demands of an organizing drive. In fact, these obstacles create severe hardships for all organizers, not just women. This report, however, puts the lens on women and the challenges they face.

The union movement has too few women organizers and women leaders who can act as mentors, trainers and advisors to women who want to become organizers. Successful women organizers have had to find their own ways to maintain their self-esteem and confidence

in order to continue with their difficult work. Most unions still undervalue organizing and, unfortunately, undervalue the role of women in organizing. Thus, women organizers often view themselves as “second class among the second class.”

“Family life, and indeed all relationships, **often take a back seat** to the demands of an organizing drive.”

While many women organizers feel as if they are swimming upstream in a rushing current of anti-union forces, the role of women in our society, workplaces and homes can bring advantages to an organizer's repertoire of skills.

While retreat participants acknowledged that occupation or industry — not gender — usually determines their overall organizing strategy for a campaign, gender differences often require a change in tactics. After all, men and women do relate to each other differently.

For example, women have a broader view of workplace issues, emphasizing so-called quality of life issues such as childcare or scheduling, rather than just focusing on wages. Women learn early on in their lives to build relationships and social networks; these attributes can be invaluable to an organizer.

Men tend to form their opinions more independently and are more self-reliant in formulating them. Women are more likely to ask for input from others before making a decision.

The organizers at the New Orleans retreat agreed that women generally are more cautious than their male co-workers about supporting or becoming involved in an organizing campaign. That being said, once they commit to the union, women are less likely to waiver and usually help draw support from other women.

With women now comprising approximately 50 percent of the American workforce, unions must organize large numbers of them if there is any hope of stemming the current tide of union decline. This won't be achieved with an overwhelmingly male force of organizers, no matter how dedicated and enthusiastic they may be.

Recruiting, training and retaining a skilled cadre of professional women organizers are critical to successful union growth. To do this, the job of union organizer will have to change to meet the needs of women organizers.

The women organizers at this retreat had specific recommendations for unions about how the job of organizer could be more attractive to women, as well as how their talents could be used more effectively:

- 1.** Give organizers more control over their schedules. The women said they could plan to be away from home for days at a time as long as they had some notion of when they could be off — even for short periods of time. Likewise, working nights is fine, as long as the organizer has some control over which nights they work.
- 2.** Allow for working in teams. The need for mentoring and support, along with a need to sometimes “job share” an organizing campaign due to family and home obligations argue for spreading the responsibility for a given campaign around to several people.
- 3.** Allow for more work from home. With e-mail, cell phones and other modes of modern communication, more work can be done offsite.

- 4.** Make sure that organizers have the technological tools to do their job. (In particular, many complained about the lack of laptop computers.)
- 5.** Adequate financial resources from the union need to be supplied up-front. Too often, organizers are required to finance their drives with their own cash until the money comes through.
- 6.** Unions need to address the child-care issues and family responsibilities of their women organizers. After all, it was pointed out, you don't get to “make up” the time you miss with your family. One idea was to allow sabbaticals for organizers.
- 7.** More women are needed in union management roles. The gender of organizers won't change until the gender of the people who hire organizers changes.
- 8.** More organizing drives should be locally based and union locals should be required to support them. Hiring local organizers should be done in ways that take them out of the politics of the local union.
- 9.** Training and mentoring should be built into the job.
- 10.** Unions need to put more resources and value into organizing as a union career. All union staff, for example, should be required to go through at least one organizing drive. Unions, as employers, need to recognize the work of organizers even when they don't win a drive.
- 11.** Unions need to be clear about what the job of organizer requires, so women know what to expect.



## PREFACE: FACILITATOR'S OBSERVATIONS

### THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF ORGANIZING

Not surprisingly, the experiences of this group of senior women organizers in the field bears out recent data on workers' attitudes toward unions. Recent AFL-CIO polling data show that women's positive views toward unions, which had been increasing steadily since 1980, declined precipitously (by 14 percentage points) between 1999 and 2003.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the most extensive study of workers' attitudes toward employment, unions and managers in 25 years shows that while American workers overwhelmingly desire more influence on the job, the majority do not see unionization as the preferable vehicle to achieve such influence. Instead, workers view *both* unions and managers as obstacles to exercising a say in workplace decisions.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the workers sampled say they do not want to go to work everyday to face an adversarial relationship with management, and they want to exercise a *direct* and *individual* voice in job-related decisions rather than rely exclusively on *indirect* and *collective* representation through unions. The AFL-CIO Women's Committee report contains similar findings. There is also a large body of evidence suggesting that direct worker participation programs are effective when unions are involved as joint sponsors of the program and when such programs are combined with collective bargaining.

Taken together, these data strongly suggest that unions need to increase their experimentation with alternative approaches to organizing and to market their ability to provide both individual and collective voices. There are examples of unions that have implemented many of the suggestions made by retreat participants. A follow-up study of these unions' experience would be an interesting project for the Berger-Marks Foundation to pursue.

I was struck over and over during the course of this event by how much stress these women experience in their lives. As an academic, I spent much of my career studying the effects of alternative job designs and work

environments on workers' physical, psychological and social health.<sup>4</sup> As these women began to describe their work lives, I quickly realized that they were describing the classic case for job stress and burnout: high task demands with low control over pace and few sources of social support. A very large body of research has shown that this combination of factors increases the risk of stress-related illness — both physical and/or psychological. This same body of research has shown that two types of change in work design can reduce the risks associated with job stress: (1) increasing the individual's control over the pace of work and (2) increasing the sources of supportive social relations available within the work environment.

I also was struck by the fact that what these women suggested as changes to the organizer job could have been drawn directly from what the scientific literature already tells us works to reduce the perception of stress and its psychological consequence: burnout. They are not suggesting that the primary work activities involved in a campaign can be made less stressful. They fully recognize that, as long as employers are permitted to run hostile anti-union counter-campaigns, the work itself will remain emotionally and physically draining. Rather, their suggestions are very consistent with the kinds of interventions that have proven effective in other types of high stress work where the nature of the job does not lend itself to modification. Greater schedule flexibility, time off between campaigns, and basing organizing locally all address a desire to gain greater control over the task demands of the job. Creating organizing teams and basing organizing locally reflect a desire to create more supportive social environments. Separately and, especially, in combination these specific changes have been shown to both improve performance as well as reduce the negative effects of stress.

