

Women and the Labor Movement

An Interview with Linda Chavez-Thompson

Pam Henderson and Susan Woods



Pam Henderson



Susan Woods

Interviewers Pam Henderson and Susan Woods are senior extension associates, Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

Linda Chavez-Thompson is the executive vice-president of the AFL-CIO and the highest ranking elected woman officer in the labor federation's 110-year history. She rose from the organizing ranks of The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees to achieve a distinguished career as a national labor leader and representative of public-sector employees. A second generation Mexican-American, her work life began at age ten laboring with her parents, ten-hour days at thirty cents an hour, in the cotton fields of West Texas. Before assuming one of the three highest leadership positions within the AFL-CIO, she directed AFSCME's efforts in a seven-state region which included Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas and Utah, and guided the union through a period of growth and expansion. Her voice and accomplishment have been recognized through numerous distinctions ranging from an honorary degree from Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts, to appointments by President Clinton to the President's Initiative on Race and as vice-chair of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities. She serves on several national boards and executive committees, including The United Way, the Council on Competitiveness, Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, The National Conference for Community and Justice, and the Institute for Women's Policy Research. She is vice-chair of the Democratic National Committee, former national vice-president of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, and co-chair of the Coalition to Defend America's Working Families. She speaks from her heart, her experience and her common sense—and she always speaks her mind.

Susan Woods. *As a second generation Mexican-American woman from a public-sector union, in a right-to-work state, your achievements have broken new ground all along the way. What attitudes have you encountered? What barriers have you faced?*

Linda Chavez-Thompson. I think the first barrier was the culture barrier. I'm fifty-four years old, so the fringes of the old ways, in the Mexican-American culture especially, were still around when I was growing up. Women took a back seat to men, didn't argue with their husbands. The man was the absolute ruler of the house. Young girls were taught to be supportive, to keep their mouths

shut, etc. Those were the things my mom was taught as a young girl. When she became a wife, those were the types of things she was supposed to be teaching us—but she didn't. That was her own way of exerting her feminism, I guess, her own very shy way. She never really taught us that we were to be just wives, and have the husbands make all the decisions.

I started out in the labor movement at twenty-three years of age in a secretarial position in a small construction-laborers' local. A secretarial position was ok. That wasn't

woman, a Latina woman. I was much too forward and out there.

Anglo men were even less respectful. I think, for the most part, they felt I had taken their jobs or that I was in positions that should not be held, number one, by a woman and, number two, by an Hispanic woman. Their lack of respect took many forms: lack of information, lack of participation, refusal of invitations to the same places as men, to conferences or workshops.

Many of them treated me like I was still the secretary,

even though I held higher positions in the union. They always thought I was the note-taker. As I continued up the ladder of success, we formed several [union] organizations and they thought I should always run for the recording-secretary position. I said, "I either want to be president or I want to manage the money."

In fact, I never served in any recording-secretary position, ever. I served as either president or secretary-treasurer of the public-employee council. I was a trustee, managed the audits of the central labor council. I served as second vice-president. I think it was my own little way of rebelling, of saying "Uh-uh, not me."

When I moved from Lubbock, Texas, to San Antonio, where there was a predominance of Hispanics, I didn't face as much of a barrier as an Hispanic but more as a woman. The attitude was that women don't know what they're doing. How can a woman push a city manager to do what he has to do, to better the lives of the public employees represented by the union? It wasn't easy at all. The attitudes that I encountered were arrogance, for one; disdain, for another; and in some cases, just downright ugliness from those who had absolutely no use for me.

Pam Henderson. *Well, Linda, a lot of what you describe are the things that people who have "visible difference" experience all the time. It sounds like you faced an uphill battle every day, which must have been very, very hard. How did you manage it?*

Linda. I developed a very thick skin and my own attitude. I figured that if I let it get to me, I wouldn't be able to do my job. I found out many, many years later that people I eventually made friends with thought I was arrogant and a



Union Summer 1996 in Memphis: Jesse Jackson, Doug Dority, with Linda Chavez-Thompson.

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seen as breaking into the men's world, so to speak; and a woman going to work, of course, to supplement the husband's salary, was okay too.

