

UNION WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP EDUCATION PROJECT

A Joint Project of the United Association
for Labor Education and the
Berger-Marks Foundation



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PROJECT SUMMARY

What role should women's labor education play in the 21st century labor movement? How can union women's leadership programs, especially the UALE summer schools, speak to the needs and concerns of women workers today? These questions underpinned the Union Women's Leadership Education Project, prompted by a focused survey of 2012 and 2013 participants in the United Association for Labor Education (UALE) regional summer schools; the project brought together 26 women in November 2014 at the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee to provide answers. The task was huge but simple: Examine, compare, assess, even rethink the curriculum, recruitment and financial structure of the four regional summer schools. Then chart a path to fortify them through aggressive recruitment, especially of younger women, across all types of labor organizations.

The women invited to the Highlander Center came from eight universities; 11 unions and worker centers (Retail Action Project and Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance), including the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario and the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (coordinators of longstanding women's schools in both Canadian provinces); and women's leadership programs like the Prairie and Regina V. Polk Schools and the Women's Institute for Leadership Development (WILD).

Despite daunting financial, recruitment and logistical challenges, the retreat consensus is clear: Women's schools today nurture and develop women leaders in a diverse and changing workforce with emerging and traditional labor organizations. What will allow them to expand to meet the needs

of a labor movement under attack? Aggressive recruitment of young women through issues they care most about, greater institutional buy-in, social justice curriculum that speaks to young and immigrant workers, and curriculum that engages them in both skills development and a framework for understanding the "big picture" (how political and economic systems operate).

The women at Highlander envisioned a set of guiding principles that would shape curriculum across all four summer schools. They began developing recruitment strategies that would expand outreach to young women in unions and alternate labor organizations and identify more stakeholders to support the schools. To help new summer school coordinators, the group built a framework for a coordinator's handbook and a work team completed a draft after the retreat. It was tested in the summer of 2015 and will be finalized for the four 2016 UALE summer schools. Online access to all teaching materials was projected within the next two years. Significantly, three women in their 20s chaired the three ongoing committees—on the handbook, the curriculum goals, and outreach and recruitment strategies.

And finally, UALE featured the UALE/Berger-Marks women's leadership project on March 27 at its 2015 conference in Orlando. It was the first UALE plenary ever held on women's leadership programming. It was preceded by a panel presentation for the Labor Studies Journal and followed by an afternoon workshop on recruitment strategies for women's leadership programs.

A Bold New Vision



The four regional UALE summer schools (Western, Midwest, Southern and Northeast) provide a space and time for women in the broad-based labor movement to come together to develop leadership and create community with women from other unions and organizing projects.

Summer school is a place where women build their skills, confidence and knowledge of the forces shaping our workplaces, families and communities. It is a place for transformation, where women can be supported as agents of change. It is a place for building solidarity across unions and alternative labor and community organizations. In addition, summer school provides a safe space to examine the ways that gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, sexual identity and other forms of oppression serve to divide us, and helps us find ways to unite around our common struggles.

The education model we embrace is education for action. Our approach is learner-centered, experience-based and participatory, leading to individual and collective change.

—From the Nov. 20–23, 2014, Union Women’s Leadership Education Retreat at the Highlander Research and Education Center (New Market, Tennessee)

THE HISTORY

As the labor movement faces severe economic and political challenges, the need to identify, mentor and support new young leaders is more important than ever for union survival, growth and effectiveness. The AFL-CIO has launched a new Young Worker Leadership Institute, a National Labor Leadership Institute and a Community Labor Leadership Institute, and unions across the country have created innovative leadership programs as well (such as USW’s “Next Generation,” AFSCME’s “Next Wave” and Women’s Leadership Academy, IBEW’s “RENEW” and many others).

Expanding pathways to leadership for women remains a particularly important labor movement priority at a moment when, in proportion to their numbers in unions, women remain underrepresented at all levels of union leadership. As AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler recently told the AFL-CIO Executive Council: “We haven’t done a good job of selling ourselves as a movement that gets it,” and she went on to point out the lack of women in leadership (Gruenberg, 2015).

