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Research Article

THE COSTS OF UNION LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines why women are underrepresented in the top ranks of unions. Historians have shown that men sidelined women, suggesting the reasons for male dominance were primarily social or cultural. This essay offers novel evidence on family formation and longevity from obituaries and other sources, and a new model that suggests that historians have downplayed the costs of becoming a leader, which are considerable for men and higher still for women. National union leaders lived longer lives than did union members, but local union leaders of both sexes lived considerably shorter ones. Women leaders were significantly less likely than men to have children; an enormous cost. The new model is able to incorporate social and cultural factors that have been well-documented by historians with game theory and evolutionary factors that historians have largely ignored.

INTRODUCTION

This article addresses why so few female trade unionists rose through the ranks to become national officers. Historians have amply documented that even in unions where women were in the majority, such as garment-making, telephone, or textiles, men dominated elective office. (Arnesen, 2004; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Cobble, 1990; Faue, 1991; Gabin, 1991; Kessler-Harris, 1983; Kessler-Harris, 2006; Milkman, 2007; Needleman, 1998). A key assumption of historians is that men and women compete (or should compete) with equal intensity for positions of authority. If women are under-represented, and discrimination is present, then discrimination is the critical cause for the imbalance in leadership. As we will see, discrimination was an important part of the story, but not the whole story.

Few labor historians have considered the fact that humans share with chimps a number of features that encourage male dominance. Males of both species wage war in groups on other groups over territory. Within a group, violence or intimidation, generally backed by allies, are critical to allow individuals to achieve and maintain high status, which results in more opportunities at procreation (Wrangham and Peterson, 1996). In chimp societies, rape is routine, but rarer in human ones; unlike chimps, human females can outrank males

(Wrangham and Peterson, 1996). Females of both species actively form alliances, engage in politics, and compete for status, as status confers considerable advantages (health, longevity, etc.) for individuals and their offspring (Marmot, 2004). Humans also exhibit high levels of cooperation and altruism, as Sarah Blaffer Hrdy observes, humans rely more extensively on non-parental alloparents to raise children than other apes (Hrdy, 2009). Humanity's heterogeneous primate heritage can be seen in unions, whose language is imbued with tribalism and conflict ("rank and file" and "picket lines" are terms that originate in the Civil War) but also cooperation and altruism ("brothers and sisters" and "solidarity forever").

Union leadership was something that men and women struggled to achieve, but leadership confers benefits and imposes costs. The costs are clearest in the middle levels of unions. This article argues that union leadership is inherently stressful, especially at the local or middle level, a conclusion consistent with the view that potential leaders are demonstrating that they are engaged in a behavior to benefit the group. The demands of leadership contribute to the fact that local officers led shorter lives than members, men even more so than women. Female leaders also lead shorter lives but are far less likely to have children than female union members. The vast majority of male leaders were fathers, and it is safe to assume that their wives provided most of the parenting. Female leaders were no less altruistic than men, but they paid a higher price for leadership as they lacked wives (or husbands willing to assume the role of mother). A disproportionate number of female leaders eschewed or delay motherhood; a few developed alloparenting networks, but the rarity of that approach suggests the difficulties of that approach in an industrial society. Given those factors, it is plausible that most unionists, and a disproportionate number of women, opted not to compete for leadership. This model does not discount the role of discrimination; sexual discrimination increased the cost for female leadership.

Women in Unions: An Overview

Men have long dominated unions. In 1900, women made up only 2.2 percent of American trade union members (Kessler-Harris, 1983). By the 1920s, women made up 5.4 percent of leadership in unions and presumably a greater proportion of membership. This is according to the author's analysis of the 1925 edition of *The American Labor Who's Who*, the only national listing of union leaders (*Journal Magazine*, 1925). Two subsequent versions of this work came out, providing an important means to assess changes in women's leadership over the twentieth century. The 1946 edition indicated that the proportion of female leaders had not changed amid a decade of tremendous gains in union membership (Dickerman & Taylor, 1946). Female leaders in the 1920s benefited from Progressive-era feminist ideology and institutions, just as a generation later, the "Rosie the Riveter" propaganda of WWII undoubtedly bolstered women. Another wave of labor ferment occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, as unions organized millions of predominately female jobs in teaching, hospitals, and the public sector. The 1976 edition of *Who's Who in Labor* reveals that female leaders had fallen to just over 1 percent (*Who's who,* 1976). The sharp decline of post-bellum female leadership occurred amidst a conservative backlash about the appropriate role of women

and a period where unions were unusually financially healthy. The greater resources that unions had may have contributed to males competing more fiercely for leadership after WWII than in previous decades. It is worth recalling that chimps fight harder over scarce resources; bananas engender conflict whereas branches do not (Gilby, 2012). The decline of female leadership amidst unprecedented union power surely contributed to the rise of pressure groups such as the Coalition of Labor Union Women.

