

Christine George Presentation for panel

The women's liberation movement: manifestations at the work place.

Introduction

I want to take just a minute to put my observations in context. In the late 1960's and early 1970's my main focus was as an organizer and member of the anti-war and women's liberation movements. As an activist at the University of Wisconsin- Madison I was very active in SDS, and just before graduation (1969) participated in a Free University women's group. On returning to Chicago, I became part of a women's group of SDS women; then on to a member and leader in Rising Up Angry, a local left group that initially focused on organizing working class youth; and subsequently (and concurrently) a member of the Chicago's Women Liberation Union. The focus of all my organizing was in the "community" or in support work and not in the work place. However, as I began working on and off in the public sector on graduation, working for the Cook County Department of Public Aid and then the Illinois Department of Employment Insurance (i.e. unemployment) I found the issues of women's liberation were not left behind. In both places I became involved in day-to-day workplace and subsequently union involvement where gender inequality was a salient issue. Ultimately, by the mid 70's workplace organizing became my primary focus as a union leader and part of a union's staff.)

At these workplaces I found myself as part of a multiracial and largely female work force: clericals, para-professionals and professional workers.

Snap shots of feminism along the way....

What I observed in these working situations were three over-lapping by distinct manifestations of the ideas of women's liberation. First, there was the dissemination of feminists ideas and concepts (women-centered stance, power and privilege differentials between men and women and accompanying exploitation (both economic and patriarchal, etc.) These concepts were brought to the workplace/union explicitly by women (and some men) who were union leaders and staff. Second, I saw a process of building leadership and discovering women's leadership that was already in place. Third, issues began arising in the day to day work situations of women that were framed by feminist informed concepts.

Dissemination of feminist ideas

In the 70's the newly elected democratic liberal governor redeemed a campaign promise and signed an executive order allowing the unionization of state workers. The first groups to unionize were primary "blue collar," prison guards (primarily male); and mental health attendant and support workers such as food workers and cleaning staff (both male and female). This was followed by professional and clerical workers (substantially female). The latter two groups were more difficult to mobilize for various socialization reasons, often with a gendered component. In the organizing of these units and latter in the negotiation of the first union contract and building of subsequent union demands, union organizers and leaders were very aware of the gendered work and family realities of the women workers and

intentionally brought feminist concepts into their strategies. For example, the co-director of the union organizing effort, a woman with strong democratic socialist and feminist worldviews, introduced the concept of a child-care and adoption leave to the elected clerical negotiating team. This concept, not in the initial “organic” demands of the clerical negotiating team, ultimately was a key feature in the first union contract and was pointed to in the organizing of clericals into the newly formed local unions. Another example is the introduction of the concept of “comparable worth” to rank and file union members and the efforts of the national union to push this issue in local negotiations.

The leadership of the union also introduced opportunities to support the Equal Rights Amendment in Illinois (a battle ground state for the adoption of this effort), linking and mobilizing members for demonstration at the state capital and adopting resolutions supporting the ERA. While this mobilization was successful in engaging members who were already—from other aspects of their lives—supportive of the amendment, it did not engage most rank and file women members, who either were opposed to the effort (often from rural or suburban areas of the state) or did not recognize it as a high priority in their day to day lives (African American clerical and blue collar workers).

Building women’s leadership

Introducing these concepts and strategies was closely allied to building women’s leadership within the union and workplace. Much of this was discovering women’s leadership already present, but there was a clear strategy of building and mentoring women leaders, a large plurality of whom were African-American, reflecting the composition of the workforce. These efforts included urging women to run for office in the union, take on roles as local workforce leaders (stewards and members of the elected negotiating teams) and initiating a number of women focused union educational conferences and training sessions. Also many women—including myself—were introduced to and became active in the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). There we were connected to long time women leaders in other unions. The mix of old school union leaders, women activists newly arrived to the women’s movement, and newly engaged women union leaders was a dynamic and creative. A key point of early struggle was support for the ERA, between women who feared (correctly it turns out) the risk to the long fought for “maternalist” work rules—such as maternity leave—for women and young women feminist activities who felt the maternalist policies were often used to discriminate against women (also the case) and felt that the ERA was essential to women having an equal place in the workplace.

Issues arising in the day-to-day work place

The grievances and issues at local labor-management meetings (a democratic feature instituted in the newly negotiated contracts) point to how women workers were identifying and naming issues that arose in their gendered lives. One example of this manifestation was the rise in number of grievances about sexual harassment. Women who were entering the gendered workplace of computer and information services encountered verbal harassment (“jokes” etc.) and pornographic pictures on office walls and desks or computer terminals. Women had a vocabulary that was missing for early cohorts of workers and found union staff and leadership that were responsive in supporting them in battling these occurrences.

Another issue that plagued parents, primarily women, at all work sites, but especially in blue collar and clerical positions, was being prohibited and severely penalized from receiving calls from or calling their children and schools on work phones (the only ones available). Arising in many disciplinary

cases and brought into labor-management discussions, were local union leaders and elected stewards fought persistently to have these rules modified and/or over-turned.

In conclusion, I found many manifestations of intentional and organic feminist activities and concepts in the work place and in union activities—reflecting a woman's day to day reality and the interaction of that reality and the organized and increasing popularized "women's liberation movement."