



# STEPPING UP STEPPING BACK

WOMEN  
ACTIVISTS  
"TALK UNION"  
ACROSS  
GENERATIONS

The  
Berger-Marks  
Foundation

*Partnership for Organizing Women into Unions*





"AFTER LISTENING  
TO ALL THESE WOMEN,  
I WANT TO MAKE MORE  
OF A DIFFERENCE."

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The  
Berger-Marks  
Foundation

*Advancing the Economic Well-being of Women*



## A MESSAGE FROM THE TRUSTEES OF THE BERGER-MARKS FOUNDATION

**IN MARCH 2010**, the Berger-Marks Foundation invited 30 women activists to New Orleans for a candid conversation across generations about how unions can attract young workers, especially women, and support them in key leadership roles.

Out of frank discussions over two days comes this report, *“Stepping Up, Stepping Back: Women Activists ‘Talk Union’ Across Generations”* by Linda Foley, Foundation president. In it, problems are faced openly and solutions are suggested. Its content comes from work done in small groups, which separated into three age clusters, and plenary sessions. As Foundation trustees, we took notes as silent observers. We hope that unions will find this report useful and that it will contribute to academic research on intergenerational activism.

What happened at this 2010 New Orleans summit was a true connection, a sense of genuine community (especially among the under-age-35 participants), and an awareness of shared values across generations despite differences and tensions. A network of young women committed to social justice as they define it has come out of this conference.

The Foundation invited women from at least 20 unions and other labor organizations, as well as women from groups outside the labor movement, such as the National Organization for Women and Interfaith Worker Justice. The trustees invited an almost equal number of women over and under age 35.

It was the second time we chose New Orleans as a “safe space” for women to “talk union.” The first Berger-Marks conference in New Orleans of 19 women — all experienced union organizers — produced the 2005 report *“Women Organizing Women: How to Rock the Boat Without Being Thrown Overboard.”* Those union women frankly discussed how to attract and retain more women organizers. A copy of the 2005 report is posted on our website, [www.bergermarks.org](http://www.bergermarks.org).

The trustees wish to thank the following people for their help on this intergenerational project: Susan Phillips for being the summit scribe and helping to plan and execute the report; Rachna Choudhry and Brenda Moon for co-facilitating the discussions; AFL-CIO Secretary Treasurer Liz Shuler for her willingness to be our luncheon speaker; Professor Sue Schurman for her workforce presentation at the start of the summit; Nancy Brigham for interviewing and photographing participants as our web site manager; Grace Cumberland for her extensive logistical support; and Sheara Reich for coordinating the conference from start to finish. We’d also like to acknowledge trustee Yvette Herrera for her role in planning the summit agenda.

**Louise D. Walsh**, Chair

**Linda Foley**, President

**Carolyn Jacobson**, Secretary-Treasurer

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**hirty activist women from unions and other progressive organizations at an intergenerational “summit,” sponsored by the Berger-Marks Foundation, spent nearly two full days analyzing their experiences in and around the labor movement. But the transformational moment of this intense, often emotional, interaction at a New Orleans hotel came during the last few hours.

During the conference, participants had attempted to identify what united and divided them across age groups, what social justice meant to them and how future generations of women could become more active in unions.

In the final session, “Making Change Happen,” the dynamics shifted. After more than 17 hours of sharing collective wisdom drawn from decades of work on labor and social justice issues, the “Over 35” women (referred to as O35 by participants) mostly just listened as their “Under 35” sisters (U35) took over that last part of the program.

The older women had stepped up throughout the marathon dialogue to help create an atmosphere of sharing, trust and solidarity. And then at the end—either instinctively or purposefully—they stepped back to listen and learn from their younger colleagues.

Various U35 spokeswomen presented ideas and recommendations on flip charts that covered the conference room like handmade wallpaper. Once the younger group realized they had found a “safe space” to air their criticisms, concerns and ideas, they took over and made the meeting their own.

For most of the two days, the women had divided into three generational discussion groups. Eight participants were 51 or older; 9 ranged in age from 36 to 50; and 13 were 35 or younger. Most work full-time for unions or organizations aligned with the labor movement. All are activists, and all share a deep commitment to social justice. They were invited to the summit after months of consultations between the Foundation and various union leaders and organizers.

Facilitators Rachna Choudhry, who is under age 35, and Brenda Moon, who is older, assisted their respective age groups and took turns moderating joint discussions after each topic had been generationally dissected. Both women are experienced facilitators and trainers with deep ties to the union movement.

## GOALS

Berger-Marks Foundation Chair Louise Walsh summarized the goals of the New Orleans summit in her opening remarks:

1. For participants to leave refreshed, reconnected, less isolated and with greater understanding of differences, similarities and tensions within and across generations of women.
2. To identify concrete ways to make unions more inviting to young workers so they can improve their own lives and the lives of others.
3. To publish a report that captures the participants' best ideas and new thinking.

The summit was structured to promote openness among the three generations of women represented by these 30 activists. Most of what is quoted here is unattributed. Quotes attributed to individuals have been published with their permission.

As this report will demonstrate, the dialogue in New Orleans not only led to a greater understanding of generational differences and similarities, it also created a sense among participants that they were uniquely united as women.