In all time periods, women consistently contested men for positions of authority in unions. Throughout all unions in the 1990s, women made up more than one-third of union members, but less than eight percent of elected leaders (Baden, 1986; Eaton, 1993). Relatively recent surveys of trade unionists suggest that explicit male hostility to female leadership is low. Canadian trade unionists in the late 1980s indicated that a majority of men and women ranked male resistance as the least important reason low levels of female leadership. Most gave other reasons, such as women working more than one job, having child care responsibilities, underestimating their abilities, or lacking the experience and skills to move into leadership (Chaison & Andiappian, 1989). A survey of Massachusetts workers in the 1990s found remarkably similar findings (Melcher, Eichstedt, Eriksen & Clawso, 1992). Moreover, unions in the new millennium increasingly appointed women to leadership positions. Feminist scholars argue that unions retain masculine assumptions such as that leaders should not spend considerable time at home (Milkman, 2007), but male hostility to female leadership appears to be a declining cause for the sexual imbalance in leadership. Indeed, female officers have increased dramatically in the post-feminist era—from 1% to 8%. However, rates of female leaders are a little more than half again as high as in the 1920s or 1940s, while rates of women in unions is steadily increasing. What has endured, and has been little examined by historians, are both the costly nature of union leadership and the ways biology contributes to the disparate levels of investment in children by women as opposed to men.

Union Leadership in Light of Game Theory

It is the nature of unions that they impose unique costs on aspiring leaders. The efficacy of collective action invariably requires some individuals to sacrifice time and energy to make cooperation work. Game theory and experimental economics have done much work on the tradeoffs between cooperative and selfish strategies through analysis of trading games. For instance, in each round, traders offer from zero to ten dollars to their counterpart in a blind trade. If both traders offered ten dollars, both would keep twenty. If one offers ten dollars, and the other offers zero, the cooperator loses ten dollars, and the selfish trader is ten dollars richer. As in the prisoner's dilemma, both traders would benefit most from cooperation, but in practice, cooperating with a selfish partner is a recipe for disaster. The optimal strategy for both partners might be to cooperate, but the nature of the game (and of people) pushes them inexorably towards selfish acts.

Economists such as Herbert Gintis show that the dynamic changes when people are given the chance to punish trading partners. Following each round, Gintis allows people to

impose a cost on their former partner. For every dollar the person spends, their former partner loses three dollars. The money is lost to both parties; nonetheless, many of these "altruistic punishers" spend several dollars to punish non-cooperators. Punishment deters selfish strategies in future trades, even when new partners know nothing about their trading history (Gintis, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2005). The need for altruists is certainly more important when organizing cooperative strategies in the face of a well-organized opponent such as an employer or when many union leadership positions are paid. Thus it is likely that activists and leaders function (or functioned at one time) as altruists.

The fact that some union leaders are corrupt or self-serving is well known, and, consequently, potential leaders often engage in what could be viewed as "conspicuous altruism," or what psychologists call costly signaling (Smith & Bird, 2000). Costly signals may be so onerous that they affect the health and longevity of individuals. While these signals appear self-sacrificing, they may well result in net reproductive success. As we will see, the path to union leadership requires stressful, time-consuming self-sacrifice that appears to shorten the life span.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The author collected biographies and obituaries of union members and leaders. Information included union position (member, local leader, or national leader), age at death, and whether they had a spouse or children. The unions included several unions with a sizeable proportion of female members, such as the American Federation of Teachers, the American Nurses Association, the American Federation of State and Municipal Employees, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, International Electrical United workers, the Service Employees International Union, and the United Electrical workers, and one union with few female members, the United Steel Workers. Because female leaders were relatively rare, the sample also included information from the reference work *Notable American Women: 1607-1950,* and subsequent editions (James, James, & Boyer, 1971). The sample size was sufficiently large (n=312) to assess the rates of marriage and parenthood with a high degree of confidence. The results were statistically significant for men (p=.005) and for women (p=.024) for age at death.[1]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Longevity and Family Formation of Union Leaders and Members

