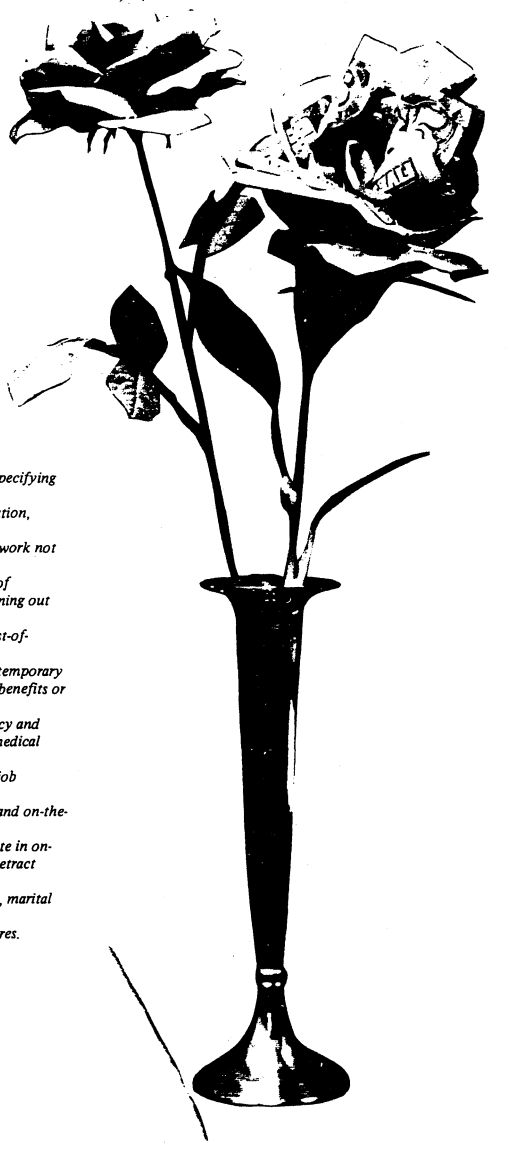
Raises & Roses

office workers bill of rights



1. *The right to respect as women and as office workers.*
2. *The right to comprehensive, written job descriptions specifying the nature of all duties expected of the employee.*
3. *The right to detailed descriptions specifying compensation, terms, conditions and benefits of employment.*
4. *The right to compensation for overtime work and for work not included in our job descriptions.*
5. *The right to choose whether to do the personal work of employers (typing personal letters, serving coffee, running out for lunch).*
6. *The right to defined and regular salary reviews and cost-of-living increases.*
7. *The right to comprehensive medical coverage for any temporary medical disability without jeopardizing our seniority, benefits or pensions.*
8. *The right to maternity benefits and to having pregnancy and other gynecological conditions treated as temporary medical disabilities.*
9. *The right to benefits equal to those of men in similar job categories.*
10. *The right to equal access to promotion opportunities and on-the-job training programs.*
11. *The freedom to choose one's lifestyle and to participate in on-the-job organizing or outside activities which do not detract from the execution of assigned tasks.*
12. *An end to discrimination on the basis of sex, age, race, marital status or parenthood.*
13. *The right to written and systematic grievance procedures.*

DISTRICT 925
Service Employees International Union,
AFL-CIO, CLC

Clerical Workers:

Noon at 9 to 5

Reflections on a Decade of Organizing

■ *Cindia Cameron*

As manufacturing jobs have been automated, shipped abroad and shut down for good, traditional sources of employment as well as union members have dried up, with severe effects for the labor movement. For the past decade, job growth has been highest in the new "service economy," with office jobs becoming both the largest and fastest growing job category for the newest growth sector of the labor force—women. Fully one of every three employed women is an office worker. What effect has this shift had on organizing and on the union movement?

A new participant in labor issues in the past decade has been an organization known to many people because of a movie and hit song of the same name—9 to 5. As union organizers search for methods and strategies to tackle the new conditions, it is worth looking at this newcomer to see what contributions it can offer.

The purposes of this article are first, to look at the phenomenon of the 9 to 5 movement, the social forces that have encouraged its growth and have been its greatest obstacles; second, to describe its goals and methods, how they connect with or differ from those of traditional unions; and finally, to see what union organizers can

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draw from this experience that would be useful in attempts to build unions among this largest group of employed women.

9 to 5, the National Association of Working Women, is a membership organization for women office workers. Since its founding in Boston in 1973, it has grown to 12,000 members in 25 citywide chapters, as well as at-large members located in all of the 50 states. Its purpose is to improve wages, rights and respect for office workers through three methods: individual job problem and legal rights counseling, educational programs such as on VDT health hazards and job survival skills, and public pressure campaigns which target corporate and public policies affecting office workers.

9 to 5 combines women's issues (discrimination, pay equity, sexual harassment, respect) and union issues (higher pay, job posting, increased benefits) with a community organizing style (corporate campaigns, locally elected boards of directors, personal empowerment).

Social Forces

What accounts for the emergence and endurance of this hybrid women's workplace organization, and what have been the major obstacles it has faced?