It is in the context of these urgent challenges that the UALE Women’s Caucus partnered with the Berger-Marks Foundation almost two years ago to assess the several types of women’s schools and their current and potential contribution to new leadership development efforts.

Union summer schools represent one of the labor movement’s few longstanding, institutionalized commitments to women’s leadership development in a multiunion setting. The first residential school was started by the Women’s Trade Union League in 1914. Based on the Bryn Mawr Summer School for

“I would not be involved in my union at all without the tools I got from summer school.”

—SURVEY RESPONDENT

"I can't believe it's taken over 30 years for us [the four summer schools] to talk with one another."

**—HIGHLANDER
RETREAT PARTICIPANT**

Women in Industry in the 1920s, the first regional women's summer school was held in 1974. Since 1980, four regional women's summer schools (Western, Midwest, Southern and Northeast) have been sponsored in part by UALE and hosted/coordinated by a rotating cadre of university labor education programs in collaboration with unions, as well as state and provincial labor federations (Kornbluh and Frederickson, 1984).

These women's schools are residential, multiday programs that usually include plenary sessions, core skills and issues classes, workshops, cultural events and union support actions. To date, the four annual UALE women's schools have provided thousands of working women a wide range of leadership development opportunities previously unavailable. They offer women the opportunity to meet and network with women from other unions and organizations within their own region. The schools also offer a formal structure that supports cross-union networking and intergenerational exchange among women labor educators and emerging women leaders. Within the labor education community, these schools are recognized as one of the few formal structures that support ad hoc collaboration and intergenerational mentoring. And, for many women, the schools offer a space to develop within the "phases" of leadership development addressed in Michelle Kaminski's and Elaine Yakura's path-breaking study of women in union leadership, "Women's Union Leadership: Closing the Gender Gap," (Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society, 2008).

Although the women's summer schools have a long track record of reaching women with leadership education in a multiunion environment, these schools have faced and continue to face many challenges, including:

- 1. Inconsistent levels of financial and logistical support.**
- 2. Low participation of young women and women from low-wage immigrant communities in some schools.**
- 3. Lack of time and resources to conduct effective cross-region program assessment and development.**
- 4. Absence of mechanisms for information-sharing across regions with women's school coordinators.**

These challenges were discussed in the 2013 UALE Women's Caucus, based in part on preliminary observations of all four schools in an unpublished study by the Berger-Marks Foundation (O'Farrell, 2012). Two years earlier, Berger-Marks had met with UALE President Elissa McBride to propose a joint project, funded by the foundation, to review and assess the summer schools. Several members of the Women's Caucus subsequently drafted a proposal and budget in 2013 to work together to address these challenges. Berger-Marks committed \$49,100 to the project at the end of that year.

This collaborative initiative built on existing relationships between UALE and the foundation, which in recent years has provided much-needed scholarships to support greater participation of young women and women of color in women's summer schools. The foundation also had funded several studies that affirmed the importance of women-centered programs in the related areas of leadership development for organizing (Whitefield and Emrani, 2009), mentoring (Hess, 2012) and women's committees (Gray and Figueroa, 2014).

The timing was right. UALE was approaching the 40th anniversary of its Union Women's Regional Summer



Project Director Cheryl Coney leading discussion amongst Women's Labor Education Project Retreat participants. Highlander Center for Education and Research, November 2014.

Schools. The joint project became known as the Union Women's Leadership Education Project and undertook to identify key components of the summer schools and other women's leadership programs, to assess the benefits and the challenges, and outline a road map to the future. The road map would address these challenges, especially those outlined above, by bringing the four regions together to encourage collaborative solutions.