Judging from final “one breath” comments by each of them at the end of the summit, the meeting itself will have a lasting impact on the women who were there and, possibly, on the entire labor movement. Here is a sample of what participants said: “I’m hopeful, more personally courageous, a little scared, grateful — and less alone.” ... “I’m thinking about expanding this group and moving forward to make real change happen.” ... “I’m inspired and energized by people talking about actually challenging and changing the status quo in the labor movement.” ... “After listening to all these women, I want to make more of a difference.”

## SUMMARY

### Unions are at a tipping point

While there have been significant gains for women in workplaces and in the union movement, the two-day discussion in New Orleans demonstrated that many barriers to advancement and fulfillment remain. The Under 35 (U35) women who attended the Berger-Marks summit are bright, articulate and totally committed to making life better for working families.

Many of them want to spend their adult lives supporting the organized labor movement. Whether they actually do so depends on how quickly unions and allied organizations respond to their needs. While the U35 group expressed support for the work of unions, many already are thinking about moving on to other social justice organizations where the culture for women and younger activists is more accepting.

The proverbial elephant in the room at the Lowes' Hotel in New Orleans was the state of the overall economy. The loss of more than 8 million jobs between 2007 and 2010 means many of these young women



“WE KNOW WE  
MUST GROW OR DIE.  
BUT WHAT ARE WE  
BUILDING?”

## [ OUTSIDE FORCES ]

It's important to acknowledge the role outside forces play in shaping generational attitudes and culture. We asked the women in New Orleans to give us some idea about the influences and events they experienced in high school which shaped their choices as adults.

*When you graduated from high school, what were your expectations of yourself?*

### Under 35

Career driven

College, marriage, then kids

Balance work and home

Do your own thing

Have it all by mid-20s  
(old by 30)

### Over 35

Be the opposite of our mothers

Be intellectual

Get a job

Be successful

Be self-sufficient

Go, go, go—but where?

feel “stuck” in positions they would otherwise abandon. At the same time, a guaranteed revenue stream of monthly dues gives women who work for unions more job security than their sisters who work at allied organizations and other non-profits.

All who attended the New Orleans summit agreed that the U.S. labor movement must grow to remain viable. But changes necessary for unions to attract and retain younger women go beyond building a bigger, more powerful labor movement. “We know we must grow or die,” a U35 said. “But what are we building?”

In other words, America’s labor movement is at a “tipping point,” as far as young women activists are concerned. The struggle for social justice and workers’ rights appeals to the righteous sensibilities of these younger women. But unions must begin to make changes now or today’s young activists — and their even younger sisters attending college and high school — will abandon the labor movement and pursue social justice in other organizations with more welcoming cultures and values.

Here’s what the U35 women meeting in New Orleans recommended unions do to recruit and retain young women activists:

- Develop a broader social justice agenda.
- Foster leadership development by creating pathways for new activists to move up the ranks.
- Be open to new ways of communicating, but remember that the substance of the message is what matters.
- Work to create a sense of community among younger women.
- Allow younger workers and women “safe spaces” for conversations, feedback and assessment.
- Include younger activists in decision-making. More experienced leaders should introduce younger activists to the “right people” and vouch for them.
- Encourage older advocates to mentor younger activists and then actually train them to be good mentors.
- Facilitate face-to-face meetings between union leaders and younger activists.
- Teach basic skills (such as how to run a meeting), strategic planning and campaign-building to younger activists.
- Develop relevant demographic information and share it with younger activists, who want access to critical analyses of politics, labor laws and the economy so they, in turn, can share it with their peers.
- Retrain and encourage older activists and members to use new models and a new vocabulary.
- Plan union events so they have substance and maximize participation.

## STEPPING UP, STEPPING BACK

### **Young women labor activists believe they are part of a broader social justice movement.**

There was some agreement across all age groups at the New Orleans summit about the definition of social justice. All of the women said it involved equality. Many described it as a way to redistribute wealth, power and privilege. While social justice could impact individuals, it was more about society as a whole, they agreed. But beyond these few sweeping concepts, there were generational differences in the way the women viewed the fight for social justice.

When asked to define social justice, the Over 35 (O35) women made this list:

- Love your neighbor as yourself
- Own your privilege and learn to use it, not abuse it
- Equal rights
- All of us are affected by what happens to the least powerful
- It takes a village with all of us caring about the outcome
- Individuals and groups receive equal opportunity and benefits
- How an issue that benefits a group benefits everyone
- It's global
- Transforming relationships of dominance and subordination into reciprocity and mutuality
- Systematic fairness
- Respect, listening to one another and making difficult choices
- Safety net
- From each according to ability, to each according to need

The list from the Under 35 group (U35) was more about inclusion:

- A journey not a destiny
- Self-empowerment and broader than ourselves
- Changing and deconstructing institutional power
- Equal distribution of power, wealth, access, opportunity
- Sense of community
- Equality
- Working in the world as it is in order to create a world as it should be
- A moving target

Unlike their older sisters, the U35 group did not see social justice as a concept belonging exclusively to progressive movements on the left. Many among the U35 said they could understand, for example, how members of the “tea party” movement felt they were working for social justice. “Social justice is a moving target,” one 20-something woman said. “It’s a continual process of re-examining.” She later added, “Successful movements for social justice transcend left and right.”



“THE FIGHT FOR  
SOCIAL JUSTICE IS  
THE FIGHT  
FOR THE SOUL OF  
THIS COUNTRY.”



On the other hand, a 50-plus-year-old woman flatly stated, “People on the right have a movement, but it’s not social justice.” Several women in the 36-50 age group commented that religion and faith inform their quest to achieve social justice.

