

“Labor Women’s Transformative Global Leadership”

Dorothy Sue Cobble, Rutgers University, USA

Good morning. Let me start by thanking the Solidarity Center for inviting me to be part of this exciting event. Thank you to our Brazilian hosts as well and to everyone who played a part in bringing us all together in São Paulo. I am thrilled to be here and to have the opportunity to learn from all of you. I look forward to our two days together and to thinking with you about how we can create a more just world where the rights and dignity of all are honored.

I’ve been invited to share with you some of my findings from a report I wrote for the Solidarity Center last year on women and labor movements worldwide and I’m happy to do that this morning.

But first I’d like to start with a few words about labor women’s *long history of transformational leadership*. I’m a historian by trade and I write – and have for many years now – about the history and contemporary efforts of labor women to transform their unions and the societies in which they live. I want to share some of this vital and rich history with you because I believe it’s inspiring to know that there’s a long tradition of labor women’s *transformational leadership* on which to build. It’s also inspiring because of what they stood for. When we talk about leadership, we have to ask, leadership for what? And in my view, our foremothers forged a *distinctive vision of social change* that is well worth recalling and reclaiming

today. There was a *working* women's politics and a *working* women's feminism. I call it labor feminism. It differs from the feminism of more elite women but it was a feminist politics nonetheless.

What did labor feminists want? First, they sought the full development of each individual. Yet they did not celebrate *individual* advancement or integrating women into an unjust system. They argued that we are only truly free when those around us are free. For each to advance, all must go forward. In other words, individual progress and collective progress are intertwined, and neither can be achieved without the other.

Second, they embraced gender equality but sought to go beyond it. After all, if we are only asking to be equal to men who are also exploited, albeit in their own ways, that is not enough. Labor feminists believed women faced discrimination as a sex, and they sought to eliminate those discriminations. Yet they also sought to end other injustices. They were concerned with dismantling *multiple* structures of inequality and they fought hard to secure economic justice, freedom, and dignity for all.

Third and last, there was a *global* vision. Let me take a moment to recount one story from a hundred years ago of labor women's global vision. I tell it because I'm in the middle of uncovering this lost history but I also share it to emphasize how our global movement today rests on the efforts of many who came before us.

In 1919, 250 trade union women and their allies from 19 different nations in Latin America, Asia, Europe, North America, and the Caribbean gathered at a “Women’s Labor Congress” to found what they claimed was the *first* union women’s international organization. I have no reason to doubt their claim. They called themselves the International Federation of Working Women and they opened their doors to a wide variety of working women’s unions, traditional and nontraditional.

They sought to move beyond nationalism, beyond imperialism, beyond colonialism and racism, and find common ground for, in their words from a hundred years ago, “raising the standard of life for all workers.” They sought peace too through international law. “Make law not war” they proclaimed, and they vigorously asserted that peace could only be achieved when the maldistribution of wealth and privilege was rectified.

They claimed for women the right to vote in nations around the world as well as the right to participate fully in the new international labor organizations that were emerging. In 1919, for example, the ILO convened its first conference in Washington D.C.. Only 23 of the 269 delegates were women, and NONE of the women had voting rights. In response, labor women called their own conference in Washington at the same time and for 10 days they formulated their own global standards and conventions. They created, in the words of one participant, a great “labor sisterhood.”

Like many of their union brothers, they wanted industrial and political democracy, living wages, shorter hours, and the right to education. But in a proposed “working women’s charter,” they called also for equal pay, maternity benefits, and women’s “full enfranchisement,” described as “political, legal, and industrial equality.” Their resolutions in 1919 stressed migrant rights as well, including “equal wages and rights for foreign workers” and freer “movements of peoples among the communities and the nations.”

The women gathered in 1919 lobbied the “official” ILO conference to advance their agenda. They lost on some of their demands. For example, they wanted the ILO to amend its constitution and make it mandatory for women to be included as voting delegates from each country – what we would now think of as quotas. But they secured agreement on other issues. Most notably, after strenuous debate, the male delegates at the founding ILO conference adopted the Women’s Congress recommendation of twelve weeks of paid maternity leave as the *third* ILO international convention.

The 1919 labor women also organized for more power and representation in the dominant international labor bodies of the day, primarily the International Federation of Trade Unions. In 1924, they set up the first international committee of women trade unionists in the IFTU. It was this committee that a new generation of labor feminists revived in 1956, the same generation who would secure the

passage of the ICFTU Women's Rights Charter in 1965. Some fifty years later, that committee is still functioning. Indeed, in 2010, when Sharan Burrow became General Secretary of the ITUC, the first woman to hold that top office, she had been active in and had the support of an expanded and updated version of the midcentury women's committee. She was standing on the shoulders of the labor women of 1919.