Based on review of existing material, the extensive experience of participants at a four-day retreat in November 2014, insights of a new generation of women labor educators from a variety of programs, and thoughtful, in-depth discussions, we concluded that the schools make an important contribution to union leadership grounded at the local level for the organized and the unorganized woman activist. The following are steps the project is taking to reimagine and strengthen the schools: a vision statement, a set of five core principles and a coordinator's guide, as well as gathering recruitment strategies and online resources. The benefits and challenges identified provide a starting point for moving forward with individual and organizational stakeholders.

THE PROJECT

Thousands of women have attended summer schools in the past four decades. One early school in 1977 had 70 participants. In 2014, there were more than 300. The four schools rotate among three to five university labor program hosts or a labor federation within each region. They range in size from 15 participants to 200 participants and in length from three days to five days. While format and class options differ, each school offers a core leadership component, skills workshops, such as organizing and public speaking, and inspirational speakers. Some schools incorporate labor history, cultural programming and work actions. Several schools run multilingual programs. In one sample year, the participation fees ranged from \$300 to \$700.

This joint project focused on assessing women's leadership development programs, specifically the four regional summer schools whose 2012 and 2013 participants were surveyed; examining current practices; and strategically planning ways to increase the impact of the schools. Guided by UALE Women's Caucus Co-chairs Kate Shaughnessy and Gayle Hamilton, as well as Berger-Marks Chair Louise Walsh and Trustee Kitty Peddicord, and UALE President Cheryl

"I am now the secretary-treasurer of my union. I believe the other officers/stewards see me as more of a leader since I attended summer school."

—SURVEY RESPONDENT

**“We don’t
want to
strengthen
what we have.
We want to
transform
what we have!”**

**—HIGHLANDER
RETREAT PARTICIPANT**

Teare, a planning committee was formed, a search conducted, and Cheryl Coney was hired as the project director.*

The planning committee represented union and university labor educators and project sponsors. A comprehensive survey was developed and sent to the more than 500 attendees of the 2012 and 2013 schools, 108 of whom responded. The survey responses helped shaped the agenda for a retreat convened at the Highlander Research and Education Center in November 2014.

THE RETREAT

For the retreat, each of the four summer schools nominated two labor educators apiece from union and university programs. To foster intergenerational knowledge transfer and mentoring, there was a mix of longtime and new school coordinators. Two worker center educators were invited and one participated. There also were women from other multiunion women’s summer schools, such as the Regina V. Polk School in Illinois, the Women’s Institute for Leadership Development (WILD) in Massachusetts and the Prairie School for Union Women in Saskatchewan, Canada.

The final mix of 26 participants represented experienced and new summer school staff, as well as racial, ethnic and generational diversity. This may be the only time women labor educators came together for several days to assess all four schools since 1975. During the four-day retreat at Highlander, attendees:

- Drafted “five core principles” for curriculum at the four summer schools.
- Began a coordinator’s handbook for regional summer schools that was

piloted in 2015 and finalized for the 2016 schools.

- Committed to recruiting significant numbers of young women for future schools (with some setting a three-year, graduated goal of 50% participation of young women).
- Built relationships among multiple generations of women’s school coordinators across regions, and created infrastructure for ongoing collaboration.
- Assessed the scope and effectiveness of current multiunion women’s labor education and leadership development programs, especially the summer schools.
- Exchanged core curricular resources and began a process to create an accessible online archive of women’s leadership development curricula.
- Shared best practices in program design, coordination and participant recruitment methods.
- Crafted a strategy to boost women’s leadership development capacity across programs and regions and, where appropriate, better align women’s schools with emerging labor movement leadership development priorities.
- Committed to including younger women in planning future summer schools and teaching in them.
- Agreed to collect data on age and diversity of participants beginning with the 2015 regional union women’s summer schools.
- Strategized about how to expand institutional buy-in and support for the schools to increase their ability to meet the needs of the changing workforce.