— Sue Schurman

## INTRODUCTION

**During the past quarter century** labor union density in the United States has declined drastically — from 20% of the eligible work force in 1980 to 13% in 2004.<sup>5</sup> During the same period, women workers have represented one of the few bright spots in unions' attempts to organize new members. Women now make up nearly half of the U.S. labor force. And women are significantly more likely to join labor unions than men — especially if the lead organizer is a woman.<sup>6</sup> Despite this evidence, women still constitute a small minority of senior union organizers.

Why is this so? How will unions have to change in order to recruit, develop and retain more women organizers? In November 2004, the Berger-Marks Foundation invited 21 experienced women organizers, representing 9 major U.S. unions with strong organizing programs, to a 1½ day retreat focused on the basic question of how to recruit and retain more women organizers.

The forum was structured as a series of small group discussions followed by a plenary report from each group and a follow-up discussion. A planning committee from the Berger-Marks Foundation developed a series of questions intended to elicit the participants' views on a number of issues relevant to the general question of how to develop more women organizers and how to organize more women into unions. Each session explored one or more of these questions in detail. Participants were divided into representative groups of 4 to 5. A member of the planning group was assigned to each group to take careful notes on the discussions. Notes were also taken in the plenaries. Together, these notes formed the data on which this report is based.<sup>7</sup>



## WHY WOMEN BECOME ORGANIZERS

**To set the stage for the discussions, we first wanted to understand how and why each of these women became organizers. We asked each woman to share, briefly, her personal story of when, why and how she first became involved in organizing. Although each story was unique, a common theme immediately surfaced: Organizing gave these women a sense of personal empowerment — the feeling that they could make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others.**

### “THIS IS THE WORK THAT WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE.”

Some, like **Jana Smith-Carr** (Communications Workers of America), were young women just entering the workforce — at the bottom. For Jana, organizing was initially a purely economic proposition — a way to improve her immediate life situation. “I was a single mom working for the phone company — making just enough money to buy lunch, diapers and formula. I was so broke...My local had prizes for who could sign up the most workers at the phone company. I believed in what they were doing and agreed to join the contest,” she said with a big smile. It was the beginning of her lifelong career in organizing.

Others, like **Jeannine Belt** (International Chemical Workers Council/United Food and Commercial Workers), did not discover organizing until much later in their life. “I was 52 years old when I started this new career,” said Jeannine, “and I thought to myself, ‘I can make that happen.’”

**Helen Cyrulik Kalota** (Communications Workers of America), a nurse, captured the essence of the other women’s feelings: “What inspires me in people is when the light comes on in their face. It is powerful to see it in their face and their mind [when they realize] ‘I have power. I can do this. I don’t have to settle for less.’ It’s something that keeps me going.”

Within this overall theme of *making a difference* several variations emerged:

### “ORGANIZING CHOSE ME. IT WAS MY CALLING.”

A number of these women believe that the work chose them. For **Rachel Baisden** (International Brotherhood of Teamsters), “Organizing chose me. It was my calling.” Jeannine Belt (UFCW) felt that “God put me on this earth to do this work.”

**Lisa Johnson-Sells** (Oklahoma State Workers Union/Communications Workers of America) said, “A light came on for me. When that light comes on for other people, it’s like the first time with each one. It never gets old.”

For **Terri Goodman** (Laborers’ International Union of North America) “life and organizing collided” when she became a non-union worker in construction. “Eight workers and I were hurt on the job. We found out we had no workers’ compensation. I visited every worker in the four crews the company had with a coworker (8-9 workers in each crew). All but three workers wanted a union. We went down to the union hall and they took us in.”

**Tee Williams** (American Federation of Government Employees) “stumbled into organizing.” At the time she knew nothing about unions. “I saw African-Americans and single parents treated like s---. I was very vocal.” As a result, “Someone with the union said, ‘you should run for alternate shop steward’.

It is not just a job. It is a cause. I told my children, ‘It’s your future. It is my job, my goal, God’s work.’”



“The environment changed, and I did make a difference.

Individually we *can* make a difference. **We created a different culture** where women are comfortable and kids are welcome.”

**Paula Bentley** (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) did not plan to become an organizer. She just started getting involved in her union because “things needed to get done.” “It’s hard to separate organizing from my life story,” she said. “One thing leads to another. You get involved in one — and you end up in all of it.”

**“THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH FEMALES IN ORGANIZING.”**

All of the women who participated in this forum believe deeply that hiring more women as organizers is critical to their union’s ability to organize more women. Several participants became organizers specifically for this reason after observing the small number of women involved in their union’s organizing departments.

**Barbara Fields** (Baker, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union) was the first African-American woman hired on her union’s staff. “There aren’t enough females in organizing,” she said. “I got involved because I needed to make a difference.”



**Sandy Rusher** (Communications Workers of America) agreed: “There were no females on the local’s organizing staff. Someone said, ‘You have to do this to help change the culture of the union.’ One woman brought her baby to nurse at a staff meeting. That was a sign of huge change. The environment changed, and I did make a difference. Individually we *can* make a

difference. We created a different culture where women are comfortable and kids are welcome.”

**“I LIKE TO FIGHT THE BOSS.”**

A number of participants trace their roots as organizers to specific incidents on the job that sparked a desire to fight back. **Marge Krueger** (Communications Workers of America) said that revenge was her motivation. “I went to work before daycare. I had no babysitter. If you wanted to work, being an operator was the job because you could work at night. When I’d go in the ladies room, someone was always crying because they were late 2 minutes [and were disciplined]. At first I thought I was there to talk about the union, but then I realized I was touching people’s lives. You do make a difference.”

**Erin Tyson Poh** (Northern California Media Guild/ Typographical Union, The Newspaper Guild-CWA) also claims revenge as her initial motivation. She discovered union organizing with the Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) after being treated poorly as a waitress while in college. She learned, “You don’t have to take this. Here’s your power. Take it and run with it.”

**Patti Devlin** (Laborers’ International Union of North America) had not expected to devote her life to union organizing. A good student in high school, she expected to go to college, “but Dad was rified by Reagan so college wasn’t an option.” She went to work retail instead, left that job and eventually became a member of LIUNA. Later she decided to earn a college degree at the National Labor College where a fellow student noticed her fighting spirit and suggested that she should become an organizer. She saw organizing as a promising career path, so it was a match. “I believe in it,” she said. “I like to fight the boss.”