By the early 1970s three social forces were building that resulted in an immediate and widespread response to this new type of organization. First, there was a real change in the economic status of women. More and more women had become necessary wage earners, seeing themselves as permanent workers for the first time. Second, the ideas of the women's movement had affected a majority of women. Even the large numbers who described themselves as "not women's libbers" were now accepting the idea of equality for women, and more importantly, were beginning to believe it was legitimate to expect more. Finally, throughout the 1960s and 70s, the nature of office work itself was changing. The traditional private secretary with a large amount of discretion and control over her office and work was rapidly being replaced by data entry operators, word processors and keypunch operators—all lower-paid, more routine and monotonous jobs, with even fewer possibilities for promotion and advancement.

As a result of these combined influences, working women's groups with varying methods and agendas sprang up in several major cities in the early 1970s. In 1977, five of these joined forces to found 9 to 5. The organization served as both a catalyst and lightening rod for the concerns of this new breed of working

woman. As an organizer who worked for the Baltimore chapter in the late 70s described, "I'd meet women for lunch to talk about 9 to 5 and would hear, over and over, women expressing a sense of relief that finally there was a group hearing and acting on their unspoken concerns and aspirations."

Even though these combined social forces have propelled organizing efforts in cities across the country, 9 to 5 still has a relatively small membership. What obstacles has it encountered in organizing among women clericals?

The reasons traditionally cited by union leaders for not organizing women office workers are all in some part true, but largely miss the essential issues. For example, secretaries and other "elites" of clerical work sometimes do identify with the power and prestige of their boss or company, rather than with co-workers. But with more highly educated office workers and rising expectations, these women are often precisely the ones with the self-confidence and skills to become the first leaders of a 9 to 5 chapter and to be the most convinced that they deserve more.

It's true that many office workers work in plush, clean, comfortable surroundings, and feel themselves to be somehow "above" blue-collar workers and their unions. There are, on the other hand, great numbers who work in large, poorly designed, stuffy, regimented worksites, with increasing numbers whose work is paced and monitored by computer and their pay based on production or piece-rate systems.

It is also true that many clerical women feel alienated from or hostile to unions. They have long been ignored by organized labor, and their special concerns—such as childcare, discrimination and lack of respect—have not, until recently, been addressed. Many unions do not have an organizing staff these workers can identify with, few women and fewer with experience in issues or conditions of clerical work.

While all of these problems do exist, they do not add up to a useful explanation of why it may be difficult to make organizing inroads among women clericals. Within 9 to 5, there are three common observations about what the real obstacles are. First mentioned is fear. The real fear and hardship of unfair and discriminatory firings should not be underestimated, as women are increasingly the sole support of their families. But it is less likely that a woman will be fired for being open about 9 to 5 activity than it is that she will be harassed by management and isolated by co-workers. As one veteran staff member explains, "What many women really fear is stepping out of the mold—taking a stand for yourself first, before boss or company loyalty. Women

are still brought up to put others before themselves. If they do change their behavior because of 9 to 5, it is often a threat to friends, family, co-workers and their own self-images. This is the real fear."

A second obstacle is the tremendous job mobility of office workers in the 1980s. Younger workers especially are constantly leaving one job for another—motivated by boredom in a company with no challenge or advancement opportunity, by the prospect of better pay or conditions, or to escape a tyrannical boss or unfair conditions which they feel helpless to change. In cities, where clerical jobs are concentrated, there is always another office job. Maybe not a better one, but a different one, an escape. Because of this mobility, clericals do not have the incentive to stick it out, to stand up and join up to improve conditions.

The most significant obstacle, in my experience, was explained by an Atlanta member this way, "Why don't more women join 9 to 5? Because, in my seven years as a clerical, I can tell you, office workers are never encouraged to join *anything*. To be a librarian or any professional, you *have* to join that association, but not clericals. It is actually discouraged." Office workers do not have a history of political or civic participation. Until very recently they have had no history of leadership or heroines, no social clubs or associations, no press or recorded history, no experience of common strugggle on their own behalf. As an organizer for District 925 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) observed on the founding of this first national union for office workers, "A workforce cannot organize itself without organizational skills, leadership, a common identity and a collective sense which gives it the *will* to organize."

9 to 5: Goals & Strategies

The central goal which has guided 9 to 5 over the past 12 years, is simply, to introduce office workers to the idea, the experience and the value of organization. It has employed four basic strategies to reach this goal. First is to raise the issues (pay, rights, and respect) to the public, in order to change the expectations of office workers. Second, to create examples of change, to win concrete victories which show that it is possible and worth the risk. Third, to educate the constituency on issues and legal rights, in order to build a climate of legitimacy for organizing and the knowledge of rights and how to protect them. And finally, to develop leadership among clericals, emphasizing both the empowerment of individuals and the training of long-term activists within the

constituency.

How have these strategies been put into action, and how effective have they been?