For the younger women, deciding on what is morally right was more difficult. “Are we willing to say that there are some things that are just wrong?” a 30-something woman asked. “It may be harder to say what’s right, but it’s pretty easy to say what’s wrong.”

“The fight for social justice is the fight for the soul of this country,” a U35 said. “I want to live in a society that thinks Americans are good people. Laws are important, but they are meaningless unless they are enforced. It’s like having a driver’s license and no car.”

The U35s questioned whether organized labor’s version of social justice fit with their own value judgments about which of society’s wrongs needed to be addressed. There was concern that unions focus too much on issues like health benefits and pensions and not enough on core socioeconomic values. “The labor movement is hollowed out in terms of ideology,” a U35 woman observed. “We never talk about class. We need to reclaim that. I fight against racism and rampant individualism. We should be talking about that more.” The U35 group also noted that there are many successful struggles for workers’ rights going on outside of the organized labor movement.

A number of the participants questioned whether organized labor was “speaking to women and families.” They pointed to a gap between the issues women grapple with in their daily lives (child rearing, family dysfunction, domestic violence, etc.) and the unions’ messages around wages, hours and working conditions.

The younger women stressed that unions need a new vocabulary and new ways to discuss worker issues both with their members and the public at large. “We have lost the narrative about what unions are and can do,” a U35 observed.

**Unions should focus on the substance of their message and not so much on the technology that delivers it.**

Unions and other progressive groups have attempted to connect with young people by establishing their presence on Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites. The Under 35 (U35) women at the New Orleans summit said they believed unions have relied too much on Facebook postings and Tweets, instead of focusing on real connections to young workers. “It’s an easy out to say that you can get young people to join unions through iPods, Twitter and Facebook,” a U35 woman said. “It takes one-on-one contact.”

“Organizing is basic stuff — not Twitter and Facebook, but face to face,” another younger woman said. “The issues are the same for young and older workers. The older generation thinks it’s technology ‘instead of,’ but it’s really ‘in addition to.’”

Besides, they pointed out, not all workers or potential activists, even younger ones, have access to the latest Internet technology.

“THE OLDER GENERATION THINKS IT’S TECHNOLOGY ‘INSTEAD OF’ BUT IT’S REALLY ‘IN ADDITION TO.’”



“Facebook and Twitter equal classism,” a U35 community organizer declared. “Poorer people have less access to technology.”

“Young people want substantive, quality material,” another young woman added. “Artifice [Facebook and Twitter] get in the way. There has to be a there, there.”

The U35 group saw a retooled member and public education program as key for revitalizing the labor movement. They offered these communication tips for unions who want to reach younger workers:

- One on one works — social media isn't the only way to communicate.
- Human connection is what develops relationships.
- Messages must be dynamic, tailored and delivered in various ways.
- We need to support and replicate programs that work.
- Unions should systematically hit high schools and universities.

Despite concern that unions were spending too much time on Internet communications, the U35s said social networking was a necessary tool for them to stay connected with people their own age. “If I had only D.C. people to talk to, I'd hate it,” a U35 said. “I'm still part of my friends' lives. Networking is the only way to keep track. The labor community — some parts are young, but I don't often interact with people my age.”

Women under and over 35 said they used technology to multi-task and perform their jobs more efficiently. Without Internet communication, several in the 36-50 age group said, they would not have the flexibility to perform work at home or elsewhere away from the office. That can cut both ways. Some women said they resented being available for work 24/7, especially when it intruded on family events and personal obligations. But one 36-to-50-year-old woman expressed appreciation for the freedom mobile devices afforded her. “If it weren't for my Blackberry and laptop, I couldn't come to this conference,” she stated. “I use technology to feel connected. If something urgent comes up at work, they can contact me; I don't have to be there.”



#### IT'S TIME TO BUILD COALITIONS

Terry O'Neill, who was elected president of the National Organization for Women in 2009, is encouraging the union movement to partner with her organization to help improve the lives of working women and families.

“Women who have union contracts are able to save money because they have decent jobs with pensions and health benefits,” she told the women gathered in New Orleans. “Now these jobs are at risk.”

That's why, she added, “we need to link our arms and work together. With NOW chapters and union chapters all over the country, we can create an infrastructure to move forward with real, concrete projects.”

O'Neill pointed out that organized labor and the women's movement haven't always had the most collaborative relationship. But it's time to set aside whatever differences have existed between the two social justice movements, she said. “Friends don't have to be identical twins,” she told the Berger-Marks Foundation in an interview. “They just have to be friends. We can agree to disagree on some things while collaborating on those issues that unite us.”



#### H&M WORKERS GET A UNION AND A RAISE

Mandie Yanasak, an Under 35 organizer with the United Food and Commercial Workers, described how a coordinated global effort secured an agreement providing union rights and, ultimately, a collective bargaining agreement guaranteeing wage increases for hundreds of workers at H&M clothing stores in New York.

H&M is a Swedish clothing company that caters to young women, Yanasak explained. The company also employs many young women. After an agreement was reached with the help of Union Network International, a worldwide coalition of free trade unions, the company agreed to “card check recognition” for more than 1,000 of its U.S. employees. The company said it would bargain with employees once a majority had signed cards affirming their support for a union. H&M also agreed not to interfere with the workers’ efforts to organize.

In addition to wages, Yanasak said the H&M workers’ issues included irregular and unpredictable scheduling, eligibility for full-time work and benefits and a lack of time off for child care and other family obligations.