**“I LIKE THE RED STATES.”**

That fighting spirit has attracted several of these women to the challenge of organizing in regions of the country where unionization and collective bargaining rights are minimal. **Carmella Cruse** (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) wanted to join the union when she was first hired as a telephone operator but was told she had to wait six months until her probationary period ended. She refused to wait and eventually became an organizer. As a young African-American woman in the “red zone” of Kansas, she said, “I walked down the middle of the road carrying a union sign!”

“Organizing is the hardest job

I’ve ever had, but **it’s the most rewarding work I’ve ever done...**

You gotta have the fire in the belly to do this work.”

**Audra George** (American Federation of Teachers) started her career as a political organizer while she was in college, eventually gravitating toward union organizing. At the time of the retreat, George was based in Oklahoma and leading campaigns throughout the southwest, where her particular fondness for non-collective bargaining states is an asset. “I like the red states,” she said. “We get it done, just differently and definitely not traditionally.”

**“IT’S AN EXTENSION OF MY BEING THE OLDEST OF EIGHT CHILDREN.”**

**Kitty Prouse** (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) exemplifies the strong connection between organizing and the spirit of caring for others shared by the majority of these women. She attributes her own career in organizing as simply “an extension of being the oldest of eight children. I see people who struggle,” she

said, and guiding them to find help by joining the union is “an honor and privilege.”

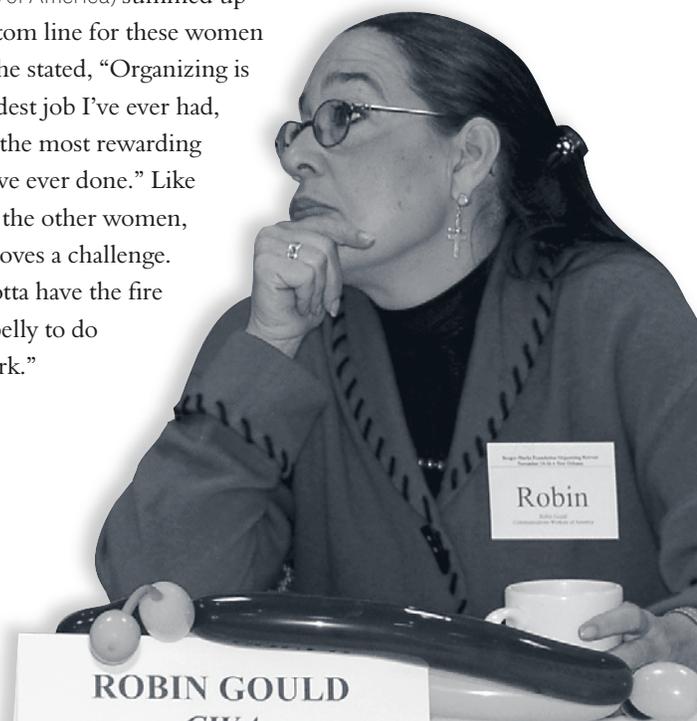
**“I WON’T GIVE MY LIFE TO THE MOVEMENT LIKE YOU HAVE.”**

At first, not all these women were so eager to embrace the challenge of union activism or organizing. **Susan Baxter-Fleming’s** (Communications Workers of America) mother was a union activist. When Susan followed in her mother’s footsteps to a union position at the phone company, she told her mother, “I have taken a union job, but I won’t give my life to the movement the way you have.” But it didn’t turn out that way. “I saw injustice at work so I helped on the organizing campaign. I waited for the international union to send in the organizing army to get the job done. Then I realized that *I* was the army.”

**“IT’S THE HARDEST JOB I’VE EVER HAD, BUT IT’S THE MOST REWARDING WORK I’VE EVER DONE.”**

**Hsiao-tse Chao** (Northern California Media Guild/ Typographical Union, The Newspaper Guild-CWA) is a first generation Chinese immigrant and a reporter for the *Chinese Daily News*. She has been organizing in the same place for over four years and admitted: “It’s tough to keep the campaign alive for such a long time,” yet she does not give up because she believes in the work.

**Robin Gould** (State Employee Alliance/Communications Workers of America) summed up the bottom line for these women when she stated, “Organizing is the hardest job I’ve ever had, but it’s the most rewarding work I’ve ever done.” Like each of the other women, Robin loves a challenge. “You gotta have the fire in the belly to do this work.”



