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Dale Melcher and Susan Winning

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# A Tool for WILDer Leadership Development

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Leadership development in the labor movement is a necessity for both individuals and organizations, including unions, central labor bodies, and community-based groups. The focus of the Women's Institute for Leadership Development (WILD) has been on both developing the skills, self-confidence, and knowledge of individual women and the leadership capacity of their unions and organizations. This article highlights the *WILD Guidelines for Individual Leadership Development*, a tool designed to help women members, activists, and leaders develop an individual plan for self-conscious and self-confident leadership development in their unions and organizations.

*WILD* is a Massachusetts program that has worked for over twenty-five years to develop the leadership of women, especially women of color, in the Massachusetts labor movement. WILD defines the labor movement broadly to include all community and immigrants rights organizations fighting for workers justice, as well as organized labor. WILD's mission is to:

- increase the number and the diversity of women leaders in the labor movement
- help build a rank-and-file union movement
- help build a labor movement that addresses the concerns of poor and working women, and other issues of social and economic injustice; and
- build awareness of and stimulate debate about issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other issues of oppression.

The signature *WILD* program is a weekend-long summer institute for women from unions and workplace focused community organizations, inspired by and adapted from the Northeast Regional Summer School for Union Women. Through the leadership development workshops offered at the institute, WILD has developed a *WILDer* vision of leadership, a vision of collective, collaborative leadership, which includes a commitment to a set of values: solidarity and diversity, and a labor movement that

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includes groups working for social and economic justice, democracy, and leadership that truly reflects the membership.

WILD recognizes that there are many barriers to women's leadership development, which limit their access to training or opportunities to act to develop the skills, knowledge, and self-confidence they need. But there is also recognition that women can be instruments of their own leadership development with the assistance of or in spite of union leadership.

Since its inception in 1986, WILD has been thoughtful and creative in its approach to leadership development, evaluating progress and revising its programs. The *WILD Guidelines for Individual Leadership Development* was developed as a tool for reflection, planning, and action, and has been used in the advanced leadership curriculum and the *Fit to Lead* planning and mentoring program. The checklist was demonstrated and discussed in a workshop at the 2008 UALE conference.

## The Leadership Checklist

The checklist is just that—a list of knowledge areas, skills, and experience with check boxes next to each, informed by WILD's mission and perspective. The final two sections of each step suggest activities and education/training to build the skills, knowledge, and confidence that women may need to move forward. The list is organized into three stages of leadership development: *Becoming an Effective Activist Member*, *Taking Leadership Responsibility*, and *Building a Movement and Strategic Planning*. The checklist introduction warns that leadership does not develop in an orderly fashion and that women may find that they are doing Step Three activities when they have not had the experience and training suggested at Step One! This document is meant to suggest ways to challenge women at all levels of leadership to grow as labor activists and leaders (see Figure 1).

*Step One: Becoming an Effective Activist Member* focuses on beginning to develop activism and understanding the basics of unions, the labor movement and the movement for social and economic justice, including the negative impact of various forms of oppression on the labor movement. Knowledge of the purpose of unions and the labor movement, the structure of the local and the state and national labor movement, the contract, the roles of the steward and basic labor law, as well as the importance of being a union activist are stressed. Skill development areas include speaking, writing, listening, as well as the ability to ask for and get support.

*Step Two: Taking Leadership Responsibilities* shifts focus from being an activist to being an organizer. The big picture expands to include labor history, the role of women, immigrants and people of color in building the labor movement, and understanding how racism and other forms of oppression continue to divide and weaken the labor movement. Emphasis is placed on taking on additional responsibilities in the union or the area labor movement to engage other members, as well as developing the skills that support active participation and the confidence to be more engaged in the work of the union or community organization. The knowledge base includes labor history and

**WILD CHECKLIST SAMPLE**

STEP ONE: Developing yourself as an activist member.

A. Knowledge Base: I am familiar with or have begun to study...

- basic leadership qualities
- the purpose of unions
- my union contract

B. Union/Organizational Experience: I have ...

- spoken up at union/organization meetings
- participated in a committee of the union/organization
- participated in a union/organization action – worn a button, signed a petition, etc.