This work led to the creation of three committees (work teams) to continue the discussions in key areas to move the work forward. All three chairs are young labor educators:

Recruitment and Outreach: This committee—chaired by Sarah Hughes of the Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies—focused on building upon the legacy of the schools, fundraising strategies, growing the schools’ capacity and attracting more young women. The committee helped develop a workshop for the 2015 UALE conference that focused on outreach and recruitment for women’s schools.

Coordinator’s Handbook: Ashley Dwire from SEIU, and coordinator of the Southern School in 2009, chaired the committee designated to complete a coordinator’s handbook. This handbook will be produced in late 2015 to serve as a guide for 2016 UALE women’s school coordinators. A draft was distributed as a pilot for 2015 school coordinators, to be revised, as needed, for the final version.

Curriculum and Development: Chaired by Sharice McCain from the University of Minnesota Labor Education Service, this working group (committee) helped flesh out the five guiding principles of women’s school curricula developed at the retreat (see page 11).

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Looking at existing women’s labor education programs, in addition to the summer schools, provided a foundation for assessing the current state of women’s labor education and identified new opportunities for coordinators of the women’s schools to share resources and improve multiunion recruitment.

In addition, discussions were held regarding how regional summer schools are coordinated and their best practices, challenges and traditions, all of which helped in the development of the coordinator’s guide.** By using this information and materials gathered from previous summer schools, as well as contacting recent school coordinators, a draft version of the guide was produced. One senior labor educator said it was the first time she really understood what other schools were doing.

The retreat committee developed several sessions at the 2015 UALE conference and several women who attended the Highlander retreat participated in the workshop, plenary and a luncheon, all of which discussed the women’s schools. There was also a paper presentation for the Labor Studies Journal panel. This was the first UALE conference in which the women’s schools were featured in multiple forums.

SURVEY RESULTS: MOVING FORWARD

The project director surveyed more than 500 participants from all four summer schools; 108 women responded. Nearly 90% of respondents indicated that attendance at a summer school had a significant impact on them, while about 10% said the school had no impact.

The responses appear to suggest that women’s schools contribute to the four stages of union leadership development described by Kaminski and Yakura (2008): Finding one’s voice, developing basic skills, figuring out the politics and setting your own agenda. They also draw on the newest work on mentoring (Hess, 2014) and women’s committees (Gray and Figueroa, 2014).

“I have realized how important it is for women to step up in our locals and become strong leaders.”

—SURVEY RESPONDENT

At the retreat, participants in small groups, as well as the full group, reached for something to uplift women's leadership. One group said, "We don't want to strengthen the schools. We want to transform them." This sentiment suggested a more collaborative direction for curricula across the regions and in raising the profile of UALE summer schools. It is reflected, in part, in The Five Principles that all schools are invited to incorporate.

STRENGTHS

1. Empowerment and Solidarity:

When asked about the schools' impact, the largest number of women (35) gave personal responses that suggest strengthening their voices, such as "I gained more confidence" and "became more effective." The most frequent words used when asked about their most important memory were "empowerment" and "solidarity." Fifteen women said the schools had no impact on increasing their leadership role (with two more saying the question did not apply). Retreat participants reinforced these survey results in small groups and plenaries.

2. Action and New Roles: Women reported that when they returned home, they took actions (formed a women's committee) and took on new roles. One woman said the school "enhanced my ability to advocate for members," while another was "elected to the executive board." One woman became a national officer.

3. Networking: In both impact and memories, respondents reported gaining inspiration, skills and strategies by meeting other union women, learning about similar challenges and new approaches, thinking "out of the box" for

solutions. This occurred at the retreat itself, where women from different programs met for the first time and shared materials and strategies.

4. Structures: Summer schools are a place where women learn more about their own union structures and how they fit into the larger labor movement and wider world: power mapping, national issues and action planning were all tools that helped them assess their own situations and begin to analyze the politics. Retreat participants stressed the importance of giving newly active women tools to return home and gain support, not face rejection.

5. Basic Skills: After leadership training, the most useful workshops were collective bargaining, public speaking and grievance handling. While only a few workshops were mentioned as least useful, they did suggest that beginning and advanced courses sometimes are necessary, not only in such areas as contract negotiation, but also in social media and labor laws.