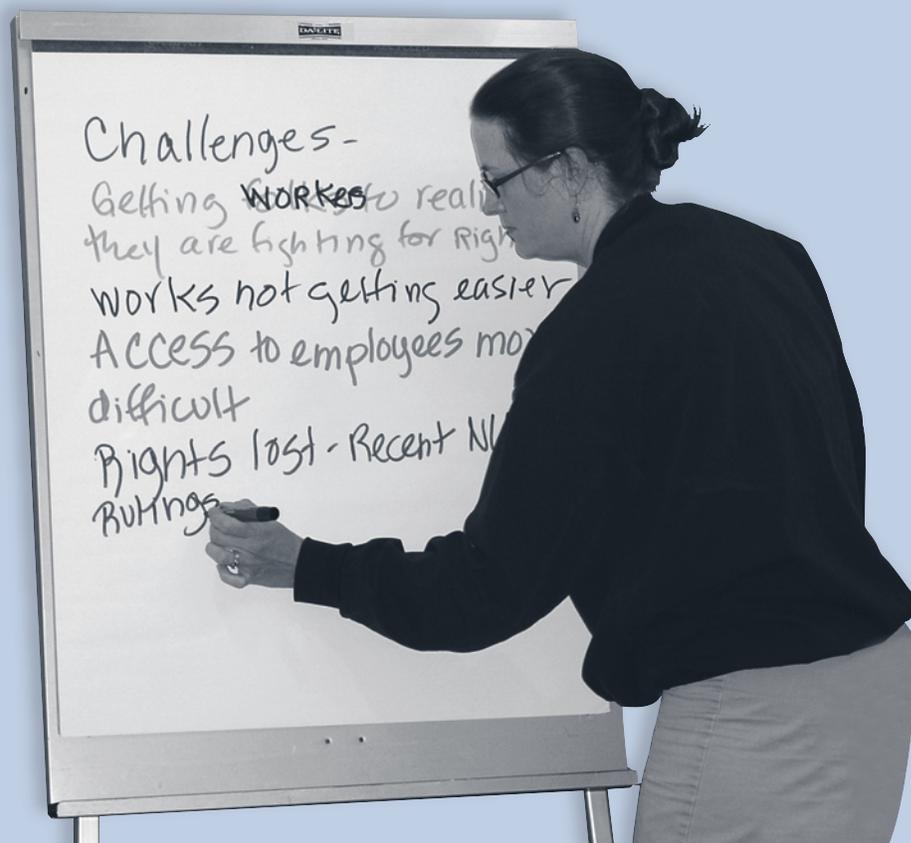
## UNIQUE QUALITIES WOMEN BRING TO **ORGANIZING**

**Participants described a workforce** that is changing in ways that make women's traditional strengths very important assets in organizing campaigns: More women are entering the workforce; more families are becoming two-income households; and, on a large scale, men are assuming a much more active role in domestic responsibilities than their fathers or grandfathers did.

One woman pointed out that a discussion of diaper brands among males would have been unheard of a mere generation ago; today, it comes up in poker games. Another participant believes, "We are getting away from 'good ole boy' behavior — the workers we are targeting today are more family-oriented and women [organizers] have more credibility with these people and their issues."

Women, the group believes, are socialized differently from men and learn early on to build relationships, trust and social networks quickly. Women also bring a flexibility that allows them to assess and adapt to new environments in a short time period. In particular, participants emphasized, women's traditional roles require a talent for multi-tasking and organization along with a willingness to work very long hours.

These qualities, along with their strong focus on family and community issues, make women very effective in communicating the benefits of a union contract to the new workforce. Organizing is increasingly about the whole family, noted several participants, and women organizers tend to understand this faster than many of their male colleagues.



## CHALLENGES WOMEN ORGANIZERS FACE

### THE WORK IS GETTING HARDER

There was broad consensus among this group of senior labor activists that most of the challenges faced by women organizers today are common to all organizers irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity or other personal factors. During the course of their careers, they say, organizing has always been an uphill battle. But the economic and political context of the past four years has made things dramatically worse. In particular, the risk that workers who try to organize will be illegally fired has increased under the Bush Administration's labor relations policies.

This has created a chilling effect on workers' willingness to participate in organizing campaigns. When Susan Baxter-Fleming started working as an organizer, workers would ask, "Can I get fired for this?" Now, she said, "workers say, 'I know can get fired for this.'" Employees, she said, see others who are worse off than they are and this makes them more willing to accept deteriorating compensation and job conditions as preferable to the alternative: unemployment. Other participants stressed that many employees have become less willing to engage in overtly adversarial organizing campaigns and as a result, organizers need to develop "non-offensive" tactics.

### NEW TECHNOLOGY

Technological changes have also created new obstacles to organizing campaigns. Productivity increases based on new technology and new work processes are shrinking the workforce in many industries and therefore the size of potential bargaining units. In many of the industries these women represent, telecommuting has dispersed employees from the workplace, creating "virtual" workplaces and making it harder for organizers to communicate with potential members.

The advent of intranet communications systems has made it much easier for employers to wage their own campaigns to avoid unionization. As one organizer

described it: "Information is obtained differently now; it's instantaneous with the Internet. Workplaces with technology make it hard to prevent the boss's campaigns from working psychological warfare. They have the advantage."<sup>8</sup>

### UNIONS FAILING TO ADAPT

Several of these women organizers believe that unions are failing to adapt quickly enough to the new tactics and technologies of employers. "Employer campaigns have gotten so sophisticated yet predictable" said one woman. "We [unions] don't change quickly enough to adapt to things outside of our control. It's easy for companies to strategize and inoculate their non-union workforce." Another woman questioned why unions continue to operate in a primarily reactionary manner when employer behavior is so predictable. "Why are we not more proactive in our approach?"

### SHRINKING UNION RESOURCES

In participants' opinions, failing to adapt has created a vicious cycle for unions: Shrinking union density has led to budget cuts in most of their unions. Even in those unions that shifted a larger percentage of their budgets to organizing, often fewer staff and fewer resources exist to support lengthy campaigns. As frontline workers who mount these campaigns, organizers frequently must rely on their own ingenuity and/or personal resources to keep campaigns alive. Several women reported personally funding key aspects of important campaigns while waiting for resources to flow down from their unions — in some cases to the detriment of their own credit rating. "My credit was ruined because of [my] funding campaigns," said one woman. "It took me 7-10 years to recover."

### INEFFECTIVE MARKETING STRATEGIES

These organizers shared the view that most unions do not have effective marketing strategies and further, they

don't accurately apply marketing techniques to targeted employee groups or their industry as a whole. Unions, they said, are increasingly viewed by potential members as part of the problem. "Our [union's] image is negative and confirms the bosses' campaign about unions," said one participant.

### SECOND CLASS AMONG THE SECOND CLASS

Surprisingly, after a decade in which the AFL-CIO has urged unions to make organizing their most important goal, the majority of participants strongly shared the view that organizing is still not viewed as an important function inside their unions. According to participants, organizers remain "second class" citizens compared to their colleagues who work as business agents and bargaining representatives.

Compounding the challenges faced by all organizers, women face additional difficulties in this predominately male occupation. If organizers in general are second class citizens, women organizers have the added liability of being "second class among the second class." These experienced organizers believe that women still have difficulty establishing the same level of respect and acceptance their male counterparts receive when they approach a group of workers. This is especially true in campaigns with mostly male workers but can also occur where the majority of workers are women.

"In this line of work," said one woman, "brothers are automatically respected. When you [women] walk in the room you're automatically looked down on. That's what we are fighting for; I want my voice to be viewed the same as his."

For women, there is a fine line between behavior that commands professional respect and that which is potentially offensive. For example, agitation tactics commonly used effectively by men are often perceived as pushy when used by female organizers. "We are seen as bitches, where men are seen as assertive [for the

same behavior]," said one participant. "It's even worse in the 'red states,'" said another. An African-American woman adds a racial component to these gender issues, "When I was first sent into the South, if you could have seen the look on the faces of those Southern boys...they were shocked! They couldn't believe they had to deal with a *black* woman!"