The first steps in raising the particular issues of women office workers to the public were achieved by a combination of "street actions" and the publishing of the Office Workers' Bill of Rights. The actions took place in front of large companies, with colorful songs, speeches and visuals, such as the "Heartless Employer Award" on Valentine's Day or "Scrooge of the Year" at Christmas. They resulted in consistent press coverage of the issues—low pay, poor benefits, and discriminatory treatment—as well as in changes in some employer policies. Presenting what this new group was *for* as well as against, necessitated a rallying point. The slogan "Raises, Rights and Respect" and an agenda, the Bill of Rights, were designed to raise the standards of what was acceptable treatment for this largely underpaid and undervalued segment of the workforce.

To win concrete improvements, 9 to 5 had, in the early years, two important weapons which are no longer viable: the element of surprise and the threat of federal anti-discrimination agencies. Appearing on the doorstep of a company to dramatize conditions of unfair treatment was all it took to get some changes made. Companies were taken aback by this new phenomenon and were eager to get out of the press and public eye. But as word of 9 to 5 spread, the surprise element disappeared. Chambers of Commerce and management consultants across the country now offer training sessions on how to control or "manage" white-collar workers and "militant feminists" like 9 to 5.

Early campaigns also relied on suing banks for non-compliance with affirmative action plans required of federal contractors. With the changes in funding, enforcement and regulations since 1980, it is much more difficult to threaten companies or to win cases.

From 1974 till 1980, however, the combination of one-time actions on employers and year-long corporate campaigns and legal suits resulted in impressive victories—promotions and back-pay awards, job posting and grievance procedures, raises and childcare programs. Equally important, members changed their ideas about the possibility of change, their relationship to employers and government, and the value of organization.

The corporate campaigns had, in the eyes of some organizers, two weaknesses. First was that relying on the power and threat of government anti-discrimination agencies might encourage 9 to 5 members to see these agencies, rather than the power of their own organization, as the solution to their problems. Ironically, the

changes in government enforcement under the Reagan administration have gone a long way towards curing members of this belief. Second, because of employer harassment and fear of being fired, women from the targeted company were sometimes not publicly involved in the leadership of corporate campaigns, thus presenting to some of the workers whose conditions were directly affected the lesson that "someone else will solve your problems for you"—a contradiction of the message 9 to 5 set out to convey.

Because of these changes, another approach to winning workplace victories has been developed. Using this model, job-problem calls are screened for individuals who can bring together a group of coworkers to meet with 9 to 5 to define their grievances, learn about legal rights and develop a group strategy to pressure management for change. Similar to shop floor organizing, the goal is the solution to a specific problem: better lighting or equipment, a fair promotion or review process or an end to mandatory overtime, not the recognition of their organization or union. With this model, change has been achieved and the message that there is power in organization has been learned and spread.

The third strategy is to provide a climate of legitimacy for organizing through educational programs on issues and legal rights. Workshops on sexual harassment, pay equity or the health hazards of office automation are universally popular and well attended. It is through these outreach events that many women who go on to become chapter leaders have their first experience with 9 to 5. The programs are designed to give participants a chance to share common problems and solutions and to build a support network, as well as to teach skills.

The final strategy is that of developing leadership among women clericals. The trademarks of this style have been to develop those leaders who are most representative and can articulate the problems of this constituency: a single mother whose full-time pay still qualifies her for government assistance; an older woman with years of training men to be her bosses; a keypunch operator who works rotating shifts and whose pay is based on production quotas. These are the people who speak to the press, to public officials, who address rallies and lead workshops. There is also a conscious effort to present a bi-racial public image at all times. Leaders are often paired, black and white, for public or press appearances and even for leafletting. The aim of this style of leadership development is both to provide clerical women with the skills and experience to control their own organizations and also to use these leaders to convey to potential members that 9 to 5 is a group where people like themselves make decisions and make change.

Lessons for Unionists

Given that the goal of 9 to 5 is to build collective identity rather than collective bargaining units, what can unionists learn from the model and experience of this organization?

There are at least three areas in which 9 to 5 has broken new ground in reaching workers outside the traditional "house of labor." First, 9 to 5 has articulated the aspirations of the constituency and raised them to the level of public debate. Who should get the coffee in the office was not an issue in the minds of anyone but secretaries before the 1970s. Now in the most isolated and conservative town, bosses think twice before asking this service of their secretaries. Finding the gut issues and building a consensus on what workers should expect, then highlighting the gap between where they are and where they want to be, are the first steps in creating the *will* to organize.

Second, public outreach events such as educational workshops attract new potential members who then have an opportunity to become allied with the labor movement whether or not there is a union at their workplace.

Third, 9 to 5 has set a strong example in the area of public relations and media work, due in part to its emphasis on providing personal stories, well-researched issue papers and a positive, aggressive approach to news stories. 9 to 5 spokespeople are, for the most part, not paid professionals, but "real life office workers" who can tell their own story in their own words—quite different from the popular stereotype of the union movement.

The major contribution of 9 to 5 for the union movement, out of which new methods and tactics can be developed, is in providing an example of a new phase in the process of organizing. This is a phase of building a collective identity and the will to organize which must precede the traditional union organizing methods, particularly among the new categories of workers in the service economy. ■