

Liz Shuler as a Symbol of Progress for the American Labor Movement

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Introduction

Although the American labor movement has provided the working class with countless benefits by granting workers the protected ability to advocate for their rights, it cannot be forgotten that unionism has historically been prone to exclusion and the abandonment of the progressive values that originally shaped the goals of the movement. The traditional, white male dominant union structure has historically ignored the unique needs of women and marginalized groups in the workplace, particularly surrounding a lack of focus on protecting against discrimination and providing equal access to education and union membership. Similarly, some organizations have adopted moderate values, going as far as working with the state to prevent the spread of communism, promote the continuation of US militarism, and renounce certain progressive goals. Although both of these issues can push workers to distrust unions and feel less inclined to join, there is evidence to suggest that under greater levels of female leadership, these concerns may begin to see improvement.

One of these female leaders who has begun to display signs of hope for the future of the American labor movement is Liz Shuler, current president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the first woman to hold the position in the federation's history. Many have hailed this as a step forward for women's advancement, but may not recognize the immense potential that comes with this achievement; in this essay, I argue that Shuler's presidency has the ability to bring more changes than some may expect to the AFL-CIO and to the American labor movement in general, considering the trends that have occurred in unions with female leadership. Displaying a genuine commitment to gender equality, inclusion, and progressive values, Shuler has the potential to reshape the AFL-CIO from a federation with a controversial history to one with an inclusive and progressive future.

Efforts for Women's Inclusion

While the number of women entering the paid labor force has steadily increased in the US throughout history, progress for gender equity in labor unions is a relatively new change, and continues to be a pressing issue harming the lives of working class women. In 1988 it was noted that it was only recently that women were no longer completely regarded as “less organizable,” “less economically motivated than men,” and “less willing to take the risks and make the commitments that union organization entails.”¹ Despite the fact that early union history was



frequently lead by female workers who were seeking better work conditions,² negative stereotypes had still been commonly viewed as factual among the vast majority of Americans. This meant that union leaders who were nearly always male and members who were involved in such male-centric

organizations did not perceive women as being motivated to improve labor conditions, and therefore did not seek them out when searching for new members. Although these views may not be quite as widespread today, lingering perceptions of women as inherently submissive and family-oriented—rather than assertive and career-focused—mean that unless unions make active efforts towards ensuring that their organizations hold women to the same esteem as their male counterparts, women are often not sought out by organizers or treated equally within unions.

¹ Ruth Needleman, “Women Workers: A Force for Rebuilding Unionism,” *Labor Research Review* vol. 1, no. 11 (1988): 4, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/102502>.

² “Strike pickets,” February 1910, Bain News Service photograph collection.

Further, regardless of these viewpoints, the male-centric organization methods that have been utilized by most unions means that, even if organizers wanted to recruit female members, other factors have prevented many women from being educated about unions, wanting to join, or having the ability to do so if they desired. This is largely due to women being the outsiders of unions that “relied on old approaches with male organizers speaking a ‘blue-collar’ language and fostering a male culture,” with union leadership not taking family obligations or childcare into consideration.³ These restrictions mean that “women have less access to union information”⁴ as well as less of an opportunity to attain such information due to family responsibilities traditionally falling upon women. Although progress has been made in many households across the country to disrupt the assumption that a mother in a traditional, heterosexual family dynamic will single-handedly oversee homemaking and childcare, this progress is recent and partial, and many women continue to take on a disproportionate family burden, even in dual-income households. As a result, this leaves them with less freedom than their male counterparts, particularly creating a lack of availability outside of work hours, when union meetings take place, meaning there is a severe inequality between a woman’s ability to gain information about unions or join organizations as compared to a man’s ability to do so. Ultimately, this means that under the most common past structure of labor unions—a structure that is still present in many unions today—where male leadership often disregards the need to reevaluate practices that

³ Ruth Needleman, “Women Workers: A Force for Rebuilding Unionism,” *Labor Research Review* 1, no. 11 (1988): 4, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/102502>.

⁴ Ruth Needleman, “Women Workers: A Force for Rebuilding Unionism,” *Labor Research Review* vol. 1, no. 11 (1988): 7, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/102502>.

exclude women from joining, women are discouraged from becoming involved in the labor movement, advocating for themselves and other workers, and ultimately striving towards a better quality of life, not only for themselves but for the working class as a whole.