It quickly became evident in the discussions that these senior women organizers feel driven to demonstrate that they can perform as effectively as their male colleagues. In different ways, each woman expressed the need to work harder and longer in order to gain the respect they perceive men receive automatically. The need to continuously prove themselves in environments hostile not only to their mission — union organizing — but also to their gender, clearly creates a level of stress for women organizers over and above what their male counterparts experience. This stress is exacerbated by the campaign-based nature of the work. In effect, each woman has to "start over" with each new campaign. As one participant put it, "You should not have to prove yourself every time you walk into a room, but you do."

The problem is compounded by the realities of unions' performance in organizing campaigns. According to the AFL-CIO, unions win about half of private sector organizing campaigns. This means that even the most successful organizers are likely to experience defeat on a regular basis. Faced with the constant need to prove themselves and the reality that, despite their best efforts, their campaigns are likely to fail nearly half the time (often for reasons completely outside their control but for which they will nonetheless bear responsibility), these successful women organizers have had to find ways to maintain their self esteem and confidence in order to find the motivation to continue doing this work. "We take defeat repeatedly," noted one participant, "and must redefine what success is" in order to keep going.

By far the greatest challenge for these women revolves around balancing the demanding schedule and extensive travel typically required of organizers with their roles as family and community members. There was a strong



consensus among the participants that the interpersonal qualities typically associated with women — listening skills, cooperation, concern for others — can be a powerful tool in the organizing process. But many women will be deterred from becoming organizers, they said, unless some fundamental changes in the nature of the work are made. One participant poignantly observed: “Over the years it takes a toll on a family to have one parent absent most of the time. Looking back at my family now, they have a life of their own and it’s very different than if I had been home. It’s a life that doesn’t include me.”

“the women I organize have the  
life I want; **how do I ask them  
to give that up?** It’s harder now  
to make that pitch.

These women readily acknowledge that their male colleagues would also list the extensive time away from home on campaigns as the major negative aspect of the job. However, they believe that despite dramatic changes in gender roles over the past few decades, there are still basic differences in men’s and women’s roles within the family. Women, they said, are still the primary caregivers especially for younger children and aging parents. Emotional conflict and additional pressures result when the job precludes women from filling their roles as wives, partners, mothers and community activists. Many women simply will not make this sacrifice.

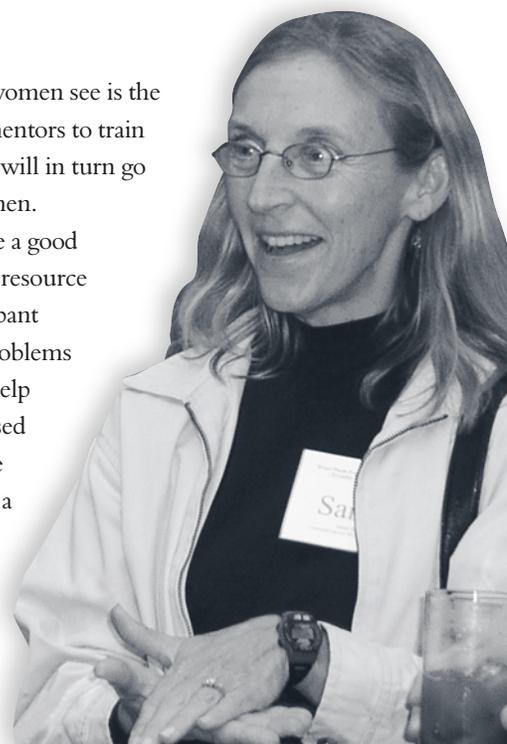
The toll that travel has taken on their personal lives and relationships loomed as a major topic for these women. Many reported trouble establishing meaningful personal relationships or losing one or more relationship due to their occupation. “I’ve been a single mother since my son was a toddler,” said one woman. “The relationship didn’t last long because I was an activist and he couldn’t handle it.” All of the women who have managed successful long-

term relationships agree that it takes a special mate to put up with the life of an organizer.

The hardship of travel is particularly evident for organizers with children. Women on the road feel isolated and disconnected from their families and community. “We make a big sacrifice; 99.9 percent of my work is in another state. I’ve gotten used to being alone and I don’t know if that’s good or bad,” admitted one participant. This disconnectedness can lead to guilt over lack of involvement in their children’s daily lives and doubts in their own parenting abilities. This in turn leads women to question the personal sacrifices they make at the expense of their children. “You miss out on so much and you can’t recoup; you can’t go back and do it all over again” she added. Another pointed out: “Time is one of those things you never do get back.”

The inherent conflict between the realities of most organizing jobs and women’s desire for family and community ties makes recruiting women organizers difficult. “It got different after I had a child” said one woman, “Soccer practice, husband to feed...the women I organize have the life I want; how do I ask them to give that up? It’s harder now to make that pitch.” Agreeing, another woman said it’s a constant challenge to be a mom and an organizing role model: “Women see the 80 hour work weeks and extensive travel and say ‘No, I don’t want to do that.’ It’s a real structural problem. We churn through organizers...like mowing grass,” she said. She believes this will continue “until we figure out how to have a life....”

One major problem these women see is the lack of successful women mentors to train the women organizers who will in turn go out and organize more women. It takes time, they said, to be a good mentor and time is another resource in short supply. One participant believes: “If we can solve problems for us as women, that will help us organize. Women are raised as social creatures...we have families...how do you have a life and organize?”



## MEN AND WOMEN: DIFFERENT **WORKPLACE** ISSUES?

**The organizers were asked** whether they used different approaches with women and men and, if so, whether this is because men and women respond differently to women organizers or because intrinsic differences exist in how men and women react to organizing campaigns. Their response was unanimous: Occupation or industry is overwhelmingly the deciding factor in the organizing strategy irrespective of the workforce gender composition. However, within the overall strategy there were often tactical reasons for approaching men and women differently.

