

History of "Women of Steel" in the USW

Since its beginning, women have been members of the United Steelworkers and their numbers have grown to 20% of the current membership. Many historical factors have influenced this growth: more women entering the workforce, expansion of the industries represented by the union, affirmative action and automation of work previously restricted to heavy physical male labor.

Female activism within the USW has always been recognized. However, it wasn't until the establishment in Canada of the Women of Steel Leadership Development Course in the mid-1980s that the phrase Women of Steel first symbolized for women their identity within the union. At the 26th USWA Constitutional Convention in 1992, the first Women of Steel resolution was introduced and stated:

Our message must be clear to all our members; women are first-class citizens in the union and in the labor movement as well as in the workforce and society in general. Gender equality is a union issue – it is a source of our strength and solidarity.

Today Women of Steel encompasses a diverse set of activities, issues and initiatives within the USW that are directed at moving women into activist roles at all levels of the union. Along with their involvement and energies, the culture of the USW continues to grow and proactively take on working women's issues as part of its regular agenda and future directions of the Union.

What Are Women's Issues?

Many women's issues are mainstream union issues and concerns. They include pension and retirement security, affordable health care, better pay, paid

leave for family and medical needs, job security and more control over work hours.

Women bring a new perspective to the issues and can add to the list of potential solutions. They look for opportunities to be part of the union dialog around these issues and their solutions.

Women also bring new issues to the union agenda that represent the needs of the growing numbers of women in our union. Issues concerning the balancing of work, family and union involvement, opening opportunities for women to hold an equal status in their union at all levels, eliminating violence and sexual harassment of women and being mentored into leadership by both women and men.

Women are growing our Union. The USW members and leadership continue to expand the roles of women and welcome their diversity.

Why Should Women Be Treated Differently?

In many of our workplaces women are a minority. The work environment – from physical layout to management and traditional shoptalk – create barriers to women's employment and training. Often women are separated from one another as to make it difficult for them to build the types of solidarity and sisterhood that has existed for so long in the workplace among brothers in the union. Women's Committees afford women the space to develop the kinds of mentoring and support groups that help them build confidence, self-esteem and activism.

Women also remain the primary household organizer in most families which means they have less time before or after work in which to develop friendships and support networks that help them feel comfortable at union events where they are often in the minority. Women's Committees develop their meetings and agendas around the unique needs of the

women in their particular local union and work to encourage and develop support networks that increase the numbers and comfort level of women at union functions while increasing the activists' resource base.

Building A Strong Foundation

There are some basic components that have been designed to assist women find their place of activism in the USW.

Women of Steel Leadership Development Course

A unique educational offering that is designed to help women gain a broad understanding of the various functions of the union, share their perspectives on issues impacting female workers, and to build self-esteem. The course is normally held only for small groups of women over a 3-5 days period and is facilitated by trained female local union facilitators. Because it is a protected environment, sisters share, learn and grow in their self-esteem, which fosters new activism.

Women's Committees

The USW, by Constitutional Resolution, requires all locals that have female membership, support the creation of a local union Women's Committee which will have equal status with other committees recognized in the local union. Women's Committees can take on various activities that are geared to raising the awareness of working women's issues, increasing female activism in their union and expanding union visibility into the community where they work and live.

Regional Women's Councils

These are established in Districts where a significant number of local union women's committees exist in a specific region. The District Director established them as committees develop in a region. They assist the Director as an advisory body on working women's issues and concerns and develop agendas, programs and activities to help support local union

What It's All About

women's committees. They work to incorporate women into mainstream union initiatives in line with District goals and agendas.

Women's Conferences and Educational Programs

On the District, National and International level women's conferences are planned around major women's issues and provide education in the development of mobilization skills and training to expand women's roles in the union.

Women's Committees Help Men Understand Women's Issues

One of the key elements in affecting change is establishing dialog. Through dialog with one another, we educate and help change attitudes and behavior. Since the development of Women of Steel, we have seen a considerable increase in women's participation at all levels of our Union. Their input and perspective have helped to shape the agenda and content of our educational programs, conferences and policies. A growing union like the USW, that continues to lead social change and advance issues affecting all working-class families, does so by developing the best leadership for future generations. This means sisters and brothers working as equals winning whatever issues they tackle together.

What Can You Do?

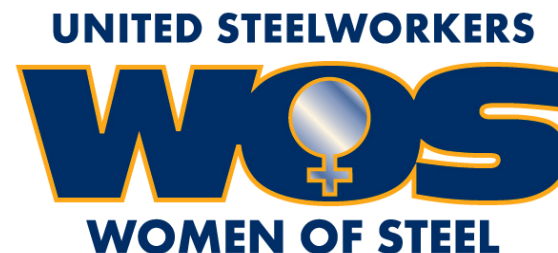
Mentor a sister in your local. Be more than just available - Invite her to be part of the union by getting her on a committee; introduce her to other activists; take her to a union meeting and be a sponsor for her to gain more confidence in understanding the union contract and encourage participation in a leadership role.

- ♦ Start, join and support your women's committee.

What It's All About

- ♦ Include women as delegates to educational opportunities, conferences and other union functions.
- ♦ •Ask women to give input on developmental plans and to be part of the design team to carry them out.
- ♦ •Work to advance women's issues in the local and at the bargaining table.
- ♦ •Make union meetings and their events more working-family friendly and encourage full membership participation.
- ♦ •Accept the fact that you may not understand women's concerns over a particular topic and encourage open dialog.
- ♦ •Remember that activists come in all ages, genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Make a place for everyone at the table.
- ♦ •Encourage women to be a part of support groups with other women in the local and their communities.

Be an activist and support your union!



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What It's All About

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Thought to Ponder:

To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world