Working Women versus Employers: An Insider's View

Anne Ladky

In her book, *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide*, Lane Windham compellingly illuminates the context of organizing in that decade and dispels long-held myths. She makes clear that it was not a lack of organizing that resulted in the decline in unionization in the following decade but the aggressive refusal of companies to tolerate union organizing activity—or any campaigns that they perceived could lead to unionization—aided by government failures. The experiences of those of us in what has been called the working women's movement bear out her arguments.

I am not a historian—my comments are aimed at connecting what I was experiencing as an organizer with Windham’s narrative. I was organizing in the 1970s around women’s employment issues as a member of the Chicago Chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and then as a member of Women Employed (WE). I joined the staff of Women Employed in 1977, became its executive director in 1985, and served in that position for thirty-two years. WE, whose founding is noted in the book’s second chapter, is now a forty-five-year-old organization whose mission is to break down barriers to women’s economic advancement and promote workplace fairness. It has a staff of twenty; it is locally based with national policy reach. The organization has opened hundreds of occupations to women, helped outlaw and reduce sexual harassment, did some of the very first work on family-friendly workplace policies, made affirmative action a dramatically effective tool for women’s advancement, and much more. Today, its priorities are to change workplace policies and practices that affect low-paid working women, expand work-family policies, and enable more low-income women to enter and succeed in higher education. While the organization’s priorities have changed to address evolving barriers facing low-paid female workers, the organization’s mission is unchanged since its founding in 1973.

Our founder, an organizer named Day Piercy, was working at a YWCA in a white working-class part of Chicago and decided that an organization focused on
employment issues could have appeal to women across racial and class lines and win systemic changes. Her idea was inspired by the National Farmworkers Association, founded by Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez in 1962, to provide support and assist farmworkers in organizing for fair treatment, respect, and better wages. They organized under the banner of “Rights and Respect”—a slogan WE adopted. Their association became a union, the United Farm Workers, which created a movement and organized locals that won contracts with growers using a combination of workplace organizing, public education, and consumer boycotts, building the power the farmworkers needed to succeed. Piercy’s vision in 1973 was to build an organization of working women who would work together to improve their wages, benefits, and working conditions, as the farmworkers were doing—and ultimately form a union. She moved to the downtown branch of the YWCA and started WE. I got connected both through Chicago NOW and my involvement in several organizing efforts in the publishing industry that Day knew about.

Essentially, in its early days, Women Employed was what today we call a worker center, with an aggressive direct action program through which women confronted employers about discriminatory practices and stereotypical attitudes. We reached women with constant leafleting at transportation stops and met with them one-on-one to help them connect their issues to those other women were experiencing. We formed sectoral committees in banking, insurance, and retail and brought women together to figure out how discrimination worked in each sector. Our demonstrations and meetings with employers helped women overcome fear and build a sense of their own power. We combined on-the-job organizing with advocacy and legal action for equal pay and equal opportunity. Our goals were codified in the Fair Employment Program created by our members and ratified at one of our first annual conventions. Early on, we launched pressure campaigns aimed at employer associations and companies, including one for job posting in the insurance industry, one aimed at banks that were not fulfilling their responsibilities under affirmative action requirements, and others. We took the groundbreaking work on affirmative action enforcement that national NOW had done and took it to a new level—forcing the federal government to put serious pressure on contractors for the first time. Our work with the Carter administration radically increased affirmative action enforcement. Our clerical organizing had a two-front approach—an outside pressure strategy for rights, respect, and higher wages, and an inside strategy of supporting secretaries in organizing in their offices. To meet the needs of our members and build the organization, we set up a hotline, did job problems counseling, held legal rights workshops, and offered a range of job-seeking and career development programs.

As Windham describes, this was a time when the clerical and retail workforces were large and growing, and unions were trying to figure out how to make inroads in those sectors. Employers were definitely on high alert. Very early on, WE held public meetings with groups of employer representatives to make demands that they change their employment practices. Soon after, the local Business Roundtable sent out a memo warning its members about WE, recommending extreme cau-
tion in dealing with us and asserting that we were a front for a union. It did not take much to convince the employers to refuse to attend more of these meetings, but the few sessions we had served their purpose, demonstrating to the several hundred women who attended (and many more through the media) that the employers had the flimsiest of excuses for their discriminatory policies and practices. As Windham points out, employers were “spooked” by what they saw as a threatening new wave of organizing—and they probably could not imagine that a group of mostly twenty-something women housed in the YWCA could be doing what we were doing all on our own.