“Younger workers are concerned about the same issues that all workers are concerned about,” she said.

#### Today’s unions often are not a “safe space” for women or young people.

According to the women in New Orleans, sexual harassment, unfortunately, is alive and well in America’s labor movement. Nearly every participant (regardless of age) had a story about how she was bullied, intimidated or threatened by “brothers” in her union. If the experiences of these women are any indication, the labor movement remains a man’s world in which degradation and harassment of women are still pervasive and widely tolerated.

“Sexual harassment is such a problem in unions. It’s more disappointing that our own people are sexist, racist and homophobic,” one participant said. “There are some real pigs out there. It’s far worse than with any other employer.”

The Under 35 (U35) women acknowledged that there is more awareness of sexual harassment today than when their older sisters entered the union movement. “Sexual harassment didn’t have a definition when older women began work,” a U35 said. “Now there are laws and legal remedies, but the law is not enough.”

The younger women agreed that sexual harassment still is prevalent throughout the labor movement, even after decades of education and anti-harassment policies. The difference, several said, is men have just “gotten smarter about it.” “Sexual harassment training has become a ‘how-to’ for men,” one woman added.

At the same time, a union culture that overvalues “paying your dues” often devalues the contributions of younger workers and activists. The U35 group complained that younger workers frequently are trivialized and marginalized by union leaders. They are seen as not wanting to get involved and sometimes are characterized as “cute.” Unions have done a disservice to themselves and younger workers by “selling younger workers out” with collective bargaining agreements that provide two-tiered benefits.

The U35 women agreed that as union activists, they did not feel empowered in their own organizations. They said they believed union leaders did not take them seriously. Usually they get slapped with a single label or stereotype. “It’s important to get young people in the room,” a U35 added. “The younger a group gets, the more diverse it is.”

The U35 women also accused the labor movement of being “defensive” and “insular.” It’s an atmosphere that does not promote team-building or power-sharing,

they said. “Our leadership can’t be afraid to ask questions, even if they don’t know what the answers are,” a U35 offered.

### **Union structures are shutting young women out of leadership.**

The hierarchy and structure of U.S. unions greatly inhibit participation of young women at all leadership levels in the labor movement. Union political structures reward incumbents regardless of results. There is little appreciation (if any) for the need to balance work with life’s competing priorities. There is no succession planning and little job training, which too often is seen as “training your competition.”

The result is a “churn and burn” culture that turns young women off. Many of the Under 35 (U35) women said they already were feeling burned out and used up. “Look at the leadership style in the labor movement,” one U35 said. “They work you hard until you are ready to drop dead and then throw you out.”

“As young people, we have to prove ourselves, so we volunteer to do more,” a U35 woman commented. Another added, “Those of us who are younger and have no kids are asked to do more.”

“Two critical things are needed to keep women in the labor movement,” one veteran activist observed. “First, balance family and work so women can go home for dinner, at least occasionally. We have to fight the ‘cowboy mentality’ of ‘you’re no good if you’re not on the road all year.’ And, No. 2, I would do anything for an organization if I am heard.”

While the U35 women said they respected many of today’s male and female labor leaders, they are frustrated that too many union officials have stayed in office too long. They strongly recommended that unions adopt term limits for elective offices. “We should ask incumbents to pledge to honor term limits,” a U35 said. “They should pledge to leave at normal retirement age.”

Years of stagnant leadership have left the labor movement with too few role models to inspire younger women. AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler, who at 39 is the youngest person ever to hold a top AFL-CIO national office, spoke to the intergenerational group in New Orleans. While the U35 group expressed hopefulness about her election as secretary-treasurer, they still felt union leadership was way too “male, pale and stale.”<sup>1</sup>

“I have discomfort with deference to male-defined standards of leadership,” one participant added. “We need women-defined standards of leadership.”

So why do younger women activists stay in the labor movement?

<sup>1</sup> NOTE: Several international unions have elected women to top leadership positions. For example, the 1.4 million-member American Federation of Teachers is led by President Randi Weingarten and Secretary-Treasurer Antonia Cortese. Since the Berger-Marks women’s summit, long-time Service Employees International Union President Andy Stern was succeeded by Mary Kay Henry. Anna Burger will continue as SEIU Secretary-Treasurer at least until 2012, giving the 1.8 million-member SEIU two women as principal officers. AFT and SEIU are two of the largest unions in the United States.

**“THEY WORK YOU  
HARD UNTIL YOU ARE  
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AND THEN THROW  
YOU OUT.”**

### [ OUTSIDE FORCES ]

*Which television shows were popular with young women when you were in high school?*

#### **Under 35**

Felicity  
My So Called Life  
90210  
Melrose Place  
Real World  
Ally McBeal  
Gilmore Girls  
Friends  
Veronica Mars  
Saturday Night Live  
Dawson’s Creek  
Fresh Prince of Bel-Air  
X-Files

#### **Over 35**

Soaps (Days of Our Lives, All My Children, etc.)  
Jerry Lewis  
90210  
Melrose Place  
Smothers Brothers  
Laugh In  
In Living Color  
Dynasty  
The Jeffersons  
The Cosby Show  
Mod Squad  
Mary Tyler Moore Show  
The Monkees  
Man from U.N.C.L.E.  
Brady Bunch  
Hockey (Canada)



“OUR LEADERSHIP CAN’T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS, EVEN IF THEY DON’T KNOW WHAT THE ANSWERS ARE.”