But when I began to break into other jobs, when it began to look like I actually had a talent to represent, to speak—to raise a little hell—then I started coming up against greater cultural problems. Men thought I wasn't supposed to be in a job like that. My own race of men thought that I was just not respectful of the fact that I was not supposed to be visible as a

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pushy broad. I probably was, and still am. But it was my defense. I had to build up my defense against people hurting my feelings. My feelings got hurt a lot during the early days of my career because, to a lot of men, women in the labor movement were considered just decoration. The men were the ones who really ran the labor movement in Texas and elsewhere. So to make my way, I had to develop my own attitude. I was representing the interests of my members and I didn't give a hoot what the others felt about me. Just get out of my way and let me get my job done.

So for a long time I had a lot of problems. I didn't get along with people because they were always trying to put me in my place, trying to make me a second-class business rep or second-class union rep. I wouldn't let them do it. I just kept doing my own thing. Slowly over the years I learned to get them to respect me. I got them behind me on some issues. It was not easy, not easy at all. Once you have good language skills and, hopefully, a good heart for what you hope to get for the public employees you represent and what you hope to build, people begin to see the results.

Susan. *Did you get support from other women?*

Linda. There weren't that many women. We had a handful who served in secondary and third-line positions. There was one woman who was promoted to her husband's position after he died. She was an Anglo woman with an Hispanic last name. She faced some of the same difficulties that I faced, and so we became fast friends. And there was another one who ended up being president of her union, a CWA local. But there were not enough women in the labor movement in Texas, per se, to have a little club to talk about all the ways we were being treated.

Pam. *Where did you get your support?*

Linda. I got my support from other public-employee union brothers in Texas, which is, of course, a right-to-work state. That means we have at-will employment. Cities and counties and public agencies can fire at will. The only thing to do is to fight for personnel procedures, grievance procedures, civil-service protection for workers. Then there is some protection for workers because public employers must follow a process to fire and to discipline.

In 1975, when I was holding the position of assistant business manager of the local in San Antonio, we formed what was called the Public Employees Council of San Antonio and Bexar County. There were about seven public-employee unions that faced the same kind of problems: firefighters, the postal workers, the letter carriers, the transit union, teachers, a couple of city-utility-workers' unions. We all faced the same problems with public-employer arrogance and treatment of public employees. We banded together. They were the ones who supported me and helped me and understood me. And so I had a small group of friends that did not dislike me because I was a woman or an Hispanic woman, and who were very supportive when I took on a battle with the city manager or the mayor or the city council. They were generally the ones who showed up en masse to speak up on my behalf. There were twenty-one delegates in the public-employees' council—twenty men and me. And I would often joke: "Twenty to one, that's good odds." I just never let them forget that I was a very important one person out of the whole twenty-one.

Pam. *What insights have you gained from this experience? What have you learned?*

Linda. Communication. Around 1981 or 1982, we were having big problems, unions with other unions: the industrial trades with the public-employees' sector, and the public-employees' sector with the construction trades. The president of the council at that time, a woman named Joan Suarez, organized some unity meetings. We would sit around the table and glare at each other and say things like, "Well, you said this about me, and you said that, and you don't care what happens to my members."

At one of these meetings, I confronted a building-trades worker, an ironworker, directly. "I understand you called me a bulldozer." And he said: "That's right." I asked him to tell me in what context. He said, "Well, I'll tell you exactly what I said. I told them don't ever get in Linda's way. She's like a bulldozer. She'll run right over you." Well, I didn't know whether it was a compliment or an insult.

Then the subject of that day was me. "She's always on TV; she's always hogging the limelight; she's this; she's that." I held up very well during that one-hour meeting. But as I walked out and headed toward my car, tears were streaming down my face. I thought I was doing good for my members. And here all these other union people thought I was the worst thing walking around on this earth.

Later I picked up the phone and called the guy and asked him if he wanted to go to lunch with me. I think I scared him. "What do you want?" he asked. I said, "Just go to lunch with me. I'll make it a very public place." I didn't know this guy. I never had any interaction with him and here he was hating me. At lunch I said: "Kenny, let me tell you what I have to do to get what I need for my union members. I don't have a union contract. I have personnel rules. I have civil-service rules that are very strict as to what I can appeal and whether it's a demotion, dismissal, or suspension. I have to work within the parameters of the rules of the city versus the rules of Texas versus no laws to protect us."