Windham provides an illuminating national perspective on management resistance in her third chapter, putting our experience in the context of the rise of new “management consulting” firms that were created to fight organizing and prevent elections from succeeding. One meeting we had with a major food company demonstrated how seriously they took the threat our efforts posed. We had launched a campaign some months earlier to demand changes in the company’s pay and promotion practices. The campaign began with extensive leafletting at their downtown headquarters aimed at raising the issues and getting information from employees. Although the company was a big federal contractor, the affirmative action plan they filed with the government had virtually nothing in it. In our first meeting with the head of HR, we were patronizingly told that no women were in management because you had to have driven a delivery truck for the company in order to advance. (The man who told us this had clearly never done so.) Subsequently, a woman working in the payroll department anonymously sent us payroll records that clearly showed blatant pay discrimination. We filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the company’s contracting agency, which had never enforced the affirmative action requirements. The company agreed to another meeting, this time in a downtown hotel, with only a few of us allowed to attend. The slightly ludicrous HR executive was not there; in his place were very hostile management consultants who were there to tell us that there would be no concessions. They made sure we had nothing to take back to our members who were demonstrating outside the hotel. Ultimately, they were forced to change their practices by our work to increase enforcement of federal policies, but their goal that day was to shut down our organizing and deny us any victory.

During this same period, we met with unions to explore potential collaboration. There was a desire on their part to organize clerical workers, but most attempts had been unsuccessful. No one really knew how to go about it, there were too few women in union leadership to rethink the approach, and management resistance was aggressive. Most of those we met with showed little interest in a meaningful partnership, even though women in the labor movement had supported WE’s founding. As Windham points out, the Reagan administration’s decision to pull back from enforcement of labor laws added a new barrier to organizing in the early 1980s. For us, it meant that we would likely be unable to protect our members who took risks in their offices. Conditions for cracking the barriers to clerical organizing were becoming less and less favorable.
Windham’s study encourages deeper thinking about why our vision of a revitalized labor movement that elevated women’s concerns could not be fulfilled. For one thing, neither we nor the unions fully understood the power of our organizing model. If we had, perhaps everyone involved would have thought bigger. To develop and experiment with new approaches, overcome management resistance, and run large-scale national campaigns that involved political and public support would have been a major undertaking, requiring very substantial resources, probably in the tens of millions of dollars. As Windham recounts, smaller-scale efforts did not prove to be enough. And as the barriers she describes grew, clerical work changed dramatically. The highly skilled women who were secretaries wanted out of the “office wife” role and into better-paying jobs as opportunities opened through equal opportunity enforcement. Technology was permanently altering or eliminating many other clerical jobs. When WE was new, vast rooms of women ran billing machines or coded insurance statements; by the 1980s, many such functions were being computerized.

WE’s successes in opening professional jobs to women, with the force of the federal government on our side, grew even as clerical organizing became more difficult. We expanded our programs aimed at improving mobility for low-paid women, but we did not continue to pursue the possibility of union organizing. In the 1990s, we changed our organizing model, engaging professional women who had benefited most from our work to become advocates for policies to improve the work lives and opportunities of low-paid working women. WE continues to battle aggressively for better conditions for retail, hospitality, food—service, and other low-paid workers; just last year the organization won, for nearly a million workers in the Chicago metropolitan area, the right to earn paid sick time.

WE is one of many organizations today that are publicly opposing the grim conditions in the growing number of low-paying jobs in our economy and winning changes to benefit workers, both women and men. We know that if we had been able to bring collective bargaining to these workers forty years ago, individuals and families and American society in general would be far healthier on every measure. As Windham eloquently argues in her closing chapter (where her organizing roots are evident), we need new approaches to building the power of working people, including a redefinition of collective bargaining in a new era. She has made an important contribution to the effort to do this by illuminating the state of organizing in the 1970s and the ways in which that organizing was stymied. Building on the experiences of “alt-labor” organizations, new and old, is another essential element. I hope as she does that the book spurs additional study and deeper conversations about how this country can improve the quality of jobs and promote shared prosperity in a radically changed economic age.

ANNE LADKY began organizing for economic justice for women in the publishing industry and then as a volunteer with the National Organization for Women, Chicago chapter, in the early 1970s. She was a founding member of Women Employed and joined the staff in 1977. She served as its executive director from 1985 until 2017.