The major reason for using different approaches, these women agreed, stems from differences in how males and females relate to others and process information. In their experience, men tend to be independent thinkers and self-reliant in their opinions and actions. Conversely, women are more interdependent about decision making. Women will discuss issues more, seek the opinion of others and strive to reach a consensus in their group. As one participant said, “Women are more into group dynamics, more process oriented than men.” Another participant noted, “Women collect and store information, they consult people they trust...they pull from their resources, while men are more action oriented.” A third added, “Women know each others’ issues, they have deeper connections socially; men don’t naturally connect to a group or others.”

One consequence of their interdependence is that women are slower to support or become involved in an organizing campaign; however, once they commit themselves they are more resolute in their decision and help draw other women into the fold. A number of participants agreed that women typically need longer to commit to an organizing campaign but, once committed, are unwavering. One participant summed up her organizing system this way: “Women pull other women into the group and can be organized in clumps, just

tap into the group. Men are more loners, one by one... organizing individually.”

There was also agreement among the participants that the women they organize tend to have a broader spectrum of issues in the workplace than the men do. Compensation is seldom the foremost issue on the women’s agenda. During meetings, large and small, organizers most frequently hear women workers talk about fairness, family responsibilities and respect issues.

“Women know each others’ issues,  
**they have deeper connections**  
**socially;** men don’t naturally  
 connect to a group or others.”

“For women, issues of discrimination and [sexual] harassment are more prevalent,” said one woman. In another’s experience, “Men tend to be focused on the union’s impact to their paychecks,” whereas women want security, respect, benefits and promotions/compensation in parity with their male counterparts. As a result, these successful organizers have learned to emphasize the overall quality of life that unionism can secure for women rather than focusing solely on the paycheck.

According to the participants, in order to run a successful campaign an organizer must approach men and women differently and draw from distinct styles and skill sets that cater to each gender. Women workers tend to have more family and childcare responsibilities than men and, because of this additional demand on their time, organizers have to be more creative and flexible about when and where they organize women. This means more personal encounters in

the workplace, shorter scheduled meetings and more often including family members in the meetings. One organizer pointed out: “When we’re organizing a group of men, we usually don’t have to worry about childcare.” Another agreed: “The only time childcare is an issue is when the group is female.” Women, they say, need to do much more planning around family and work responsibilities in order to be able to participate in campaigns and, therefore, organizers need to be more flexible when scheduling meetings and events.

The environment in which organizers choose to approach each gender also differs. Providing a setting where workers are at ease and feel comfortable is one key to holding a successful meeting. These veteran organizers have learned that men and women have different ideas on what qualifies as a comfortable setting. One participant, who has a predominately male organizing audience, once went to the extreme of holding a union meeting in a gentlemen’s club. “It was a place where the guys felt comfortable.” This location was conducive to the probing skills she needed to learn more about the workers’ issues; the men relaxed in this familiar setting and were more likely to open up in conversation.

In stark contrast to this approach, another organizer pointed out that this setting would go over like a “lead balloon” with her female workers, who want to see professionalism and competency from her. A raucous bar, she said, would not be a well-suited back-drop for the listening skills needed to organize women. They would not feel at ease, could not bring their children and may very well hear objections from their husbands to the setting. Another woman explained, “What we do [by organizing] is move people out of comfort zones, so we need to meet them in their comfort zones then push them out of it.”

The participants believe that men and women respond best to a certain style and approach to organizing because the motivating factors for each gender differ. In their opinion, women, whether by nature or simply a result of socialization, are generally more collective and community-minded in their daily lives than men are.

“Women,” said one participant, “tend to be more into the job, not individual issues. You can reach them because it’s a cause, it’s about others.” Another added, “Women are more likely to stand up for others than they are to stand up for themselves.” A third organizer asserted, “Women can be stomped on all day long, but when others get hit, it moves them to move. Women don’t want to be seen as ‘it’s all about me.’ Men don’t care.”

One woman stated the sentiments of her fellow participants: “It’s not that they (men) don’t care. It’s more, ‘It’s not my business.’” Participants agreed that this is a difference in style. Men, they believe, are less likely to “stick their nose in the business of others” and are less inclined to join a battle that is not their own.

The group emphasized again that the difference between organizing men and women is not at the strategic level but rather in specific methods of interaction. One woman summed up their view: “Organizing women requires listening skills; organizing men requires probing skills.” Another woman said, “Men expect you to know what’s on their mind. Women will tell you what they are thinking.”

“Working women are overextended by responsibility, children, housework, healthcare, communities” and stress is a common denominator for them, said a third woman. “They appreciate being heard and understood. Women want to know how you [the union] are going to help relieve some of their stress.”



## RECRUITING AND DEVELOPING WOMEN ORGANIZERS

### One thing became very clear in this discussion:

The organizer's role is a hard sell to potential women recruits. It was also clear that the same obstacles these women face in their own work interfere with recruiting new women organizers. The problems the group identified in recruiting women occur on several levels: with national/international unions, local unions, and at the individual/personal level.

The problem begins, at both the national and local union levels, with the noticeable absence of women and people of color in leadership positions and serving as role models. This absence of women in leadership positions is a real issue not just in recruiting, but also in organizing women workers. Most unions, they said, have male-oriented cultures built around the principle that men can work long hours and be away from home for long periods of time. The predominant model of organizing, they say, rests on creating a crisis — an adversarial “showdown with the boss.” The showdown approach is much more appealing to men than it is to women. “The [union] culture is not conducive to women and we [as unions] don't do anything to make organizing appealing [to women]” said one participant. Agreeing, another pointed out, “There is awareness that they [the unions] need women, yet they don't welcome them.”

One way to change this culture, they argued, is to bring more women into leadership roles and into organizer positions. However, tight budgets result in fewer positions and lag times such that, by the time an opening occurs, the potential recruit has moved on. Additionally, when organizing positions do get filled, the general sense among these women is that little is provided in the way of training and mentoring. One participant described the prevailing attitude as “churn ‘em and burn ‘em...there is no interest in developing organizers for the long haul; they need continued training and development.”

