

*This document was developed from materials produced by the SMART Women's Committee.*

## **WHAT IS A COMMITTEE?**

A body of persons delegated to consider, investigate, take action on, or report on some matter.

## **WHY FORM A WOMEN'S COMMITTEE OR DIVERSITY COMMITTEE?**

People of organized, union labor have made enormous progress in wages, working conditions, benefits, job security and human rights. If working women and members of color are to gain equality, they must work with and through their unions.

A Women's Committee or Diversity Committee is a place for women and members of color to gain leadership skills, to raise issues and organize to make changes, and to connect with other SMART women and members of color and build support networks in the workplace. Local union Women's Committees and Diversity Committees are a key element in the struggle for equality in the workplace.

A Women's Committee or Diversity Committee can provide a safe zone for members to identify and create their own culture where they can speak out about concerns and identify strategies to engage with and change the dominant culture.

## **HOW TO GET STARTED**

Women and people of color need unions today more than ever and unions need women and people of color more than ever as well. Unions are only as strong as the involvement and determination of their members. Local Union Women's Committees and Diversity Committees are a key part of building our union.

Approach the local leadership with a proposal identifying needs and opportunity within your local and your community.

You can start small: a good committee need not have lots of members, but rather ones that are committed to the idea. However, it is recommended that an odd number be selected to serve to prevent tie votes.

Once your committee is established you should meet regularly—at least as often as local union meetings are held.

Many local union Women's Committees and Diversity Committees have budgets; however, this must be determined once the committee goals and agenda are set. Active committees often conduct fundraisers to help implement programs.

Setting up a new Women's Committee or Diversity Committee will involve:

- Talking to other women and people of color in your workplace and other workplaces in your local union.
- Setting a date for your first meeting and publicizing it.
- Setting some goals.

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- Spreading the word. As your committee work gets going, invite others to join.

### **COMMITTEE STRUCTURE**

- Vision Statement
- Mission Statement
- Appoint a Chairperson
- Create Sub-committees and appoint a chair to each sub-committee

### **WHAT CAN YOUR COMMITTEE DO TO HELP WOMEN WORKERS AND WORKERS OF COLOR?**

- Encourage women and workers of color to speak out about sexual harassment and discrimination on the job. Encourage women and workers of color to speak up about any issues.
- Examine the health care benefits in your contract to see if they discriminate against women, and recommend to the local ways to equalize benefits in the next contract.
- Look for avenues for child care and work-life balance support.
- Identify and inform your members of community resources for women and workers of color.
- Move the union or organization to address certain issues such as childcare, maternal leave, sexual harassment, discrimination, and unequal access to promotions.
- Increase the number of women and members of color in leadership positions.
- Sponsor or encourage skills-training for women members and members of color, such as public speaking, running a meeting, or running for office.
- Set up a mentoring program for potential new female leaders and leaders of color.
- Encourage more women and members of color to participate in union activities and seek out and support women and members of color to run for elected positions.
- Participate in all national union women's and human rights campaigns.
- Provide support to existing leadership by offering information on equity issues and opportunities to learn and do more.
- Actively support the development of new leaders from equity seeking groups. Women's Committees and Diversity Committees can be a great place for workers to build the confidence and skills necessary to become active in their local unions and communities, develop relationships with other activists, work with community groups and other union committees, and be part of making meaningful change.

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- Work with other standing committees and equity caucuses to support one another's issues.
- Work with local labor councils, women's organizations, and organizations focused on diversity to coordinate and support events and campaigns in your area. (Contact your local union leadership to find out who your labor council delegates are.)
- Ensure all members have access to at least some form of anti-harassment training. Work with the leadership and the JATC.
- Connect with community groups and bring a trade union and working-class perspective on issues like poverty reduction, childcare, shelter services, etc.
- Be creative in working to ensure that the diversity of the membership is reflected in the overall composition of the leadership and membership of the union.
- Put an 'equity lens' on all issues within the local union, and actively support changes to collective bargaining agreements, by-laws, local union practices, and union 'culture', that will lead to greater inclusion of all members.
- These goals can be reached through establishing regular monthly meetings.
- Sub-committees can be set up on issues such as: education, bargaining, community involvement, anti-discrimination, or women's health.

#### **HOW TO MAKE YOUR COMMITTEE WORK**

- Establish a regular monthly meeting time and place. Send out notices at least one week before each meeting. Have a prepared agenda.
- Set up subcommittees to perform the work of the committee: training and education, bargaining issues, special programs, fundraising, and liaison with other women's groups or diversity groups are only some examples.
- Educate committee members with the policies within your local union that affect women and members of color.
- Invite union staff to meet with the committee. In this way, you can help ensure cooperation between the work of the committee and other programs of the local union.

A union is only as strong as the workers who join and participate in it. The more that women and members of color take an active role in the union, the greater their influence in improving the status of women and members of color, and the greater the strength of the union in bargaining for their rights.

#### **TOPICS THAT CAN BE ADDED TO SUB-COMMITTEES**

- Leadership Training
- Health & Welfare

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- Pension
- Super Woman Mentality
- Current Legislative Issues
- Family/Work
- Networking/Mentoring
- Union Building
- Women or People of Color in Politics
- Financial Issues
- Social Health Issues
- Community Service
- Anti-Discrimination
- Domestic Violence
- Sexual Harassment
- Advancement through the Union

## **MAKING MEETINGS EFFECTIVE**

Every committee meeting should include something useful and educational for members - an interactive quiz, a quick report back from all of the committee members (and their workplaces), a short video, a short discussion about a newspaper article, a guest speaker, a book review, etc.

Here are some additional tips for making your meeting more successful:

**Have a purpose.** Ask yourselves, why are you meeting? What do you hope to accomplish? Are you meeting to plan an event, to learn, to reenergize and to deal with standard items, or just one of these things? Be aware that some members see the Committee's work as about 'getting things done', and other members may see it as providing informal support for their issues - both of these perspectives are valid and they represent needs that should be met in a meeting.

Consider how often you need to meet. A good meeting gives people energy - a poorly planned, unfocused meeting sucks energy. Nobody likes to meet for the sake of meeting. Don't meet if you don't have a plan - and if you're meeting to develop a plan, think carefully ahead of time about a good process for developing on and for reaching a consensus.

**Plan ahead.** Where will the meeting be held? If space needs to be booked be sure to do this in advance. Be strategic about the timing of your meetings (i.e. can you hold them to coincide with membership meetings so that you can bring you issues forward?). Do you want new people to attend your meetings? If yes, how will you get the word out? Studies show the majority of people get involved in social movements because someone asked them to (not because they saw a poster, or were even committed to the issues). Don't assume people will show up if they're

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interested – people need to be invited. Again. And again. As well as making personal contact, use your local union newsletter to invite people to join the Women's Committee or Diversity Committee - by making it sound interesting and letting them know they're needed. Consider what it would be like to be a new person at one of your meetings - how are new people welcomed? How are they brought into the discussions so they don't feel left out? Distribute an agenda in advance so people can prepare. All committees will have a down fall and up flow of attendance at meetings. Attendance will be increased when people feel there is progress made on projects identified as important. Leaving the meeting with clear ideas of actions that have been agreed on and who has agreed to take these actions. Remember that tasks need to be spread out to develop skills and to ensure we don't burn out.

Some locals have found alternating between meetings in-person and online or by conference call have been effective. Remember to keep the Women's Committee and Diversity Committee updated on your projects & successes!