High status positions generally confer greater longevity and better health. Senior British civil servants live longer and healthier lives than their junior counterparts, even when lifestyle is

[1] Obituaries do not reveal when people married, divorced, or remarried. Unlike field notes or autobiographies, one cannot judge the quality of marriages, children, etc.

taken into account (Marmot & Shipley, 1996). In the United States, men in Chicago's richest census tracts live twenty years longer than their counterparts in the poorest area (Wilkinson, 2005). Consequently, if union leadership was unequivocally a high status position, one would expect that leaders would live longer than members. Indeed, female national leaders lived almost six years longer than female members; however, local union leaders died 5.4 years earlier (see tab. 1). In terms of longevity, men paid a higher cost for leadership (see tab. 2). Male national leaders outlived members, on average, by 1.7 years, with local officials dying nine years earlier than members. It is possible, though unlikely, that leaders had different lifestyles than union members. A plausible explanation is that local leadership was stressful, which could have led to health problems and shortened their lives. While it is unlikely that union members could have accurately assessed the life expectancy for leaders versus members, they could draw conclusions about their relative stress levels. That could help explain why in many unions it is notoriously difficult to recruit new leaders (Putnam, 2000).

Table 1. Age at Death of Female Union Members and Leaders

Women	N	Average Age at Death
Members	141	77.1
Local Leaders	31	71.7
National Leaders	16	83.0

Table 2. Age at Death of Male Union Members and Leaders

Men	N	Average Age at Death
Members	50	76.2
Local Leaders	47	67.0
National Leaders	27	77.0

In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, few women labor leaders were mothers. Only one in three female unionists listed in the various editions of *Notable American Women* had children.[2] Among nineteenth century leaders, most quit the union if they had children or became married. Among the subset of female leaders who were also mothers, about half quit work once their children were born, or only went to work after their husband died. This

[2] The obituary became more democratic in the late-twentieth century, preventing scholars from making inferences about workers and unionists in earlier eras.

was the case even when their husbands were deeply committed trade unionists. For instance, Rose Norwood married a labor activist, and dropped out of the union to raise their children.[3] Julia O'Connor Parker, who led a telephone workers' strike in the 1920s, hired nannies and placed her children in boarding schools (a form of alloparenting; Schicherman, Green, Kantrov, & Walker, 1986). Throughout the twentieth century, most women labor leaders remained childless, suggesting that husbands evinced little enthusiasm for child rearing and that alloparenting remained difficult to organize or expensive. The majority of women in the 1946 *Who's Who in Labor* did not list children; the vast majority of men did (see tab 3). Thirty years later, a similar pattern held (see tab 4). In both editions, a greater proportion of women in child-bearing years indicated they were not mothers compared to than those over 45 years old. It is plausible women delayed having children in order to pursue leadership, or became less interested in accommodating male assumptions about marriage. As one organizer put it,

> *it isn't that you didn't enjoy men and like to be with them, but it [marriage] had to be strictly on your terms… And then you get used to the freedom that they have, and then it becomes very much harder to think that you're going to have to give up freedom, that you can work anyplace in the country where you want to, if you're asked to, and do the kind of job you want to.* (Schwenkmeyer, 1976).

It is likely that only a relatively small subset of union women, those who were less interested in having children, believed the tradeoffs involved in union work to be personally advantageous. Either case would help explain why many women, as one historian observed, thought that union leadership was only for "superstars" (Needleman, 1998).

Table 3. Motherhood Among Union Leaders in 1946

	No Children	Children	Total
Total	62%	38%	187
24 and younger	60%	40%	10
25-34	73%	27%	60
35-44	49%	51%	59
45 and older	54%	46%	46

The evidence from obituaries paints a similar picture. Almost 40 percent of female local union leaders and 45 percent of national leaders did not list a surviving child (see tab 5). The comparable rate for women members was 17 percent, a rate consistent with data on parenthood in the 2010 Census (United States Census Bureau, 2010). By contrast, only nine percent of male trade unionists and just three percent of national leaders did not list surviving children. The rates were considerably higher for local leaders (15 percent), albeit with a small sample, suggesting that men at the local level may also made a tradeoff between

[3] (Norwood, 1978), 12.

leadership and fatherhood, although an admittedly less extreme one than for women. In many species, low-status or stressed females find their fecundity is inhibited, with considerably less impact on males' ability to reproduce (Sapolsky, 2004). At the national level, it appears that union leadership slightly increased men's opportunity for having families, while substantially decreasing those of women. This is consistent with the findings of evolutionary psychologists that high-status men enjoy greater opportunities for mate selection and reproduction (Buss, 2003). For a variety of reasons, leadership made fatherhood more likely and motherhood far less so.