However, there has been a significant amount of progress towards including women on a larger scale within the labor movement as of late, and this is largely due to an increase of women in leadership positions. An examination of women's issues in several local Massachusetts unions, all affiliated with the AFL-CIO, found evidence to suggest that placing women in local leadership positions "affects policies concerning such issues as sexual harassment, child care, and pay equity, and the presence of women in leadership stimulates greater union involvement by rank-and-file women."⁵ When women are placed in positions of power, even if these are low-level leadership positions in local organizations, they are better able to serve female members and the issues that uniquely affect them, which encourages female membership. Where male leaders may not be as aware of issues such as sexual misconduct, childcare, and equal pay, or may not feel quite as motivated to resolve such issues, female leadership is more often able to recognize the urgency of these concerns, given the fact that there is a higher chance of women experiencing at least one of these matters at some point in their lives. In this sense, an increase in women's leadership indicates a turn away from the male-centric organization methods that created a discrepancy between men and women's ability to become educated and interested in the benefits of unions or have the capability of joining, and a greater amount of women in

⁵ Dale Melcher et al., "Women's Participation in Local Union Leadership: The Massachusetts Experience," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 45, no. 2 (1992): 268, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2524834>.

leadership positions creates an emphasized awareness of how to make unions more accessible and beneficial to women. Additionally, given the fact that these trends were noticed with an influx of women in leadership at the local level, it can be assumed that with an increase in women's leadership at the federal level, such as Shuler's position as president of the AFL-CIO, these patterns will only become more emphasized, and the long history of women's exclusion in labor unions may begin to be overturned.

A Turn Away from Moderate Ideology

Where gender equality has been an issue within the labor movement since its origin, the spread of moderate ideologies within unions is distinctly different, as it has continued to grow over time. The most prominent surge of conservative ideals came about in the 1950s, in the midst of persisting fear of the spread of communism, culminating in the US's involvement in the Vietnam War. The apparent threat of communism had been widespread long before the 50s, which had seeped into labor unions—most distinctly, the AFL-CIO—that had begun defining themselves as free trade unions,⁶ but the onset of the Vietnam War made the AFL-CIO's anti-communist and pro-war stances clearer than ever before, as they worked with the state to strengthen the war effort against the wishes of many of its affiliated unions despite continuing to insist that the federation was independent from the state. The AFL-CIO found itself split between two ideologies, with an escalating “willingness of American labor leaders to work ‘increasingly in alliance with state agencies [...] all the while proclaiming the primacy of independence’ from

⁶ Joseph G. Morgan, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007): 301.

<https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2007.2.2.301>.

the state,” which ultimately “created an ‘identity crisis, in which key principles, labor-state separation in particular, incessantly would be stretched, bent, and finally shattered by the Vietnam War.’”⁷ The AFL-CIO’s support for the continuation of American involvement in the war as well as their collaboration with the state to organize anti-socialist unions globally has ultimately proven the federation’s commitment to maintaining the goals of US militarism, and although these values have become less of a priority over time, many feel they persist within the AFL-CIO.⁸

When looking towards the future for the AFL-CIO, it may be difficult to imagine any abrupt turn away from these values; however, it is important to note that many union members



have been staunchly opposed to these actions, and a large amount of those in opposition have been women, especially taking into consideration the way in which the feminist movement has often incorporated anti-war values into their goals.⁹ In a 1988 poll of female union members, “only 4% of the

⁷ Joseph G. Morgan, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007): 302.

<https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2007.2.2.301>.

⁸ Barry Grey, “What is the AFL-CIO?,” World Socialist Web Site, September 18, 2009,

<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2009/09/pers-s18.html>.

⁹ Eugene Gordon, “The Women of Vietnam are Our Sisters,” 26 August 1970, Eugene Gordon Photograph Collection—New York Historical Society.

women advocated an increase in the defense budget; 70% called for a decrease. [...] a majority opposed any U.S. intervention in other countries, and only 9% indicated they would back the sending of U.S. troops.”¹⁰ Under male-dominant leadership, the moderate values that continue to be associated with many American labor unions and the AFL-CIO were able to emerge, and it is likely that if the almost-exclusively male leadership of the past were to continue, this ideology would have little hope of changing. However, observing the perspectives of women involved in the labor movement, it is possible that as leadership changes and as more women enter prominent roles, their tendency for progressivism will likely seep into their actions whilst holding these positions, potentially re-introducing progressive practices into American unions once again.

