

Working Women's Centre

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TRADE UNION TRAINING FOR WOMEN

The percentage of women in the workforce has been growing steadily for the last decade and, as the percentage of men who join unions has increased very little in the last thirty years, the biggest potential for recruitment to union membership is among women. However many women feel that unions do not give enough attention to issues which women consider important.

Obviously the best people to advise unions on these issues are women. Yet there are few women on union executives and, although there is a thin scattering of part-time officials such as shop stewards, the number of female fulltime union officials in Australia can be practically counted on one hand - even in female-dominated industries.

Trade union training could act as a positive impetus to change this situation - but only if trade union officials and those responsible for training take a vigorous role in encouraging women's participation in union training.

INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN

Education of unionists on an organized basis is a new concept in Australian unionism, the main impetus being the establishment of the Australian Trade Union Training Authority by Act of Federal Parliament in 1975. When the Authority was established it was recognized that it was important to encourage women to attend courses and thus to increase their activity in the union movement. Up to that time women involved in various union training courses represented at the most about 5 per cent of the students.

In order to encourage women to participate in the TUTA programmes it was decided:

1. To conduct courses for women unionists;
2. To specifically encourage women to attend other courses for unionists.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

One of the basic problems for women is that TUTA's approach is completely 'course-oriented' - that is practically the only activity in which TUTA engages is conducting courses and seminars. This seems to be a self-imposed limitation, brought about by a rather narrow interpretation of the term 'training'.

Women unionists find it very difficult to attend courses which usually last for three or four days and are sometimes residential. Women predominate in industries where security of employment is not assured and such a thing as paid educational leave is unheard of. To ask the boss for time off (even unpaid) to attend a union training course could well result in the sack. This was in fact the fate of a woman clothing worker in Western Australia who asked for four days' unpaid leave to attend a union course. In Victoria the Amalgamated Metalworkers and Shipwrights Union has had to cancel its last two women's courses because so many women were afraid to ask for leave. TUTA and the Working Women's Centre have had the same experience.

Further evidence that lack of study leave prevents women from attending daytime courses was provided in Western Australia. When evening courses were first introduced over 36 per cent of students enrolled were women. This percentage was far more representative of the numbers of women in the union movement than was indicated by enrolments in daytime courses.

This paper was prepared by a Western Australian unionist who has been closely associated with trade union training.

When one considers that most of these women had families who presumably made demands on their time in the evenings, their attendance at evening courses gives the lie to the cry of some union officials that "women just aren't interested in unionism". Despite the daunting problems encountered in going to courses at night, women were still interested enough to enrol and attend.

For these women to attend courses during the day is well nigh impossible. Thus perhaps other forms of educational activity such as lunch-time talks at work places and the use of pamphlets, tapes and films would be more suited to women unionists.

The problems faced by women who want to attend union training courses are many - apart from the very real difficulty of obtaining leave. They range from physical difficulties - such as arranging transport to the city and childcare (for part-time workers) - to those of attitude. Women generally leave school earlier than men and often have very negative memories of their school years. For many working women the prospect of 'going back to school' in any shape or form can be frightening. The following recommendations from the second report of the Technical and Further Education Committee could well apply to trade union training:

- "(a) *Special orientation or initiation courses should be designed to assist women to move into traditionally 'male' areas. Sensitive counselling services should be developed . . .*
- (b) *Time-tabling of courses should be more flexible. New patterns of work and study could lead to greater access . . . for women.*
- (c) *Child-minding facilities are an essential prerequisite for many women . . .*
- (d) *There is an extensive need for special bridging and preparatory and refresher courses for women seeking to re-enter the workforce. In the case of migrant women these courses should contain an English language or bilingual component . . . "(1)*

Another inhibiting factor for a woman who enrolls in a standard union training course is that she may be the only woman in the group. Male students, finding themselves in an environment to which they are unaccustomed and in which they may feel inadequate and threatened, can easily retreat into the camaraderie of the sexist joke and 'put-down' of women. This may make the men feel more comfortable but the effect on the lone woman can be traumatic.