It has to do with the work itself, which they see as impactful, values-driven and empowering. However, the younger women pointed out, other organizations, such as community groups, women’s groups and faith-based organizations, also offer opportunities for important social justice work. For one U35, it came down to a simple economic calculation: “The AFL-CIO is self-funded through dues, and so is more powerful than community groups. It’s a funding issue.”

### **Women struggle with sexism, lack of opportunity for advancement and difficulty balancing work with the rest of their lives.**

The women were asked to rank the five most important things in their lives. Work and family tied for No. 1 among a majority of the participants. But nearly all agreed they didn’t necessarily want work to be their top priority.

“I didn’t want to say work was the top priority, but it’s such a time suck,” one Under 35 (U35) said. “I want health and social life to be higher on the list.” An Over 35 (O35) woman commented, “My son is No. 1, but work competes dramatically with that. Because I’m a single mom, work is hugely important because it’s my survival. I wish I could say it was No. 2, but it’s not ... for reasons I’m not happy about.”

“Two years ago, I would have said work [was my No. 1 priority], but I got really burned out,” another U35 said. “So I had to re-evaluate and prioritize my life. Family and friends, health and fitness, and spirituality are important. I refuse to make work No. 1. It’s just not worth it.”

Even though women now compose at least 50 percent of the U.S. workforce, it’s clear there still is not enough support to help them balance the demands of their jobs with the demands of their families. This tension is particularly acute for O35 women with children or elderly parents.

“Care-giving is historically gender-assigned. With women in the workplace, that’s an additional stress,” a participant said. “There’s child care and there is care-giving, elder care for example. If we could get care-giving beyond a women’s issue, that would be transformational.”

The U35 women, most of whom do not have children, said they also craved a workplace culture that respected their need for time to develop a life outside of the job. “I moved cross-country for work,” a U35 said. “My family and friends are elsewhere. Self-development independent of work is important to round out my life.”

The women pointed to some definite advantages for life-work balance that attach to full-time jobs at unions and other non-profit organizations. All three generational groups identified flexibility as a desirable trait of their workplace cultures. Across age groups, many cited “rigid structure” or “time-clock culture” as factors that would cause them to quit their jobs. They also expressed appreciation that they could work for organizations which share their values and principles.

The U35 group said they valued a supportive workplace that promotes team-building and horizontal decision-making. But they also wanted a job with realistic expectations and boundaries. Respect for diversity was another desirable workplace cultural value of the U35s.

Meanwhile, the O35 group, especially those in the 36-50 generation, expressed frustration with their conditioned “deference to age,” which sometimes keeps them from challenging authority and the status quo.

“We’re running out of bosses who know more than us. We have to shore up our own peer-to-peer mentoring because mentoring won’t come from above,” one 36-50 year-old participant commented. “We’re in a weird transition with ‘that table,’” she said, pointing to the 50-year-plus discussion group.

Another added, “In this [36-50] group, we show deference to age. And maybe they don’t care. Younger people would say, ‘Why are you doing that?’ We’re caught in a tradition.”

The 36-50 group complained that while younger women look to them for leadership, they themselves may never get a chance to lead their organizations. This problem is exacerbated by an earlier generation of leaders who can’t or won’t give up their positions of power. The severe loss of jobs brought on by the 2007-2009 recession makes a bad problem even worse. “In this economy, people aren’t moving on when they would have moved on,” one 30-something woman said. “It’s retirement in place.”

Several in the oldest O35 group, many of whom have become leaders and managers of their organizations, were sympathetic to younger women who have personal obligations which often conflict with work. They noted that as women who entered a “man’s world” of work years ago, they had encountered many of the same obstacles young women face today. They said that they try to be sensitive to the needs of younger working women, but don’t always succeed. “I’m the boss of 16 people,” one over-50 woman confessed. “I have conflict in my life. Often what I had to do to become a boss was inimical to what I consider a good workplace.”

The younger women observed that competition for the few leadership positions which are available to women sometimes leads to tension between older women and younger women who are coming up the ranks behind them. “Older women say, ‘We toughed it out. Why can’t you?’” one said.

“Some of my worst bosses have been women,” a 30-something participant added. “It’s because of the competition.”



#### LABOR MOVEMENT NEEDS YOUNG LEADERS

“Young people need a collective voice more than ever,” AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler told the women gathered in New Orleans for the Berger-Marks summit. At 39, Shuler is the youngest person ever elected to a top AFL-CIO office.

“Major change in our country has always been led by young people,” Shuler said. “Martin Luther King Jr. was 26 when he led the Montgomery bus boycott. At 25, Cesar Chavez was registering Mexican-Americans to vote. Walter Reuther headed strikes demanding GM recognize its workers rights starting when he was 30.”

Citing a 2009 Working America study which showed how economic circumstances for younger workers have declined precipitously over the last decade, Shuler said today’s young workers can’t assume that “playing by the rules” by getting a good education and working hard will pay off for them.

She added, “As much as young workers need unions on the job and in the political process to improve their lives and their prospects, it’s just as clear that the labor movement needs young people and young leaders.”



### INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY KEY TO RUSSELL ATHLETIC VICTORY

The New York Times called it the “biggest victory by far” for United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) and its collegiate anti-sweatshop campaign. In November, 2009, Russell Athletic agreed to rehire 1,200 workers in Honduras who lost their jobs when the company closed their factory in an attempt to bust the union.