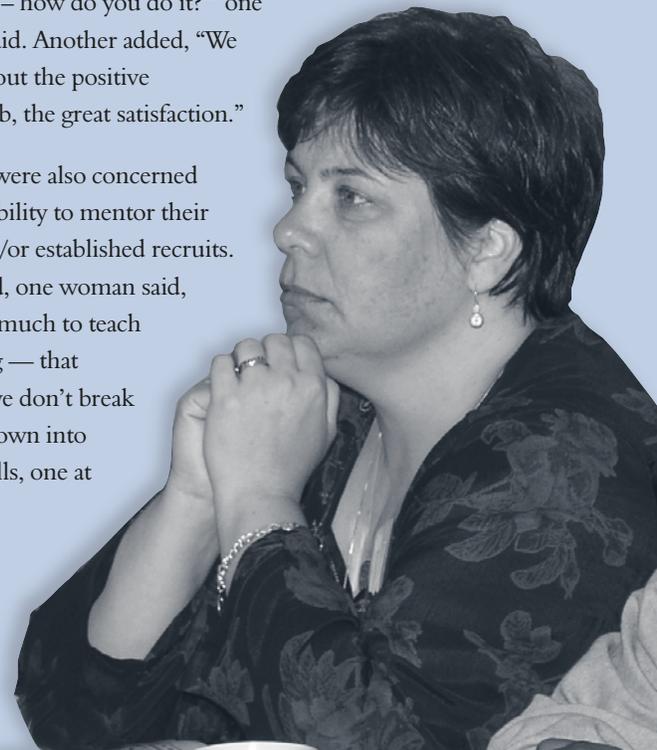
In addition to the absence of women in key leader and staff positions, these women point to the structure of

local unions and customary ways of doing business as obstacles to recruiting women. One organizer noted, “How we conduct business and how locals are structured are obstacles — the time of the meetings, the place, the way they have it, what they do, no place for children, guys drinking...” Furthermore, finding women who have a support network within their local — that could lead to their election or selection — is difficult.

On a personal level, organizers' perceptions of their own jobs and responsibilities can create problems when they attempt to recruit others. One participant admitted, “I don't think we make the job look that great.” Another agreed, “I don't think we do anything to make organizing appealing.” It can be a paradox for women organizers: How do they convince other women to do a job that has taken such a heavy personal toll on their own lives? One participant pointed out the irony: “We say *‘we're the people who brought you the weekend'*, yet *we* have no weekend! The eight hour day — *we* have none.”

Many women consider family their primary responsibility; potential recruits see the extensive travel and long hours of an organizer and get “scared off.” “They look at me and say ‘Hell, no – how do you do it?’” one participant said. Another added, “We don't talk about the positive side of the job, the great satisfaction.”

Participants were also concerned about their ability to mentor their potential and/or established recruits. In this regard, one woman said, “There is so much to teach in mentoring — that sometimes we don't break our talents down into teachable skills, one at a time.”



## MAKING ORGANIZING MORE ATTRACTIVE TO WOMEN

**By an overwhelming margin**, these women identified schedule inflexibility as the most problematic area of their job. Long hours that do not translate into flex-time or days-off accrual, extended absences from home and lack of respite time for renewal are core causes of organizer burnout. One participant explained that in the companies she organizes, the employees have 24-hour shifts so she works all hours. Our participants believe that allowing organizers more control over their work schedules would significantly decrease the high stress level and burnout rates associated with their job. Many women either leave organizing or remain on the job but lose their enthusiasm and optimal productivity. “The whole idea on organizers is to use them for a couple of years, burn them out and hire new ones” summed up their view. This disposable mentality, many feel, is counterproductive to growing, developing and strengthening labor’s front-line recruiters: organizers.

These women believe that the burnout rate among organizers can be reduced through some basic structural and schedule adjustments. They offered a range of suggestions to remedy, ease or overcome these difficulties:

### BASE ORGANIZING LOCALLY

According to participants, the best way to address the problems created by extended travel and thereby attract more women is to base organizing locally. Having a local base not only permits organizers to have more time at home, it also allows them to become more involved in the local community. For national union organizing staff, having a local base allows them to build longer-term relationships and spend more time mentoring and developing local organizing staff.

These women recognize that developing a local focus may not be appropriate for all unions depending on the union’s organizing strategy and/or jurisdictional areas. However, they strongly believe that providing organizers with a defined geographic territory that permits them

more time at home, is the key to attracting more women to the job. They also believe that it will result in retaining more male organizers as well.

### CREATE ORGANIZING TEAMS AND SHARE LEAD ORGANIZER JOBS

In addition to basing the organizing function locally, participants believe that creating organizing teams would help to alleviate the “captivity and burnout” problem. The intensive nature of organizing and the fact that many campaigns are run by one professional organizer (with a team of volunteers from the targeted worksite) result in extended schedules for the lone organizer. During the heat of a campaign the organizer cannot afford to be away. Teams, they said, would allow them to arrange their schedules in rotation, permitting each person to work from home one week per month. By sharing the job of lead organizer, the rotated-out organizer could continue to support the campaign from their home office with administrative work such as managing literature, call lists, mapping and other important activities that don’t require an on-site presence. Rotating out periodically would allow staff to “de-stress” in the down-time and ultimately produce better work. The team would become its own support structure — decreasing the isolation and disconnectedness with which lone organizers often struggle. Another major benefit of a team organizing approach is that a more diverse and complementary set of skills and experiences can be applied to each campaign.

Several organizers also suggested that if the team had regular access to an attorney in the field, it would give workers a sense of security and more confidence in activities they were being asked to engage in. Teams were also viewed as a way to increase the time and attention paid to training and mentoring new organizers.

These women recognize that creating organizing teams has major resource implications in a period of shrinking

Finding a way to **allow women to better fulfill their role as family members and mothers** is clearly a key to recruiting more women into the organizer role, as well as organizing more women into unions.

union budgets. They also recognize that sharing or rotating the Lead Organizer role can lead to some conflicts and confusion over “who’s in charge.” However, they are convinced that the expense will justify itself over time by attracting more experienced organizers and that training on teamwork can prevent conflicts. The result, they believe, will be winning more campaigns.

#### **PROVIDE BETTER TRAINING AND MENTORING**

There was group consensus that organizers do not receive enough training. Despite best intentions, they said, campaign demands typically preclude them from providing adequate training and mentoring to the new organizers they recruit. Inadequate training makes the work harder and more stressful and contributes to failed campaigns. In discussing their own careers, most of these woman described having to learn on the job through trial and error. In some cases this

meant withstanding efforts by their male colleagues or men in the targeted campaign site to undermine their efforts. A systematic program of training and on-the-job mentoring, they believe, would increase their own effectiveness as senior organizers and assist in their efforts to recruit and retain more women. “How about putting an organizing trainer on the team [whose] sole responsibility would be training?” one participant suggested.

