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## *I Knew I Could Do This Work: Seven Strategies that Promote Women's Activism and Leadership in Unions*

This guide will help union facilitators lead a discussion group about how to promote women's leadership in their unions. It is based on the report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research

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# A Diverse Movement Calls for

## Diverse Leadership

Submitted by the AFL-CIO Executive Council

**A**T THE MERGER of the AFL and CIO 50 years ago, America's union movement recognized we are stronger when we are united and inclusive. In the tumultuous years that followed, the new labor federation became a close partner of the civil rights movement, and nine years after the merger we were key to passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act. We also were instrumental in passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 to protect working women from wage discrimination. Since then, the union movement has spoken out for equality for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, faith, age, sexual orientation, disability or immigrant status.

But beneath the highlights of our fight for justice in the workplace and American society, the vestiges of a divided past remained. Throughout our history, the union movement has struggled to remove the remnants of our own "-isms" as well as those of the broader society.

That struggle continues today. Despite decades of progress, the union movement acknowledges we have not met our goals: that unions must reflect the diversity of our communities and union movement leadership must reflect the diversity of our members. In too many cases, women and people of color still are underrepresented among union leadership. It is understandable that many women and people of color—the workers who are among those with the most to gain from union membership and who are most actively organizing today—do not feel welcome.

It is incumbent upon the union movement to stand before employers and governments in every part of  
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the world as a model of openness, fairness and opportunity. We will not allow women, people of color, gay or lesbian workers or brothers and sisters with disabilities to be denied the fruits of their labor in the workplace. We cannot be less vigilant and demanding of ourselves. Building a stronger union movement to improve the lives of working families will require all of us, working together. If we fail to hear every voice and to speak for every worker, we all are weakened.

In 1993, the AFL-CIO formed a Full Participation Committee, which in 1995 reported on the need for more active recruitment and training of leaders and the importance of greater inclusion of people of color, women and young members in union activities and as representatives of their organizations. It also highlighted the need to recognize and overcome barriers to participation and to support sound policy and dedicated leadership that would work toward achieving change. When the current executive officers were elected in 1995, they expanded the Executive Council to include more women and people of color at the very top ranks of America's labor movement. The 1995 report of the Full Participation Conference recommended that unions develop leadership education and training programs for our diverse membership and that we develop policies and practices to foster diversity in staff hiring, appointments, program assignments and delegate status to achieve full participation.

Last year, the AFL-CIO's Working Women's Committee conducted research on the factors deterring women from joining unions and becoming more involved as leaders and activists. That

study, released in March 2004, found women had been joining unions in larger numbers than men for the past 25 years and union election campaigns were more likely to succeed among predominantly female workforces or if the lead organizer was a woman. Nonetheless, unions were losing ground with working women: Polling showed women's favorable attitudes toward unions declining. The

*Overcoming Barriers to Women in Organizing and Leadership* report recommended investments in reaching out to working women; recruiting and training more women organizers; focusing on traditional economic issues for women such as equal pay, work hours and balancing work and family; and demonstrating that unions work effectively for working families. The study also found women perceived a lack of commitment among union leaders to advancing women and increasing the ranks of women labor leaders would require structural changes in union leadership, training, mentoring and accountability measures.

The AFL-CIO's Civil Rights Committee recently commissioned a study by Silas Lee, Ph.D., of Dr. Silas Lee and Associates, on overcoming barriers to full participation by people of color in today's labor movement. Preliminary results show the barriers identified by unionists of color are strikingly similar to those noted in the *Overcoming Barriers to Women in Organizing and Leadership* report:

- Many people of color perceive that union organizations lack the commitment to address their concerns and open paths to leadership. It is common to hear that people of color consider themselves taken for granted by the union movement, being seen as a reliable support base requiring little investment.
- Leadership is dominated by white males and often is seen as entrenched and closed to entry by people of color.
- There are limited means to identify, train, mentor and open doors to future leaders of color at all levels of the union movement. Although people of color are most likely to join unions and to report in surveys they would join a union

tomorrow if given the choice, the increase in the numbers of African Americans, Asian American and Pacific Islanders, Latinos and other people of color among newly organized workers is not matched by an increase in representation at leadership levels.

To live up to the values that fuel our work for working families, to build a stronger union movement and to ensure that union solidarity embraces all brothers and sisters, we must act decisively to ensure diversity at every level and hold union organizations accountable to diversity standards. We must go beyond acknowledging where we fall short and move into full and committed action. Specifically, we will:

- Increase training and leadership development of state federation and central labor council leaders and staff to build capacity among a diverse group of leaders in our movement;
- Accelerate our efforts to attract and recruit a diverse pool of young people into the labor movement through Union Summer and targeted public outreach;
- Establish as federation policy that each national and international union and organizing committee's credentialed delegations to the AFL-CIO Convention shall generally reflect the racial and gender diversity of its membership and urge affiliates to include young workers as delegates;
- Require diversity in participation at AFL-CIO-sponsored and -supported conferences and trainings;
- Make the AFL-CIO itself a model of hiring and promotion practices for women and people of color;
- Expand the preliminary work done through the Union Cities and New Alliance processes to fully integrate the AFL-CIO constituency groups into state federation and central labor council programs and leadership. Amend the federation's rules governing these organizations as needed to

require the affiliation of AFL-CIO constituency groups. These groups, under the umbrella of the Labor Coalition for Community Action, are vehicles for women, people of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers to make their voices heard;

- Urge affiliated national unions to sign a set of diversity principles, to be developed by the Civil Rights and Working Women's committees and approved by the Executive Council, and provide for affiliated national unions to report annually on the representation of women and people of color in their membership as well as in staff and elected leadership positions at all levels. Require the AFL-CIO Executive Council and other governing bodies as well as state federations and central labor councils to develop targeted levels of leadership diversity and plans to reach them by the 2009 Convention;

- To ensure diversity at the highest levels of the AFL-CIO, representatives of the six constituency groups should be added to the federation's General Board; measures to ensure and enhance gender and racial diversity on the Executive Council should be strengthened; and the Executive Committee should include representatives who ensure diversity by race and gender; and

- Propose and actively support any amendments to the AFL-CIO Constitution that may be needed to implement these policies.

America's union movement must stand as a model of full inclusion. We cannot ask more of broader society than we are willing and able to do ourselves. We cannot build a better future for working families without the full strength brought by brothers and sisters of every description. In our hiring, organizing, representation, outreach and leadership, the union movement must embody our goal of equal welcome and equal opportunity for all.