6. Future: When asked about training needs for the next five years, half of the women said that learning to facilitate leadership among members was important. They were aware of internal organizational politics and are beginning to set agendas and to mentor new leaders. The skill in most demand was understanding labor and employment laws. These two were followed by needing more communication skills, managing conflict, working with a diverse membership and building consensus. This would suggest that future summer school curricula feature courses in conflict reduction/resolution, social media training, prejudice reduction (among diverse groups) and cultural diversity.

7. Instructors: Retreat participants also reported on the renewed commitment and strength the instructors take from these schools, both working collaboratively with each other and interacting with the students. Like good mentorship relations, there is a great deal of back and forth, with instructors learning from students, as well as the other way around. We see this underlying principle of adult labor education at the center of these schools.

CHALLENGES

1. Costs: Data from the survey suggest the primary obstacle to attending the schools was the cost (39 respondents) and the lack of scholarship money (36). Three women also reported that loss of income and use of vacation time were problems. Several mentioned child care, elder care and transportation as barriers. For retreat participants, this problem highlighted the need to secure scholarship money for students, negotiate the lowest possible costs to run the school, recruit volunteer instructors, address child care deficits and generally raise institutional buy-in, as well as monetary and in-kind contributions to cover the costs.

2. Recruitment: For the retreat participants, school coordinators and planning committees seek to include the larger labor movement by reaching out to alternative labor and community organizations to recruit new young labor activists from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, many of whom work in low-wage jobs. At the retreat, Berger-Marks called for a recruitment goal in which 50% of the women are younger than age 35; this was supported by others. This directly relates to both recruitment and financial challenges,

because these participants are the least likely to have union support and the most dependent on financial assistance. Translation, with its attached costs, is crucial for recruitment.

3. Coordination: Each region handles coordination differently. One region, for example, has a standing committee representing all universities in the region, giving a new or experienced school coordinator many knowledgeable resources. Some coordinators have done several schools in different locations, while others are brand new. As workplaces and unions continue to change, potential coordinators agreed they all would benefit from a clear set of guidelines on what is needed to run a successful residential school for women.

4. Sustainability: The schools receive generous support from UALE, between \$4,000 and \$6,000 per school per year. For several years, the Berger-Marks Foundation supplemented the costs by providing scholarships specifically to recruit women younger than age 35 and participants from alternative labor organizations. For the 2015 summer schools, Berger-Marks increased each school's scholarships to \$8,000 to support young women as participants and instructors. For the 2016 summer schools, UALE increased each school's budget to \$5,500. Each school also seeks money and/or in-kind contributions from university programs, local unions and community groups. While this funding has been crucial to the ongoing success of the schools, the amount available varies widely by school and year and must be supplemented by substantial volunteer labor. This makes planning, evaluation and growth difficult.

"[The Summer School] really energized me as a union member, woman and leader. It was simply fantastic."

—SURVEY RESPONDENT

CONCLUSIONS: THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PROGRAMMING

Women's participation in both the U.S. workforce (56%, according to the International Labor Organization's 2013 statistics) and the labor movement has surpassed 50%. Yet, women continue to earn less than men, are separated into low-wage jobs, and lack such critical support as paid family leave, paid sick days, affordable child care, health insurance and pensions. But just as Sheryl Sandburg has found a lack of women in managerial roles, we also find too few women at all levels of union leadership. Union Women Summer Schools, reimagined and strengthened to reflect new and traditional worker organizations, can build on 40 years of experience and make positive changes for women and men in the 21st century.

For the first time in decades, women educators across North America came together and concluded that women's leadership programming—in particular, UALE women's summer schools—can be

reshaped, strengthened and expanded to meet the needs of a changing labor movement. For example, Emily LaBarbera-Twarog, a member of the retreat planning team, noted that the social transformation piece central to the earliest summer school curricula was later replaced by the "nuts and bolts" training. Now, more than 30 years later, we intend to bring it back. That decision is reflected in the vision statement and set of five principles.