#### **MORE TIME OFF BETWEEN ASSIGNMENTS**

It is not that these women want to be home every day, but most did not become organizers with the understanding that they would be on the road 50 out of 52 weeks per year. More money is definitely not the answer — though few would turn it down. “What good is a better house if you never see it? More vacations if you can never take them?” captures their view. Some women would gladly forgo coming home on weekends if they could periodically have a quality block of time off. One participant used the flight attendants’ schedule as an example: Working long stretches of time for a comparable block of days off.

#### **UPGRADE THE ORGANIZER JOB**

The group split between women who work for unions that make the organizer job comparable to other staff representative positions and those unions that primarily hire organizers on temporary contracts with few benefits. For the latter, that women are expected to convince potential union members that a union contract will provide them with benefits that the organizer herself does not have creates a serious contradiction. One woman described the situation as, “selling them on something that I don’t have [i.e., benefits].” Another participant who organizes health care workers stated, “I’m a healthcare



worker yet I have no [health] benefits.” Another pointed out that local organizers in her union have no job security and therefore are reluctant to view organizing as a long-term commitment.

This contradiction between the terms and conditions of the organizer’s job and the argument she makes to potential members about what the union can do for them is apparently not lost on workers. Several women described workers asking them about their jobs during the campaign, and then asking why they should believe that the union would improve their pay and benefits when it didn’t even provide benefits for its own employees.

The basic nature of the typical organizing job, the organizers said, reflects the widespread use of the “churn and burn” approach to organizing. This approach creates a vicious cycle: Organizers are viewed as short term and expendable; therefore, the jobs are poorly compensated — especially in light of the extensive hours required. This fact makes it hard to recruit women. It also sends a negative signal to prospective members, particularly women, who draw inferences about the union from observing the organizer’s working conditions. The key to organizing women, many said, is to move away from the short-term mentality toward a long-term approach.

#### **ASSIST WITH CHILD /DEPENDENT CARE**

Caring for their children or other dependents, rather than their own personal needs, lies at the heart of many of these women’s suggestions about how to change the organizer job. Though there were few specific recommendations on this topic, the theme of childcare surfaced repeatedly in all of the sessions no matter what question was being addressed. Finding a way to allow women to better fulfill their role as family members and mothers is clearly a key to recruiting more women into the organizer role, as well as organizing more women into unions.

## **CONCLUSION**

**The participants’ recommendations that appear in the Executive Summary of this report and in comments throughout point the way to future activities and projects that the Berger-Marks Foundation can undertake to further its mission of supporting women organizers and organizing women into unions.**

**This mission is critical to the longevity of the American labor movement: As Kate Bronfenbrenner notes in her preface to “Union Organizing among Professional Women Workers”:**

**“Women now make up nearly half of the U.S. labor force. And women are significantly more likely to join labor unions than men — especially if the lead organizer is a woman. Despite this evidence, women still constitute a small minority of senior union organizers.”<sup>9</sup>**

**What, specifically, the Berger-Marks Foundation can do to help unions increase the number of women organizers becomes part of a longer discussion among the trustees in the coming months. Importantly, the recommendations from the participants in New Orleans form a clear roadmap for the foundation as it looks ahead.**

## END NOTES

- 1 Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, summarized the findings in "Unfair Advantage: Workers' Freedom of Association in the United States under International Human Rights Standards." 2000.
- 2 AFL-CIO. Overcoming Barriers to Women in Organizing and Leadership. Report to the AFL-CIO Executive Committee. March, 2004.
- 3 Richard Freeman and Joel Rogers. 1999. "What Workers Want." Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press. In this study, roughly a third of workers expressed a desire for unionization. Demand for unions and collective bargaining was strongest among lower wage and blue collar workers and especially strong among African-American workers (59% compared with 28% of non-African-American workers) and women workers (35% compared with 27% of men).
- 4 For a review of this evidence see Schurman, Susan J. and Barbara A. Israel (1994) "Redesigning Work Systems to Reduce Stress: A Participatory Action Research Approach." In K. Glans et al (eds.) Job Stress Interventions.
- 5 Bureau of Labor Statistics, Union Members Survey, January 27, 2005.
- 6 According to Kate Bronfenbrenner's 2003 study of NLRB elections, unions win 62% of the time when women are the majority of the unit compared to 35% or less when they are the minority. Win rates are even higher in units with 75% or more women of color. Women organizers win 52% of the time compared with 42% for male organizers.
- 7 These verbatim quotes will be used throughout the report. Words added by the notetaker or author to clarify the meaning of the sentence will be in brackets...[like this]. All quotes were cleared with their authors.
- 8 This emphasis on technology may reflect the fact that 60% of retreat participants represent workers in the professional, technical and white collar sector.
- 9 "Union Organizing among Professional Women Workers." A research study commissioned by the Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO and presented at the DPE Conference on Organizing Professionals in the 21st Century, Crystal City, Virginia, March 14-16, 2005.

**APPENDIX – PARTICIPANTS**

(Where no local number is indicated, participants work on the identified union's National/International staff.)

**Rachel Baisden**

International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 391

**Susan Baxter-Fleming**

Communications Workers of America

**Jeannine Belt**

International Chemical Workers Union Council of the United Food and Commercial Workers

**Paula Bentley**

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees

**Hsiao-tse Chao**

Northern California Media Guild/Typographical Union, TNG-CWA Local 39521

**Carmella L. Cruse**

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers

**Patti Edwards Devlin**

Laborers' International Union of North America

**Barbara Fields**

Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union

**Audra George**

American Federation of Teachers

**Terri Goodman**

Laborers' International Union of North America Local 199

**Robin Gould**

Communications Workers of America Local 7076/State Employee Alliance

**Lisa L. Johnson-Sells**

Communications Workers of America Local 6086/Oklahoma State Workers Union

**Helen Cyrulik Kalota**

Communications Workers of America Local 1168

**Marge Krueger**

Communications Workers of America

**Erin Tyson Poh**

Northern California Media Guild/Typographical Union, TNG-CWA Local 39521

**Kitty Prouse**

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