Gladys Cisneros, the Solidarity Center’s Program Officer for Central America, described how international allies helped to support the Russell Athletic workers in their efforts for justice. Following findings of serious and continued workers’ rights violations by the independent Worker Rights Consortium, USAS coordinated a campaign to pressure Russell to comply with its code of conduct. The Solidarity Center, AFL-CIO, worked with the union in its negotiations with the company, leading to the signing of an unprecedented settlement agreement that included rehiring the workers in a new factory and improved respect for workers’ rights in all its Honduran facilities. Russell Athletic is the largest private employer in the country of Honduras.

“The company came to realize that there had to be a different, better way of doing business, that included working in partnership with the union,” said Cisneros, an Under 35 summit participant. “This is an incredible victory, because it has the potential to raise respect for workers’ rights in all the Honduran garment industry.”

So what kind of leadership do young women want to follow? The U35 group listed these characteristics as the ones they most value in their leaders:

- They are supportive.
- They are dedicated to learning.
- They are mentors and teachers.
- There is mutual respect.
- They push you to think critically.
- They have vision and share that vision.
- They promote open-minded thinking.
- They are team-oriented.
- They share what works and what doesn’t.
- There is two-way trust.
- They back you up and maximize your skills.
- You can learn from them.
- They value work and life balance.

Unfortunately, the participants observed, these qualities are not taught, nor are they particularly encouraged among union leaders. Union leaders often come up from the ranks of members and activists with little or no knowledge of the jobs that union staffers perform. Many of them lack management skills. Top union leaders are elected, and can’t be fired or easily replaced. Even so, one woman encouraged her union sisters to claim the “leadership you have now. In the workplace, you can manage up or manage down. It’s not dependent on where you are in the hierarchy.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **It’s time for unions to step up and step back.**

The Berger-Marks Foundation asked the women meeting in New Orleans to come up with some concrete ideas to help make unions more responsive to young women. We were particularly interested in recommendations from the Under 35 (U35) participants. The recommendations listed below incorporate ideas from each generation at the summit, as well as some from those of us who had the privilege of just observing and listening to this unique and important interaction.

## Unions must step up

**1. Create “safe spaces” for women and younger activists.** In order to deal with the pressures in their personal lives, as well as day-to-day frustrations on the job, women need a place where they can “be women.” They need to be able to express anger, fear, lack of confidence and other emotions freely amid an atmosphere of sharing and trust.

Likewise, younger union activists need similar opportunities to share their own fears and emotions without being subjected to marginalization and ridicule by more-senior union leaders. They also need room to make mistakes and have the freedom to discuss their experiences without being judged by higher-ups in the union hierarchy.

The women who attended the Berger-Marks intergenerational women’s summit in New Orleans definitely felt it was a program that created a “safe space” for them. The intergenerational discussion was rich and informative because participants could share their criticisms and ideas with one another freely and without fear. The younger women said they felt they were being heard and that their ideas were being taken seriously. (A description of the summit’s format and discussion questions is included at the end of this report.)

**2. Eradicate sexual harassment and sexism.** The sexism and sexual harassment that still are all too common throughout the labor movement must end or unions will have no chance to recruit and retain a new generation of women activists and leaders. Adopting policies that eschew sexual harassment has not been enough to change an ingrained culture of sexism and “locker-room” behavior. Labor leaders must act swiftly and decisively when women members draw their attention to unwanted sexual advances. They also must be willing to call out and punish any union member who engages in inappropriate conduct.

**3. Reach out to younger workers and activists by providing opportunities for interaction that don’t rely on social networking or other technology.** The younger women in New Orleans were unimpressed — even offended — that union leaders seem to think they can recruit young people just because their organization has a Facebook page. What matters to younger workers are the issues that unions tackle, not whether their leaders have a large following on Twitter.

Many unions, including the AFL-CIO, have conducted or plan to sponsor forums and programs for younger workers and activists. Such forums and programs are opportunities to create frank and sincere give-and-take among various generations of union activists, but they must be structured so that younger participants get adequate time to fully present their issues and concerns.

**4. Adopt a more feminist agenda through sustained partnerships with women’s organizations.** Organized labor’s crowded agenda and its traditionally male-dominated culture make outright adoption of a feminist agenda all but impossible for unions. Instead, unions should partner with like-minded women’s organizations at the community level

“WE’RE RUNNING  
OUT OF BOSSES WHO KNOW  
MORE THAN US.”





“WE SHOULD ASK INCUMBENTS TO PLEDGE TO HONOR TERM LIMITS. THEY SHOULD PLEDGE TO LEAVE AT NORMAL RETIREMENT AGE”

and at the national level. National Organization for Women President Terry O’Neill is ready to build “real institutional bridges” with the labor movement. She notes that we are at a point where we can make progress for “people who believe in social justice and people who believe in real equality for women, but it won’t just happen” on its own. Many local unions already have formal and informal relationships with women’s groups and advocates. However, many of these alliances are fleeting and evaporate after a political or organizing campaign ends.

**5. Establish formal mentoring programs specifically for younger women.** Informal mentoring is a longstanding tradition throughout the American labor movement. All labor leaders know that their unions need to develop strong future leaders to survive. Unfortunately, so-called leadership development often is not monitored or followed up with action. The lack of formal, accountable mentoring programs also has helped perpetuate the “old boys’ club” which dominates the top rungs of union leadership. Women union leaders, therefore, have a special obligation help other women rise up through the ranks of organized labor. “It’s not enough that the door is open,” one participant said. “You have to grab them and bring them through.”