For two hours, I went through the reasons I was on TV. I explained that I had to shame the city council or the mayor into doing some of the things public employees needed. I had to show that public opinion and public sympathy were on our side. To upgrade wages, I had to talk about how hard garbage workers work and how much they get injured and what dirty old cans do to them when they are injured. Then I told him about filing a grievance and having it sit two or three months on the desk of a supervisor who won't turn it loose because he's got something

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he had to take the ribbing of his building-trades brothers when they'd say, "Hey, how's your girlfriend?" I won't tell you that we weren't on opposite sides many times, but he gained some respect for what I had to do and how I had to get it done. And we have been very, very close friends since then, because he understood my problem.

Susan. Did you say that the president of the labor council at that time was a woman?

Linda. Joan Suarez was president from 1980 to 1985—the first woman president of the central labor council in San Antonio. She's still with UNITE. She's a terrific woman, a good friend of mine.

Susan. Do you think the strategy she had of bringing all the unions together and making them talk face-to-face was something that being a woman helped her to do?

Linda. Oh, yes. When we had men presidents, as long as they got the votes, they didn't care what the rest of the people felt or wanted or needed. But she knew that what hurt me as a public employee might down the road also put the prevailing wage in jeopardy with the city council. She was concerned with the interchange between unions, the pro-activeness of the council. For five years, we had a "labor-honors-its-own" banquet and every politician in town came courting. Every local union would honor one of its members and tell us why. We would have at least a thousand people show up. We did the unity meetings. We held accountability sessions for politicians, before and after they were elected.

Some of the men said, "Oh, no, you don't do that. You deal behind closed doors. You don't make yourself visible." Joan would have none of that—she began to confront public officials. She set up monthly meetings with the mayor to discuss the problems we were having and how the mayor could help us resolve them. She began to



Chavez-Thompson speaks to reporters inside a UNITE-organized garment shop, during a tour of union and nonunion shops in California, 1996

against the guy. I went through some of the everyday struggles of keeping a union in place for public employees in Texas when you don't have a law that helps you. He didn't know this. He had no earthly idea that's why I was always on TV, why I was always in the newspaper, why I was always at political functions trying to make sure the politicians saw my face.

From that day forward, he began to understand. Often

do some things that men in the past had not done and, in reality, I think would never do.

Susan. *Joan broke out of the unspoken pattern in terms of how men had approached issues?*

Linda. Oh, yes, because our approach was to get the unions to work with each other whether for political endorsements or the issues in the community. We came together on bond issues for the school district. She was able to tell the building trades to work together with all of us. She'd say, "Don't go out there with, 'Vote for the bond because it means construction jobs for us.' Say, 'Vote for the bond because it is good for our children and it provides good jobs for us.'" She pushed a different argument, a different presentation.

Pam. *I can see how well that experience serves you for your current position.*

Linda. Oh, yes, I learned a lot from Joan. I began to see that while my union members provide the service, the taxpayers receive the service. And oh, golly, golly, golly, we have something in common. So if I don't want privatization in the garbage department, then they don't want it because it's not good service. This served as a learning process for me. This experience began to teach me coalition building and partnerships. You don't stay on your own little island. You have to branch out to help your brothers and sisters.

Susan. *You were appointed to the President's Initiative on Race. From that experience and from what you learned holding community discussions around the country, what advice would you give for building alliances to reverse discrimination—alliances with other women, across cultures with other people of color, with concerned white males?*

Linda. I guess one of the things is that there is no better way to do it than on the local level. At the national level, we talk pretty words about promising practices, about the twenty-first century and how we should live together, work together, etc. But it has to start at the local level. It has to start with people—whether it be labor, women, civil-rights groups, community groups. We have to begin with the kind of local relationships that we have.

If I live in San Antonio—and I love my city—why shouldn't I want my city to have the best? I look towards other folks and begin to build on the relationships that I have. There are some people on the east side of town, which is the black community, who have absolutely no relationship with the people on the north side

or the west side or the south side. But I do. We can work together.