Often - to compound the situation - teaching materials are couched in male terms. Everyone - from the union member to the union secretary - is referred to as "he". Men do not realize how alienating this can be for women. If a woman draws attention to sexist language she and the subject are likely to be treated as a joke.

Even if women are encouraged to attend normal union training courses and can overcome the many problems in getting there, the ordeal they face on arrival may be more forbidding than the difficulties already surmounted.

Despite all the problems the proportion of women attending courses has increased from the 5 per cent mentioned earlier to a more respectable 15 per cent. As women become more confident and more of them enrol for union training courses, some of the above problems will be overcome. It is up to the unions to hasten the process by positively encouraging the participation of a growing percentage of their membership. It may be necessary to try new initiatives in order to overcome difficulties which are not faced by the average male unionist.

COURSES FOR WOMEN

Running courses for women is one measure which can be used to hurry things along but it should be regarded only as a stopgap. The ideal situation is that all activities be entirely integrated.

The advantage of courses at which there are only women (particularly if the trainers are also women) is that the participants feel they can discuss their problems and learn from one another in an atmosphere unfettered by the sexist tensions mentioned above. In the supportive atmosphere of a women's course, run by women, it has been proved that students gain confidence and develop their awareness in a way which is not possible with men present.

An important part of the content of any course for women should be the examination of the political reality of women in the union movement - embodied in the discussion of problems such as women's health, childcare and discrimination.

In a study carried out on women who attended the first trade union training course for women in Western Australia it was discovered that eight out of the eighteen students who attended the course subsequently stood for positions within their unions. A number of them gave credit to the course for taking this step. Typical comments were "It gave me the confidence to do it" and "I would never have attempted such a thing if I had not done the course".

CONCLUSIONS

In order to encourage women to attend regular union training courses (dubbed by some cynics as 'male' courses) union officials need to be more creative in their approach. Merely to send out a pamphlet and wait for a response is not enough. Women need to know what to expect and they need very positive encouragement to participate.

Individual unions do not have the constraints of TUTA and could thus be more imaginative in the area of union training for women. However, in designing programmes for their women members, they should remember that the problems faced by women in becoming involved in their unions are magnified when it comes to tackling union education.

A serious threat to the women's programmes conducted by TUTA - and indeed to TUTA itself - is posed by certain recommendations contained in the Report of The Committee of Enquiry into the Future Development of Trade Union Training. These recommendations are:

- "2. TUTA courses should provide for greater employer involvement in training activity . . .
3. Industry courses should be carried out in co-operation with employers, where possible, and include appropriate employer input.
10. Trade union training should be essentially technical and practical training generally confined to unionists who have positions within organisational structures." (2)

As few women have positions within the organizational structure of unions, if pressure is brought to bear on the Authority to close its doors to rank-and-file members, women will be drastically affected.

Clyde Cameron, when introducing the Trade Union Training Bill (1975), stated: "There has always been a range of government-sponsored or assisted management schools, entry to which places no emphasis on participation by the trade union movement . . . For instance the Government has established the Australian Graduate School of Management at the University of New South Wales and is providing \$2,000,000 per annum to support it . . . The training provided (by TUTA) will go towards bridging the gap between unionists' and managements' level of industrial relations knowledge and technique." (3)

The involvement of employers in trade union training would add one more intimidating factor to those already confronting women and would in fact undermine the whole concept of bridging the gap between unionists and management as expressed by Clyde Cameron.

Support for the TUTA programmes, together with the development of education programmes for women by individual unions will go a long way towards increasing the involvement of women in their unions.

REFERENCES: (1) 2nd TAFE Report. (2) Australian Council for Union Training. Summary of Views on Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Future Development of Trade Union Training. (3) Cameron, C. Hansard 1975.