Table 4. Motherhood Among Union Leaders in 1976 (data taken from Who's Who in Labor (1976))

	No Children	Children	Total
Total	54%	46%	78
25-34	73%	27%	11
35-44	68%	32%	19
45 or older	39%	61%	38

Table 5. Fatherhood Among Union Leaders

Male	N	No Children	
Male Members	53	5	9%
Local Leaders	59	9	15%
National	93	3	3%

There are no studies that show that women leaders had fewer children than members, although few historians would be surprised by that finding. Yet, it should intrigue historians why so many local leaders died earlier than their members, and why this pattern was more pronounced for men than for women. It seems plausible that both increased mortality and the tradeoff between leadership and motherhood had their roots in the nature of social cooperation. One leader recalled the volunteer work done by factory workers to build their union: "… oh baby, those people worked. And they worked on Saturday and Sunday, and that you mean you worked on Saturday and Sunday" (Schwenkmeyer, 1976). Because leaders are both relatively high-status and necessary for social cooperation, but potential freeloaders, it seems likely that members require that potential leaders engage in altruistic behaviors and/or costly signaling as a precondition to wielding power.

The Life Cycle of Leadership

Working women overwhelmingly prioritized families before union work. One veteran organizer recalled that women "had little time for union meetings" (Schwenkmeyer, 1976). Many unions required regular attendance at meetings to run for office. After all, one would

not want someone to handle grievances or handle contract negotiations who did not understand the union's institutional history. Another reason was incumbents limited who could contest their elections. In unions with rules requiring regular union attendance, more than 95% of members did not qualify (Hinshaw, 2002; Compton, 1977). Mary Callahan, a local officer of the International Electrical Union local, said "for a woman to be active—I can only talk for my own local—they're between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five. Then they either leave to get married and don't come back, or, if they have children, they just drop out because they want to be home at night with the kids… Then, at about thirty-five years old, they come back again and get active" (O'Farrell & Kornbluh, 1996). The fact that women tend to invest more in children than men makes this pattern ubiquitous throughout industries and time periods. The lifecycle of most working women, along with union rules regarding who can run for office, prevented most from even getting on the track to leadership positions.

Women avoided union leadership even in democratically-run unions where women were in the majority. Katherine Conroy worked for AT&T, which employed large numbers of women as telephone operators. Until the 1970s, large Communication Workers locals had more members in female jobs (operators) than male ones (linemen). Yet Conroy found that the linemen ran the vast majority of locals. Women "don't try… even where they are a majority, they won't do anything." If women did not go to meetings, they could not become a steward. If they were not stewards, they could not get elected to an officer in the local. Local officers had to work a long time before they could be elected or appointed to a state-wide or national position. Consequently, Conroy consistently advised women in her union to "watch the brothers…Notice, for example, that they get together before a meeting and have a few beers and discuss the problems of the organization. When they go into a meeting they know what they want to do. Women show up at the meeting at the last minute, not prepared to do anything about anything." Like Norwood, Conroy was not blind to the sexism in the labor movement; she helped organize the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), but felt it was not well-done. "Women…have got a sense of sisterhood, [but] they still have no organizational sense" (O'Farrell & Kornbluh, 1996).

Moreover, what pervades women's accounts (as well as men's) is that union leadership is grueling, stressful work. Anna Sullivan worked for the Textile Workers after World War II. She recalled her day started around 4:30 am, and ended at 11 pm. She had a thick skin, and was philosophical about being discouraged to run for higher office in the union: "I'm not that ambitious" (Sullivan, 1976). Alice Puerala was elected as an unpaid "griever" after she had twenty years in a steel mill. (Her husband was an alcoholic, so leaving him alone with children was not an open). It was the lowest position in the union, but nonetheless, she found it "very time consuming and…very exhausting. When you're not working, you're fighting grievances for workers that are getting suspended and fired. You become very much involved in those human beings who are being fired and who need their jobs. You rack your brain to do your best in representing them, and it takes a lot out of you." Because Puerala missed years of union meetings, she had to pay her dues as a low-level union officer

relatively late in life. She earned a reputation as a fighter, and was elected as a union president in her fifties, but had only one chance to run for higher office before she succumbed to cancer. She was just 58. Puerala's life history highlights another aspect of local union activists: many of them die young (O'Farrell & Kornbluh, 1996).

