



A changing America, a changing labor movement

Everybody enjoys a pat on the back, a prolonged burst of applause, even a plaque or some other tangible evidence of appreciation—even when it's clear others also being honored are far more worthy.

I was truly humbled in March when the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) chose me, along with pioneer women union activists Joyce D. Miller and Gloria T. Johnson, former CWA Secretary-Treasurer Barbara J. Easterling, former AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Linda Chavez-Thompson, and six other women to receive the organization's first annual Working Women's Awards. All of us in one way or another were credited for breaking or at least cracking the "glass ceiling" that had for so long existed in American labor as it still does in so many other areas of American life.

But as I listened to the citations being read during the awards ceremony—especially those for the women who challenged the male-dominated labor establishment decades ago—I was reminded of the obstacles earlier women union activists have faced, and how fortunate I have been to have walked in their footsteps. I was also aware of how supportive both men and women letter carriers have been of my ascension in NALC leadership since 1995, when I became the first woman on this union's Executive Council—and even earlier when I first became active in Branch 506 in Davenport, Iowa.

I was also mindful of the irony that an organization such as CLUW must exist—and that it has been so important in championing the role of women within the American movement. The same irony holds for the existence of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, which held an awards ceremony in April that I was privileged to attend—a ceremony marked by the bestowing of an award named for longtime civil rights and women's rights leader Dorothy Height, who sadly had died the previous day at age 98.

For many years, there was only one African-American on the AFL-CIO Executive Council—A. Phillip Randolph, the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, an almost exclusively black union. That Randolph, one of the major figures of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, had an uneasy relationship with many of his fellow Executive Council members is well documented, as is the hesitancy on the part of a number of international unions to embrace the civil rights movement itself.

Joyce Miller, a fellow CLUW honoree, was the first woman to serve on the AFL-CIO Executive Council, but she didn't join the Council until 1980, 17 years after the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, eight years after Gloria Steinem and others launched *Ms.* magazine, and eight years after the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. In fact, by the time Miller joined the Council, doors had already been opened in professional and academic life to millions of American women previously shut out of the mainstream opportunities open to men, and largely open only to white men.

The times they are a-changing—and actually have changed dramatically in the 47 years since Bob Dylan wrote his song—if not as quickly or as dramatically as many of us hoped. People of color and women today have opportunities in politics, sports, education, professional life—and trade unions—unheard of just decades ago.

Take a look at the labor movement: Two of the top three officers of the AFL-CIO are women, one of whom is an African-American. Of the 51 members of the federation's executive council, nine are female and nine are people of color. The 2.2 million-member Service Employees International Union has just elected not only its first woman president, but also the first openly gay or lesbian president of a major American union.

As for the NALC, although I was for many years the only "skirt" on our 28-member Council, four other women have joined me—with more to come in the years ahead, I hope.

It would be misleading to say that either this union or the American labor movement has always been in the forefront of social change and civil rights. Too often, unions have had to be pushed into doing the right thing. Still, as many more women and minorities comprising the majority of the membership joined the ranks of labor, unions too have changed. Today, the labor movement leads the way in championing the economic and social needs of America's increasingly diverse workforce. No other institution has been as responsive or progressive.

In March, I received my pat on the back, my applause. But now it's time to applaud the labor movement for recognizing that gender, race and sexual orientation doesn't matter when the main goal is to create a better America for all working men and women. ☒