** Marilyn Sneiderman, director of Rutgers University's Center for Innovation in Worker Organization, joined the planning committee for the Highlander retreat and served as the lead facilitator. Other planning committee members and Women's Caucus members involved in the project's development were Jen Sherer, University of Iowa; Emily LaBarbera-Twarog, University of Illinois; Brigid O'Farrell, independent scholar; and K.C. Wagner, The Worker Institute at Cornell University.*

*** The vision statement from the Highlander retreat grew out of responses to the question: "What is your vision for the role summer schools can play in creating a just and changing world?"*

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THE FIVE PRINCIPLES

Principle 1: Development of Self

The impact of external forces on our lives as women can create the need for us to refocus and remind us of our individual contributions. Through understanding and appreciating the importance of our many identities, participants will gain greater self-awareness and find their individual voice to add to the collective, while learning how best to sustain a healthy work/life balance.

- Create an environment that empowers women to build on their individual strengths.
- Reinforce self-confidence through direct workshops and overall take-away from the summer schools.
- Foster transformative thinking to encourage women to be agents of change in our homes, workplaces and the world.

Principle 2: Developing Relationships/Leading Others

Union women activists and leaders can develop their individual communication and empowerment skills and can use those skills to build their union and to enhance the role of women in the union. Classes in this area would address one or more of the following objectives:

- Reaching out to others, both within and outside the organization, to engage them in the values and work of the union.
- Developing the one-on-one skills that can motivate others to a higher level of participation in the work of the union.
- Learning how to bridge differences in personalities and working styles; finding common ground; and the ability to build a team.
- Identifying new potential activists and recruiting them to union activities.
- Offering support and skills-building opportunities to upcoming leaders and activists (mentoring).
- Building a base of women who will support your leadership and your advancement as a leader.
- Developing a network of support for your long-term survivability.

Principle 3: Organizational Leadership

Building and leading an effective organization requires developing an effective team, having a plan, working collaboratively and creating efficient structures that encourage broad participation from a significant portion of members. Women labor leaders can learn how to carry out a viable workers' agenda in their unions and in their communities. Courses in this area would incorporate some or all of the following objectives:

- Creating a vision for your union and getting others to embrace that vision.
- Linking a vision with an action plan that can move the union forward in its goals.
- Streamlining organizational functions so that people engage around the key work of the union.
- Building an inclusive, welcoming environment, with operations that are efficient, transparent and value all voices.
- Creating a leadership team that works collaboratively toward achieving the best performance and outcomes from everyone involved.
- Moving a workers' agenda that builds power through engaged members and community allies.
- Setting up accountability systems that prevent goals and activities from stalling out.
- Ensuring that victories are celebrated, defeats are analyzed and members feel a sense of power and momentum.

Principle 4: Big Picture

Exploring the nuts and bolts of history and politics, especially historical, economic and political history as it impacts working women's lives by:

- Examining the ways in which global economic policies impact the lives of women locally and globally.
- Understanding how our past and current economic models deepen women's inequality and benefits from that inequality.
- Exploring and understanding how women from varied and diverse backgrounds and places of privilege have built and must continue to build a working solidarity among one another.

Principle 5: Intersection of Social Values in a Just World

- The summer schools are a place where issues that are controversial or difficult can be addressed with knowledge and inclusiveness. Because we work and live in a global economy, it is important to:
- Challenge the complexities of oppression, power and privilege in the United States and globally.
- Examine systematic oppression, such as sexism, racism and other "isms."
- Explore workers' movements elsewhere and develop a sense of international solidarity.

Special Acknowledgment: The UALE/Berger-Marks project expresses its thanks to all those who put countless hours of thought and effort into the UALE Union Women Summer Schools over the last 40 years. A special tribute goes to Lois Gray, without whom the schools would not have been started, and who continues to teach in them today.