One of the things that we advocated and hope for is that the President will take our recommendations when he comes out with his report to the American people. We will take a look at how we can begin work [on our recommendations], whether or not he sets up a commission—a special commission—to deal with the idea of diversity and inclusion. The community level needs to be where it all starts. We have to start in our schools, at the youngest ages of the children. When I went to schools while I was on the President's advisory board, the young kids said, "Well, we don't know what the big deal is. We all know that there are all different colors of us. So, hey, what's the big deal? Hey, grown-ups, grow up."

Pam. *How do you answer that question?*

Linda. In all honesty, I was very surprised by the answers of some of the fourth and fifth graders. They had absolutely no qualms, no problems with color and race. They dealt with it. Some of the schools have gone beyond others in talking about race, making young people, kids, feel comfortable with it. There was one teacher who spoke up about a little girl who didn't want to sit next to another little girl because she was black. So he stopped the class and for twenty-five minutes of that one-hour class they, the kids, spent the time talking about race and this little girl and her reasons. Schools were doing this because they want to treat diversity and inclusion differently. I asked some of the children, "Who do you sit with when you go to the cafeteria? Are black kids sitting with black kids? White kids with white? Hispanic with Hispanic?" This little kid, a fourth or fifth

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Chavez-Thompson at rally for striking Free Press workers in Detroit, 1996

grader, said, "Well, I sit with my friend in the band." Out of the mouths of babes—"I sit with my friends in the band."

We have given lots of recommendations to the President. We don't think that education is all that we have to look at. We believe that economic opportunity and people being able to get better jobs, to earn decent wages, to provide a decent education for their children, to live in better housing certainly helps. We're hoping that the President does ultimately come out with some of our recommendations and that our work continues.

Secretary Cuomo has already begun to do a lot regarding housing, but so much more needs to be done where people live. In the inner cities, where many people of color live, people are living in slums, in inadequate housing or no housing, afraid everyday, that type of situation. Too often that's the only place they can live because that's the only place they can afford. These areas have no medical clinics, no hospitals.

And Latinos have probably the second [worst], if not the worst, conditions, because of the language problems and because often they are looked at as the people who can be paid even less than minimum wage. Many of them are, of course, new immigrants.

We didn't deal with all the issues that I would have liked. I wanted to get into more in regards to immigration and the issue of justice in our system, of who gets more justice than others. I wanted to get more into the problems that we do have between races. It was a very short year.

Pam. *Recently you were appointed to serve as vice-chair of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities.*

Linda. Yes, working with Tony Coelho. The problems are similar. People with disabilities face discrimination and

exclusion because of their disabilities. They, like people of color, often get low-paying jobs if they get any at all. Those who receive disability benefits from social security are allowed to earn only \$500 a month in additional income, which is a poverty wage and keeps people in poverty. Why can't they earn \$1000 and still get their disability payments? So Tony and I are looking towards working with the AFL-CIO to bring to the forefront the need for better treatment of these workers.

Susan. *Linda, from your standpoint, what lies ahead for organized labor, especially as regards goals and strategies for building community across a broader,*

more diverse union membership?

Linda. Let me tell you what we're doing. We're strengthening our central labor councils [CLCs], which are the personification of what the AFL-CIO is. What we are trying to do is to bolster our CLCs, make them more pro-active, build them into powerhouses within their communities by building alliances with civil rights, women's rights, community groups within those communities. For the most part, these people believe in the same things we do. They want better wages, benefits, a pension plan, health insurance. They want all of these things for their memberships, as we do, so why not work together?

If the CLCs are not strong, if they are not pro-active, if they are not in the community and in the face of that community, we have things happen that are not good for labor or for the community. We have cities giving tax abatements—giving away the store to bring a company into the city, but never making that company pay adequate wages with health insurance benefits. So who still foots the bill for health care? Who foots the bill if it isn't the city? So cities pay twice: one, by not collecting taxes and two, by not having adequate payroll for the people who live in the city. We had this happen in San Antonio. We got a tax-abatement resolution passed at city council with the help of community groups in town. Now any company wanting to come into San Antonio with a tax abatement must bring jobs that pay \$9.21 an hour with benefits, or \$10.31 an hour without benefits.

Susan. *And this goes back to your building alliances on the local level?*

Linda. Building our coalitions, building our partnerships, building alliances. The best way is to find one thing that everybody fights for. We may not agree on all the issues, but on those where we do agree, let's fight together. If we disagree, then hey, somebody hold our coats. Hopefully it's not a big battle. ■