This progressivism is not only a relevant concern in terms of US militarism but is also a pressing issue in regard to protecting the rights of American workers. Where unions are often perceived as safe havens for workers to express their concerns surrounding their treatment in the workplace, which often can include and be centered around categories of gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, and countless other identities, this assumption of protection within unions has been historically proven to be incorrect. Under male leadership, women’s issues are largely ignored, with their concerns given less consideration and priority than they are under women’s leadership, and this can be said of other discrepancies as well, particularly in regards to racism in the workplace being brushed aside under white leadership. However, it has been found that women being present in unions in larger numbers, including in leadership positions, not only

¹⁰ Ruth Needleman, “Women Workers: A Force for Rebuilding Unionism,” *Labor Research Review* 1, no. 11 (1988): 12, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/102502>.

benefits gender equality in unions, but also creates a surge of support and protection for other social inequities as well. This is particularly visible in the effort for protections based on sexual orientation in the workplace and in unions, and it was found that “unions representing white-collar public-sector workers with a female majority are among the unions that have gone the furthest in representing their sexual minority members.”¹¹ On the other hand, unions with fewer female members offer fewer protections for LGBTQ+ members—the IBEW, for example, was comprised of only 10% of women out of its 720,000 members in 2002, and at that time took very few measures for LGBTQ+ protection, and did not join other unions with larger female numbers in lobbying for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act.¹² In unions with a more prominent female presence, socially progressive policies are more frequently enacted within their respective organizations and lobbied for. Ultimately, there is a larger amount of evidence of a commitment to social equality and progressivism in labor unions where women are more represented among their members; knowing the impacts of women’s leadership on gender equality in unions, and taking into consideration the effects of substantial female membership on other social issues, it can be assumed that female prominence in both the membership and leadership roles of unions will ultimately push forth progressive practices and policies.

¹¹ Gerald Hunt and Monica Bielski Boris, “The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Challenge to American Labor,” in *The Sex of Class: Transforming American Labor* ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2011), 93.

¹² Gerald Hunt and Monica Bielski Boris, “The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Challenge to American Labor,” in *The Sex of Class: Transforming American Labor* ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2011), 92.

Shuler’s Career: Creating a Future of Gender Inclusion and Progressivism in the American Labor Movement

There is perhaps no figure that better represents the hope for a future of gender equality and progressive practices within American labor unions than Liz Shuler, who recently succeeded Richard Trumka as president of the AFL-CIO upon his death in August 2021. She solidified this



position when she was formally elected president in June 2022, making her the first female president in the federation’s history, alongside the federation’s first Black Secretary-Treasurer, Fred Redmond.¹³ Shuler gaining this title is not only noteworthy due to her being the first

woman in this office, but is also a significant step forward due to the immense weight that comes with the platform. Although women have entered leadership positions in unions, including the AFL-CIO, in increasing numbers throughout the past few decades, they are frequently “under-represented in the most influential positions.”¹⁴ Despite this, they have continued to display the

¹³ “Liz Shuler Elected AFL-CIO President at 2022 Convention Alongside Secretary-Treasurer Fred Redmond,” AFL-CIO, June 12, 2022, <https://aflcio.org/press/releases/liz-shuler-elected-afl-cio-president-2022-convention-alongside-secretary-treasurer>.

¹⁴ Dale Melcher et al., “Women’s Participation in Local Union Leadership: The Massachusetts Experience,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 45, no. 2 (1992): 267, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2524834>.

positive impact of women in leadership roles, although their influence has been limited due to their inability to hold higher offices. In this sense, witnessing Shuler fill the most influential position in the AFL-CIO—which has subsequently caused some to refer to her as “the most powerful woman in the history of the American labor movement”¹⁵—one can only imagine the immense changes she is capable of bringing forth. Where gender equality and progressive policy have been proven to be prioritized with greater levels of female representation in leadership roles, it is possible that these ideologies will see a greater surge than ever before in the history of the AFL-CIO under her leadership.

The assurance that change will come during Shuler’s time as president is not only a result of assumptions surrounding her gender, however, but is rooted in her personal experiences that have shaped her goals. Shuler was raised in what she describes as a “union household,” where she was surrounded by union education and witnessed firsthand the benefits that come with having union protections on the job.¹⁶ She was also able to observe the treatment that women faced in the workplace, engaging in conversations with her mother surrounding issues of sexual harassment and discrimination, ultimately leading her to become involved in the labor movement

¹⁵ John Ringer and Meghna Chakrabarti, “AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler on the future of America’s labor movement,” WBUR, April 7, 2022, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/04/07/afl-cio-president-liz-shuler-on-the-future-for-americas-labor-movement>.