C. Other relevant life experiences which have developed my activism:

D. Possible activities to build skills, knowledge, confidence

- Serve on a committee in union/organization
- Attend a UALE Women's Summer School
- Join and participate in independent labor organizations (e.g. Jobs with Justice)

E. Possible classes or workshops to build skills, knowledge, confidence

- Training in basic unionism
- Basic leadership

**Figure 1.** The following is a *sample* of options in Step One of the Checklist, *Developing yourself as an activist member*.

union values, and understanding the importance of member activism, and the impact of politics and the economy. Skill areas include public speaking, running effective meetings, grievance handling, bargaining, and participating in coalitions.

Step Three: *Building a Movement and Strategic Planning* focuses on taking responsibility with others to develop and carry out strategic plans for organizing workers. The big picture challenges women to understand globalization, the economy, immigration policy, and other comprehensive questions—and their impact on the union and the labor movement. The skills and confidence emphasis is on undertaking independent leadership in organizing, education, and training for a progressive labor movement.

All stages emphasize experience as a source of knowledge and skill development. This emphasis on experience aligns with other aspects of WILD's philosophy and programs. In addition to the Summer Institute, and one day Winter Institute, WILD also offers training in Popular Education for women who are encouraged to teach at WILD's programs paired with more experienced facilitators as mentors. WILD alums are invited to participate in all aspects of planning WILD's program, running the

summer and winter institutes, and working on outreach, fundraising, and membership. Participation in committees and on the Board of Directors provides additional opportunities to develop skills and practice various aspects of leadership. Many of these activities are suggested in the checklist as opportunities for women to build their skills and knowledge.

## Uses of the Checklist

WILD envisions the checklist as useful not only for individual assessment and planning, but also as a tool for staff and leaders to develop the leadership of women members. The tool is most effective when women use it in pairs, with a coworker, a mentor, or a staff person who can assist in setting a clear goal, some steps to reach that goal, and a process for accountability. The assessment is meant to be provocative, to suggest areas where women can sharpen their skills, deepen their understanding of issues, and get information or training. For example:

- Step One checklist suggests women serve on a committee in their union or organization, and/or attend training in basic unionism or “Speaking up at Meetings.”
- Step Two activities suggest women attend labor conferences sponsored by Jobs with Justice, Labor Notes, or a local COSH group; develop a relationship with a mentor; take a workshop in *Building Effective Committees* or *Running for Office*.
- Step Three recommends women run for office in a Central Labor Council, and take workshops on topics such as *Strategic Planning* and *Globalization* (workshops offered by WILD).

The checklist is also useful to union staff in thinking about what it takes to develop leadership—the skills and knowledge essential to leadership, and the components of a leadership development program. The *Possible Activities* section suggests how a union might provide opportunities for women to develop more experience and exercise their leadership, for example, by encouraging and/or appointing a woman to serve on a committee of the international/national union, or appointing a woman as a delegate to a Central Labor Council, where she might run for office. The checklist should be part of an ongoing process of setting goals, evaluating and testing goals, acting, reflecting, revising, etc., that users will revisit to assess progress and make plans.

## WILD's Experience with the Checklist

WILD has used the checklist successfully several times in the more advanced level leadership skills class at the Summer Institute to help participants set a leadership development goal for the following year and create a plan to reach their goal. Since WILD has not had the capacity to follow-up with individual women, we can only hope

that women continue to make use of the checklist. A recent individualized leadership development program, *Fit to Lead*, combined skills training and planning workshops with a year-long mentoring relationship and made the checklist a centerpiece of this process. The checklist helped both participants and their mentors assess participants' leadership skills, set some goals for leadership development, and identify some steps to reach the goals. Where the mentoring relationship was strong, the checklist played an important role in keeping participants on track. Where those relationships were not strong, the checklist gave some guidance to the participant, but was not a significant factor in helping participants reach their goals.

## Next Steps

The piece needing more development in the checklist is the assessment of experience with activism and engagement, reflecting the importance of activism in developing leadership. We are working on revisions to capture the knowledge and skills obtained through activism, particularly the sense of being a part of something larger than the sum of the parts, as well as suggesting additional activist activities. We invite you to adapt the checklist to your industry, union, and other needs and ask that you share your experience using and or modifying the checklist with us. For more information about the Women's Institute for Leadership Development, visit the WILD Web site at [www.wildlabor.org](http://www.wildlabor.org).

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**Susan Winning** has been a labor activist and educator working primarily with women for over 30 years, working at the labor extension program at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, since 2002. Prior to that, she was the executive director of the Women's Institute for Leadership Development (WILD) which provides education and training for women in unions, and continues to serve on the board of directors. She holds a Masters in Social Work in community organization.