Many female leaders pointed to sexist double standards, such as lower pay for the same work done for the union. As noted previously, sexism added to the costs of female activism; discrimination made it less likely for women to enter the path towards leadership. However, not all women emphasized discrimination in their autobiographies or oral histories. A woman who had been blacklisted because her first husband had been a Communist said "I talk the language of men a little bit better than the language of women, and I don't mean vulgarity" (Palmquist, 1978). Another recalled that "it was always me with half a dozen guys…it didn't bother me at all, but you had to win your way" (Segal, 1975). Regina Urdenata was asked several times if she faced discrimination because of her sex, and each time she refused. As she put it, "I don't think I was refused anything" (Urdaneta, 1978).

CONCLUSIONS

The view that male trade unionists blocked women from leadership is a compelling narrative trope. It has villains and heroines, struggles and betrayals. Moreover, it is true—true but incomplete. The oral histories and memoirs of women leaders reveal pervasive double standards against women. But they also contain clues that rank-and-file women had their own priorities, notably their families, which were more important to them than unions. Moreover, evidence from obituaries suggests that the stresses of union activism took a toll on the lives of local union leaders. Added to the decidedly lower levels of family formation among female leaders, one can reasonably infer that most working-class women (and men) looked at their perpetually harried shop steward or local president and thought "thanks, but no thanks."

Clearly, unions in the past could have done more to promote gender equity by paying women the same salaries as men. Yet some unions (the UE, the IUE, and others) did just that, and their rates of female leaders were not noticeably higher than others. Today's unions do provide its workers with more mechanisms, such as flexible working schedules, to encourage women to participate. Yet even with these factors, women do not surge forward into union leadership.

To a greater degree than historians have been willing to admit, a source of gender inequality is biological rather than social (Cobble, 1990). In virtually every species with sexes, one sex invests more time and calories in offspring than the other. In mammalian species, female investment outstrips males. In the vast majority of human societies, men spend less time with children or hold infants less than women (Thornhill and Gangestad, 2008). This is due in part to the interest of women and the relative disinterest of men. As Sarah Hrdy points out, in both traditional hunting-and-gathering societies and modern

ones, girls' interest in babies begins young and outstrips that of boys (Hrdy, 2009). Obviously, this urge is encouraged by socialization, but the fact remains that history (in this case, the ancient processes of evolution) shapes the degree to which boys and girls find caring for infants a compelling activity. This is not to say that gender equality is impossible, but it does suggest that overcoming it involves overcoming a series of biases that are far older than that of the American labor movement. The problem lies not only in the priorities and agency of men but of women as well.

Game theory and history both reveal that cooperative endeavors, such as unions, are difficult and exact individual costs as well as providing group benefits. In the decades following World War II, unions were unusually powerful and well-resourced; likewise, working-class families saw unusually strong wage gains until the mid-1970s. In those "golden years," did union women choose motherhood over leadership, or did male alliances push women away from the levers of power? By the 1970s, civil rights laws took effect, but unions also lost enormous influence. Perhaps female alliances do better in relatively resource-poor environments, or men and women learned simply responded to a more pluralistic perspective. At any rate, new theories and methods lead to new questions, such as why men were so willing to pay the costs of local union leadership.

Among evolutionists, the connection between health and status is so well established that the benefits of dominance are self-evident (Marmot & Shipley, 1996). The field biologist Scott Creel suggests that we should be wary of the "implicit assumption that dominance carries no costs. The conclusion that dominance has benefits is secure on the basis of many studies, but struggling for dominance may yield high benefits at high cost…" (Creel, 2005). Creel's research focuses on social carnivores, such as wolves and wild dogs, who maintain hierarchies through fighting, but his insight about the costs of contesting social status is important as humans can end up in the middle of the pack for extended periods where the price of contesting status may obviate benefits.

To invoke the ways that human agency emerges from the distant past--one way to understand evolution's influence on human nature—is not to undermine the quest for social equality, but to help make it possible. Surely, social movements will get closer to democratizing society or the paths to leadership in institutions by taking into account human nature as it is, rather than how we would wish it to be.

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