In addition to formalized traditional mentoring, peer-to-peer mentoring programs also are important. Younger activists are excited about their campaign work and organizing successes. Unions need to provide more time for younger activists to share their stories. Unions also should put more emphasis on the role that younger workers play in successful campaigns.

**6. Fund education and training programs to assist younger activists so they can “talk union” with their peers.** Women at the summit commented that tight budgets have caused many unions to cut back drastically on education and training programs. New union activists can’t possibly know how to navigate today’s complex world of labor relations. The difficult organizing climate for U.S. unions leaves little room for error and little or no opportunity for on-the-job training. Younger activists want training in basic union skills, such as running meetings or grievance-handling. They also want comprehensive, ongoing education about economics, politics and why unions matter. They want information they can use to bring more of their friends into the labor movement.

#### **Union leaders must step back**

**7. Adopt term limits for top elected union offices.** The Under 35 women in New Orleans felt strongly that unions should place some term limits on certain elected offices. Though possibly controversial, term limits would send a strong signal to younger activists that they could get the chance to reach the top leadership ranks of their union. Some unions already have term limits. Where they don’t exist, term limits could apply to future office-seekers and not to current leaders, the U35 women said. However, they added, nothing stops current leaders from pledging themselves to voluntary term limits.



**8. Expand the number of seats on union governing boards.** Unions have too few women and people of color in leadership positions. One way to open up opportunities for women and people of color is to expand the number of seats on union executive boards. Allowing more people to run and win high union offices can provide more slots for women, minorities and younger workers without threatening sitting incumbents. Several unions and the AFL-CIO have done this, and the results prove it does open up more leadership opportunities for women and people of color.

**9. Include younger workers in real decision-making and let them take responsibility for important projects.** The young women who met in New Orleans are tough, seasoned labor leaders who can make a real difference for the union movement. They want to be at the main table. They don't deserve to be relegated to the "kid's table." But, younger activists don't want just a seat. They want to help plan the menu and prepare the meal. Younger activists want to participate in decision-making and be policymakers. Too often, unions circumscribe the activities and projects of younger activists to those affecting only their own peer group.

**10. Make union events meaningful...and fun.** Just because union meetings are necessary doesn't mean they must be boring. Union meetings can be structured to allow younger members to network and interact face-to-face with older, more experienced leaders and activists. The repertoire of union social events needs to expand beyond bowling alleys, golf courses and bars. Younger members should be encouraged to plan and execute social events, not just for their own peer group, but for the entire membership. Life for working families is tough enough these days, so union-sponsored events should be fun as well as informational and substantive. One word of caution: Much of the sexual harassment that pervades the labor movement surfaces at union events in bars and other venues which encourage too much drinking.

### **And younger activists must be ready to step up**

Before they left the New Orleans summit, the Under 35 (U35) women charted a course for themselves so they would be ready to assume new responsibilities and leadership in the labor movement. They recognized that much of the task of bringing more young workers to unions lies with them. They made this to-do list for themselves and their peers:

- Do not let labor leaders confuse the medium with the message.
- Be truth-tellers.
- Network with other younger union activists and leaders.
- Reach out to younger workers in the labor movement and outside of it.
- Run for union office ourselves.

### [ OUTSIDE FORCES ]

*What current event was most significant when you were in high school?*

#### **Under 35**

Columbine  
Monica Lewinsky  
Sept. 11th  
First Gulf War

#### **Over 35**

Kennedy Assassination  
Vietnam War  
Bicentennial  
First Gulf War  
Berlin Wall Coming Down  
Watergate  
Kent State Massacres  
Reagan Election  
Reaganomics  
Sandinistas  
FLQ Kidnapping (Canada)



## BLUEPRINT: CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR HONEST DIALOGUE

The Berger-Marks Foundation wanted participants who attended our intergenerational summit in New Orleans to feel it was “safe” for them to express their true feelings and best ideas about how women and younger activists perceive unions and the work they do. We tried to structure the two-day meeting to elicit maximum opportunities for discussion and participation. Discussion questions were circulated to participants in advance.

YOUNGER ACTIVISTS  
DON'T JUST WANT A SEAT.  
THEY WANT TO HELP  
PLAN THE MENU AND  
PREPARE THE MEAL.

Facilitators Rachna Choudhry and Brenda Moon began the dialogue by getting the group to agree on ground rules:

### Ground Rules

- Be respectful of others' opinions.
- Be cognizant of our interactions.
- What's said in New Orleans, stays in New Orleans.<sup>1</sup>
- Our conversations are internal.
- One dialogue, please.
- Don't be disruptive.
- Sit next to someone you don't know.
- Have fun and let's make sure we laugh!
- Step up and then step back.<sup>2</sup>

### Discussion Questions

The questions were discussed first in groups broken out by age:

- 35 and under
- 36 to 50
- over 50

<sup>1</sup> We told participants we planned to publish a report on the summit. The discussions were not transcribed or recorded. However, we took note of relevant quotations and used general observations, conclusions and recommendations, which were written on flip charts, as the basis for this report. We informed participants we would be using anonymous quotations in the report. Attributed quotations were approved in advance.

<sup>2</sup> “Step up and then step back” meant participants were asked to make their point and then listen to others as they made theirs.

We allotted one hour for each of the age-group discussions. A combined plenary session on each topic immediately followed the age-group breakouts. Both the age-group discussions and plenary sessions were facilitated.

