

Start with the “Women of Steel”

Initiative

Many years ago the USW created the “Women of Steel” (WOS) initiative with an overall goal to create various opportunities for female activism throughout the organization and ultimately move women into more leadership positions. It is a program that has many facets. We seek to reach current skilled activists and those that have not yet become active or may not see themselves in that role. Therefore, a key component of WOS is that it creates simple structures within the USW where our sisters can network, mentor and support one another while they build self-confidence, skills, and experience in existing programs and ones they create.

WOS or Local Union Women’s Committee?

“Women of Steel” refers to the above initiative and a term that our female members take pride in using as a validation of their identity and contributions to the growth of the USW.

Local Union Women’s Committee (“Committee”) is not usually referred to as WOS committee, but referenced as Local Union # _____ Women’s Committee. This ties the committee back to the local as an integral part of its structure.

All the female members in the local refer to themselves as “Women of Steel.”

Forming a Women’s Committee

Under the original WOS Resolution passed at the 26th International Convention, the USW urged each local union to form a Women’s Committee which is now a **mandated standing committee** in the USW Constitution. Committee Chair information should be forwarded to the District and International offices from each local union. It’s important for all Women’s Committees to be registered in the USW Network so that developmental support can be

provided.

Throw Away the Structured Meeting Model

Historically, committees tend to follow a familiar structure which is the local union meeting format. But that is a business format. A Women’s Committee needs to develop around a much less formal model.

Keep in mind one of the committee goals – to reach women who are not currently activists or familiar with the union. This committee should provide a more informal atmosphere, but with purpose and direction.

Pick a setting that affords privacy and the ability to sit around a table facing each other rather than in rows looking at backs of heads. This stimulates more openness and interaction.

Make it more like visiting around the kitchen table at someone’s home. In fact, some committees do meet at other places besides the union hall. Try a park, church, volunteer a recreation room and rotate the meetings to each other’s homes, etc. Casual is fine. You want to provide an atmosphere where women can network and discuss issues while getting to know more about one another. This bonding will help those not yet active to build a comfort level within the union.

This setting will help newer activists learn from experienced sisters. It will make them less resistant to asking questions, sharing concerns and participating in discussions than in a more formal meeting structure.

Learn to Listen and Encourage Dialog

Dialog means having a conversation in which everyone should be encouraged to participate, but

not called upon to speak. Don’t rush topics; ask for input. When new activists attend, don’t put them in the spotlight; make sure to not let them fend for themselves. When they do speak, be sure to listen to what they are saying, or trying to say – ask questions be supportive – ask for others to also give advice on the topic or share their similar experiences. It is through sharing that we grow stronger and mentor one another.

Informal Meetings Have Hidden Structure

Don’t try to conquer the biggest obstacles first or take on projects that can’t be completed with some success. Narrow your goals based on members’ time, responsibilities, skill level, and experience in helping develop a project. Take it slow so that the nurturing of new activists is not lost in the drive to accomplish the project. Your first projects should be about building fellowship among members of the committee and making them feel good about what they can accomplish working together as women. This makes the project less about the goal and more a means to get women working and talking together.

Don’t try to crowd too much into one meeting. Always allow time for Women to interact with one another, ask questions, and make suggestions; this is what builds your activists’ base.

Capture Input where Everyone can Contribute to the Discussion

Flip charts and chalk boards are important to meetings. By capturing people’s ideas on a topic or project in one place, where everyone can see what has been put forward, increases participation. People can listen and discuss more openly when they are not trying to take individual notes. Information can be captured and distributed later by the Chair.

Don’t dismiss an idea as unimportant or too difficult to accomplish. Just capture ideas and input so

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everyone can discuss them as a group. This is all about building self-confidence and getting women to talk within a group where they feel safe in making a mistake or two. Where it is okay to ask what they feel may be silly questions, but important to their understanding of the union and how it functions.

Select Projects that Everyone Can Support

After a few meetings, you should be comfortable working together and selecting a project to collectively sponsor from the committee. Make sure members know the topics to be covered before the meeting so they can entertain possible ideas. Ask women who cannot attend meetings regularly what they would participate in or attend.

Your project should take into consideration the many women who don't attend your meetings. Your visibility and direct one-on-one contact with them for input can build the stature of your committee and eventually bring in new activists.

As you work to select a project, make sure segments can be distributed among all committee members so they may contribute to the development of the event. If everyone has a hand in the project they can enjoy the excitement of a successful event and learn to work better as a committee. It is a great confidence builder even if their piece of the project is simply folding fliers or greeting people at the door.

Also, make sure you discuss a timeline for all pieces of the event. Set dates that can be worked backwards in the timeline, afford plenty of time for all preparations to be completed without rushing. Remember, the process is as important to building skills and self-confidence as the project itself. A June event that requires fund raising, advertising, union leadership approval should not start in April. Decide what it is you want to accomplish, determine those things that require first priority, and put those into a timeline.

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Steps in Forming a Committee

There are no steps. Each local union tends to be different in its composition and obstacles when it comes to forming committees. Committee formation can be driven by numbers of women in the local, shifts, responsibilities outside work, support or non-support from membership and officers, etc. Check what others have done in the flier "*WOS and Project Ideas*" on the USW website, under *WOS/fliers*.

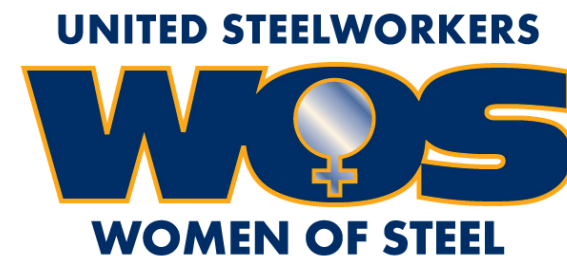
Things Committees CANNOT Do:

Collect dues for attending meetings. *All members in good standing with the local, especially women, are welcome to attend committee meetings. Meetings should be set to encourage the greatest participation.*

Endorse candidates (internal or external), support actions or activities not supported, endorsed, or approved by the Union. *The Women's Committee is charged with working to meet goals set forth in the WOS Initiative as other local committees are created to meet their own set of responsibilities. The union body, through its elected officials, is the only entity charged with speaking on behalf of the entire membership.*

Set-up bank accounts or special funds. *The local should fund lost time and other expenses of its committees and chairs on an equal basis through local union funds. If additional fund-raising is warranted for an activity, those funds must go through the local union books in accordance with International Rules and Policies. For additional guidance, reference the flier "*WOS and Financial Issues*" on the USW website under *WOS/fliers*.*

USW logos and union specific logos should not be used on external projects, activities, etc., unless first approved by the union. *The USW logos, including WOS, are trademarked. Use of local union logos on endorsements or fliers not specifically used for the union or its membership MUST be approved.*



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Thought to Ponder:

To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world