¹⁶ John Ringer and Meghna Chakrabarti, “AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler on the future of America’s labor movement,” WBUR, April 7, 2022, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/04/07/afl-cio-president-liz-shuler-on-the-future-for-americas-labor-movement>.

for the first time when joining the organizing campaign of the female clerical workers at Portland General Electric, which included her mother.¹⁷ Shuler’s passion for gender equity has been the



driving force of her involvement in the labor movement since the first moment she entered organization efforts, and this drive has not been diminished over the course of her career.¹⁸ She has noted that during her time as executive assistant to the president of the IBEW, she was

one of the only women in a leadership role within the organization;¹⁹ not only has she witnessed the shortcomings that occur with little female presence in executive positions, but has personally experienced it and therefore fully recognizes the importance of a greater female presence in union leadership. She has also continuously demonstrated interest in implementing progressive

¹⁷ John Ringer and Meghna Chakrabarti, “AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler on the future of America’s labor movement,” WBUR, April 7, 2022, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/04/07/afl-cio-president-liz-shuler-on-the-future-for-americas-labor-movement>.

¹⁸ Olivier Douliery, “Liz Shuler is Named President of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.,” The New York Times, August 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/business/economy/liz-shuler-named-president-afl-cio.html>

¹⁹ John Ringer and Meghna Chakrabarti, “AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler on the future of America’s labor movement,” WBUR, April 7, 2022, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/04/07/afl-cio-president-liz-shuler-on-the-future-for-americas-labor-movement>.

policy, such as ensuring that all workers receive higher wages, expressing that healthcare is a human right, opposing the extensive income inequality in America, and consistently supporting workers' rights to protection from discrimination and harassment.²⁰ In this sense, not only can American workers be assured that Shuler will make strides for progressivism in the labor movement due to the evidence that women in leadership roles brings about positive change, but they can also be confident that Shuler is sincerely passionate about bringing forth these changes. She is not simply a statistic, a woman in a low-level leadership position who will have a tendency for progressivism, but a proven activist who holds genuine care and passion for protecting workers' rights and implementing practices that will change their lives for the better. Additionally, despite the history of the AFL-CIO collaborating with institutions that have prioritized anti-socialism, which has made the union feel untrustworthy to many, Shuler has strayed from this pattern, putting forth the argument that "if the companies are profitable, then doesn't it make sense that the workers should get their fair share of those profits?"²¹ This pushback against the capitalist practice of allowing corporations to reap the benefits of

²⁰ John Ringer and Meghna Chakrabarti, "AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler on the future of America's labor movement," WBUR, April 7, 2022, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/04/07/afl-cio-president-liz-shuler-on-the-future-for-americas-labor-movement>.

²¹ John Ringer and Meghna Chakrabarti, "AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler on the future of America's labor movement," WBUR, April 7, 2022, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/04/07/afl-cio-president-liz-shuler-on-the-future-for-americas-labor-movement>.

production while only offering workers hourly wages in return displays that Shuler is unlike the past presidents of the AFL-CIO in the sense that her values oppose the distinct anti-socialist practices that the federation has historically been involved in. In this sense, given Shuler's direct expression and continuous display of support for inclusion and progressive policy, there is no question that as she enters what is arguably the most powerful position within the modern-day American labor movement, unions across the country will begin to see improvements in these areas.

Conclusion

Despite the flaws that have been present throughout the history of the American labor movement, a change in leadership demographics has immense potential to improve the conditions and goals of unionism, particularly in regards to a reinvigorated commitment to inclusion and progressive values. Where female exclusion has thrived under male dominant union structures in which women's issues were not granted adequate consideration as a result of the limited perspectives of leadership, a greater female presence in authority positions has displayed a pattern of minimizing this exclusion. A greater presence of women in unions, especially in leadership positions, has demonstrated an improvement in conditions and protections for female members and other marginalized groups in ways that are less likely under male leadership, and Shuler entering what is arguably the most powerful position in the labor movement suggests that change on a larger scale is within reach. Similarly, where many organizations, including the AFL-CIO, have fallen into moderate values under male leadership, an examination of the values and goals of female union members and organizers displays that with greater female numbers, particularly in leadership, progressivism is more likely to gain

prominence. Examining Shuler's upbringing and goals, it is evident that she is committed to reshaping the American labor movement for the better, bringing a newfound dedication to inclusion and progressivism that has the potential to begin the process of transforming unionism from a movement that once held moderate tendencies to one that may spark a future where liberation is possible.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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