In the time I have left, let me turn to the present and to the global patterns of women's labor unionism. My task in the report I prepared for the Solidarity Center was to review the research literature on women and unions globally. I decided to focus on three gender gaps: the gender gap in women's access to worker organization; the gender gap in leadership; and the gender gap in union priorities, that is, to what degree do union priorities reflect the concerns of women? Given our time constraints this morning, I'll simply highlight just a few of the findings in two areas: the gender gap in union *membership* and the gender gap in union *leadership*. The full report, for those of you so inclined, is available on my website.

The first point to note is the startling lack of global data on women in labor organizations -- both in traditional trade unions as well as in new worker movements. There are huge gaps in our knowledge. Indeed, I was unable to locate *any* attempt to map the patterns of women's unionism globally. So, as a necessary first step, I put together an initial table on female membership in trade unions by nation around the world. The full table, available in the report, has data for 39

countries, including nations in every region of the world, and represents some 80 percent of the world's union membership. It is based on information from the ILO, the EIRO, and multiple other sources, including some of you here today who responded so generously to my queries. Thank you.

Of course, national union data has significant problems. It is often unreliable, and fragmentary; and cross-country comparisons are difficult because of widely varying definitions of "union" and "union membership." But gathering such data is important. It illuminates what we don't know as well as what we do – both valuable I believe. It also allows for some initial assessments of patterns and trends.

Let me turn first to some of my findings about what can be called the "feminization" of trade union membership. This is a global trend that is *not* slowing down, and in many places we are seeing a significant shift in the historic pattern of male-majority unionism. Indeed, in one-third of the nations I analyzed --women are now the *new majority* of trade unionists. (And remember, women's majority status in trade unions is occurring even though worldwide men are still the majority in the official labor force statistics.) When we ask the parity question – that is, have women reached the numbers in trade unions comparable to their numbers in the official labor force, (some 40 percent) -- we find that in two-thirds of the nations the answer is yes, women have reached parity in union membership. In only a third of the nations were women underrepresented.

We found also that women's trade union membership closely correlates with women's labor force participation. Not surprising really. But more surprising, is that women's trade union membership does *not* correlate with the relative strength or weakness of unions as measured by national union density. Women are just as likely to be a majority of union members where density is low as where it is high. That's surprising I think because one would suspect or hope that where unions are large and powerful more would be done to organize women. It appears, however, that women organize regardless of the size or power of the official trade union movement.

Before moving on to my second area, women's leadership in trade unions, let me note some of the limits of union feminization research. For one, feminization in and of itself is *no* guarantee of women having leadership positions – we can all think of many unions with a majority of women members but no women in top office. At the same time, research does show that the number of women at the top is closely *correlated* to the number of women in the organization.

Two, there may be progress in closing the gender gap in union membership but women's overall access to collective representation may be worsening, depending on whether union membership as a whole is rising or falling. Three, is union feminization another example of what some call "lemon feminization"? In other words, are women moving into labor organizations because men are leaving as unions decline in power? Without detailed comparative studies it is impossible to

say for sure, but since feminization does not seem to correlate with the size or power of national labor movements, it appears not.

Four, looking at the numbers of men and women in unions at the national level obscures the realities of the organizations in which most workers reside: most are either heavily female or heavily male, that is, the labor movement, like the work world as a whole, is still very sex segregated.

OK, a few final observations from the report, this time on union women's leadership globally. In terms of *designated* positions of leadership, as we know, in recent years there have been many breakthroughs and many individual women now hold positions of power. Yet at the same time, the "pyramid of exclusion" still exists: the closer one gets to the top, the fewer women you find. Traveling the other direction the reverse is true: the closer you get to the bottom of the power pyramid, you see a lot of us.

Second, we are progressing at two speeds. There's a fast lane and a slow lane, with one wing of the labor movement having made a lot of progress and another wing where there is actually very little change. We could call this a bifurcated pattern or what Ruth Milkman terms "the two worlds of unionism." Significantly, the unions making most progress or the "best practice" cases rely on top-down pressure – "reserve seats" for women and other measures – as well as bottom-up pressure, that

is, there is often “self-organization” among women and active women’s committees, conferences, and other woman-only spaces.

Lastly, while it is important to know the numbers of women in top positions or holding jobs designated as leadership posts. At the same time, I want to emphasize that labor women can and do exercise leadership where ever they are and in whatever position they hold, whether or not those positions are officially considered leadership positions. Indeed, the most exciting aspect of labor women’s leadership I believe and one that needs much more attention from researchers is *where* women are leading collectively and *how* they are leading at all levels of the labor movement. It is women at every level who are moving the labor movement in new directions and women who are inventing new kinds of worker organizations and new ways of being a trade unionist. I profiled many of these new unions and the women in them -- a new labor movement in which women are the new majority of leaders -- in the report as well. And as we know, many of these new organizations, perhaps for the first time, are gathered together here from around the world.

Our challenge over the next two days is to think about how to sustain these new efforts, to learn from and spread their wisdom, to capture their stories and let the world know that labor women will not and are not being silenced. That’s why the Solidarity Center brought us together here in Sao Paulo and I feel very blessed to be part of it. Thank you.