#### TOPIC 1 **Work and Work Environment**

- What is the role of work in your life? Write down the 5 most important things in your life and rank them. What ranking did you give work?
- What kind of workplace culture, workplace structures would attract you to an employer/organization?
- What kind of workplace culture, workplace structures would be a deal breaker for you and motivate you to quit a position with an employer/organization?
- What characteristics do you most value in a boss?

#### TOPIC 2 **Needed Change**

- In your opinion, what are the 3 most important issues facing women in the United States that if resolved would be transformative for the country?
- In your opinion, which groups/organizations can most effectively fight for these changes?

#### TOPIC 3 **Social Justice**

- What was the first event/movement/issue that motivated you to become an activist?
- How do you define social justice? List concrete examples first and then come up with a definition of social justice. Each small group should create its own definition.

#### TOPIC 4 **Making Change Happen**

- What role, if any, can unions play in bringing about the 3 major changes the groups thought most important for women?
- Why do you think women have a negative view of unions? Is this different for younger vs. older women?
- If you were given one million dollars to make unions more responsive to young women, how would you spend it?



#### [ OUTSIDE FORCES ]

*When you graduated from high school, what were society's expectations of you?*

##### **Under 35**

College education  
Marriage right after college  
Kids right after marriage  
Profession right after college  
To be heterosexual  
To adhere to so-called "Christian" values.

##### **Over 35**

College to become a teacher, nurse, secretary, etc.  
Marriage  
Not get pregnant  
Get into the middle class  
1968 was when culture shifted toward careers vs. staying at home.



## PROGRAM AND STRUCTURE

The Berger-Marks Foundation carefully considered who should be invited to the summit. We wanted to make sure we had diversity and balance. We strove to include roughly equal numbers of younger and older women. We also wanted adequate representation of races and backgrounds. We tried to include representatives from a wide variety of unions and geographic regions. (One participant was from Canada.) We also invited several women from non-union organizations that work closely with the labor movement.

**ADEQUATE TIME FOR DISCUSSIONS** Except for a 45-minute introductory presentation on the U.S. workforce by Sue Schurman of Rutgers University, the sessions consisted of interactions among participants. We strove to allow enough time for each age group to discuss issues among themselves and then in a combined plenary. We didn't always succeed. The Under 35 (U35) group often expressed the need to continue their age group discussion beyond the allotted one-hour timeframe.

**SCHEDULE** We used nearly every hour of the two-day meeting, which began at 7:30 p.m. on Sunday, March 14. There was little down time. Participants were informed in advance that they were expected to attend and participate in every session. No one left New Orleans before the summit ended at around noon on Tuesday, March 16. The meeting was closed to everyone but invited participants. The only exception was a luncheon on Monday, March 15, attended by members of the National Organization for Women New Orleans chapter and local AFL-CIO officials. National AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler was the luncheon speaker.

Monday evening's dinner at a famous New Orleans restaurant, followed by a visit to Bourbon Street, gave participants some time to socialize and have fun.

**FOLLOW-UP** Contact information was circulated among participants immediately following the summit. They expressed the desire to stay in touch and build on the relationships they had discovered in New Orleans. A number of formal and informal networking events are planned. The Berger-Marks Foundation is committed to helping them succeed.

## READING LIST

The following articles were distributed to participants. An expanded bibliography of related articles is at [www.bergermarks.org](http://www.bergermarks.org).

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“SOMEHOW WE LEARN  
WHO WE REALLY ARE  
AND THEN LIVE WITH  
THAT DECISION.”  
ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

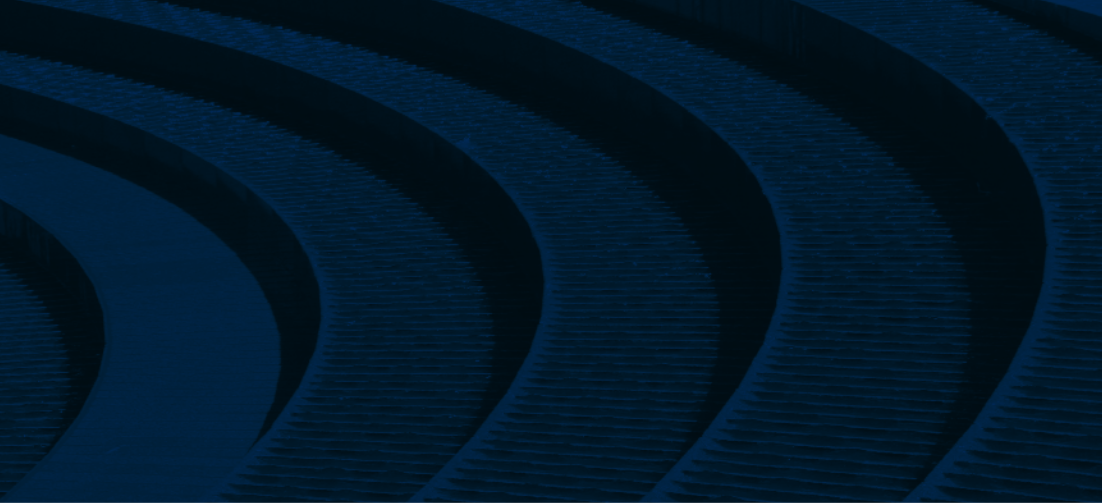
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The  
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*Dedicated to Empowering Women into Leaders*





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