Guide to Local Union Women’s Committees
Local Union Officers: This manual has been developed to assist your Local Union Women’s Committee. After you review it, please forward it on to your Women’s Committee chairperson/Coordinator.

The Guide to Local Union Women’s Committees is presented to you with the knowledge that no two local unions function exactly the same. The suggestions and tips within are generic and can be tweaked to fit the exact needs and requirements of your local union. The material is so nonspecific in nature that you can use much of this information in other local union and non-union committees, and still achieve the desired results.

The Guide to Local Union Women’s Committees is designed to:

• help your local union start a Women’s Committee or to jumpstart an existing one;
• assist first-time chairpersons/coordinators with managing their committees; and, most importantly,
• identify and encourage additional local union leaders and activists.

One of the most valuable pieces of information in this guide is the Women of Steel District Coordinator’s contact information. Many recommendations in this guide were provided by Coordinators, who are experienced and very knowledgeable USW activists. They will gladly guide you throughout this process. Contact your coordinator and introduce yourself early in the organization of your committee. If your committee is already established, contact your District Coordinator for assistance.

In order to make communicating easier, we have included forms to gather the information you need to reach out to your activists and for us to reach out to you. The ability to communicate with others is essential for the success of any endeavor and will allow you to operate more effectively and efficiently. This information will also be used by your District and the International to keep you and your committee up-to-date with the latest news from the USW; to inform you of matters of particular interest to women; or to check with you to see if we can be of further assistance.

We hope that you will find this guide helpful. While it is impossible to address every situation that may arise during the course of establishing or reactivating your committee, we have attempted to cover the most common ones. Contact your District Women of Steel Coordinator if you have additional questions and/or to provide the assistance you need.

Thank you.

Women of Steel
The mission of the local union’s Women’s Committee and how it will function within your local are two vital pieces of information that you need to know before you begin.

**The Mission of the Local Union Women’s Committee:**

- Build union power through solidarity
- Create a network for women
- Encourage activism of all union brothers and sisters
- Provide support on women’s issues
- Reach out and work with other area women’s committees and groups
- Create dialogue with union brothers
- Support local union functions
- Educate/Communicate/Mobilize

**How Committees Function Within a Local Union**

- First and foremost understand that no two local union women’s committees will function identically. Your committee should be designed to compliment the activities and meet the needs of your own local union.
- Committees are accountable to the membership and should give a report at local union meetings
- No money can be held in a separate fund or treasury
  - It is not necessary for the Women’s Committee to raise money to support its own existence – this committee should be treated in the same manner as all other standing committees
  - If your committee collects money for any purpose (charity, fundraisers, etc.), it should be placed in the local union treasury and designated for the specific cause for the Women’s Committee in a line-item
  - If the Committee wishes to disburse money from its designated line-item, the local union needs to vote on the expenditure
  - All money needs to be accounted for, therefore it must be in the local union treasury so it can be audited on a regular basis (this also serves as protection for all involved)
- To pursue an activity, a committee may need to take their idea to the local union meeting for a vote – to determine if a vote is necessary, discuss it with the local union president
- If certain committee activities require lost time payments or any other expenditures, it must be voted on at a local union meeting
- If members of your committee wish to participate in trainings, conferences or other meetings that require members to be away from work, it should be discussed with the president and voted on at a union meeting
- When presenting a motion at a local union meeting, be sure to state everything that you wish to be included (lost time, travel, per diem, etc.)
  - Make sure that someone is prepared to second your motion
  - Be ready to speak on your motion and explain why it is important that the motion be passed
  - Ask additional people to attend the local union meeting because you need their support for the motion you intend to bring forth
Other things to consider as you put your plan together:

- In some instances the committee may not have the opportunity to choose its members. They may be appointed by the local union president.
- How will the committee promote issues of importance to women?
- How can you mobilize women in your local to get involved in this plan?
- Is it doable?
- What will make this interesting and/or fun?

The Core Committee

The best way to get people to support your committee’s activities is to get them involved in the planning and execution of them. Try to find the right people to assist in your projects: those who are interested, capable and willing to work. Begin by finding your allies in the union.

This is a good time to establish a working relationship with your local union leadership. Talk with your local union president to find out what resources are available to the committee. Then talk with your co-workers. Inform them of the committee’s mission, what you want to accomplish and ask them to become activists.

The Meeting Setting: Informal, but Structured

A Women’s Committee should not follow the usual formal local union format. Keep in mind one of the goals is 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.

Sometimes it’s best to select a casual setting that affords privacy. Make it more like visiting around the kitchen table in someone’s home. In fact, some committees do meet at other places besides the union hall. This stimulates more openness and interaction. Try a park, church, volunteer your home and rotate the meetings to other’s homes. You want to provide an atmosphere where women can network and discuss issues while getting to know one another. This bonding will help those who are not yet active to build a comfort level within the union. None of this precludes using the union hall if it is available to you.

This setting will also 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.

Remember, flip charts and/or chalk boards are important to your meetings. 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. The information on the charts and chalk board can be distributed later by the chair.

Selecting 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.
Suggestions for Local Union Women’s Committee Activities

- Show solidarity with other brothers and sisters in your community who are on strike or locked out.
- Invite your staff representative to answer questions about the contract and union procedures and discuss true union values.
- Distribute and discuss the USW’s Harassment Policy a/k/a The Yellow Sheet.
- Draft resolutions regarding women and family issues that your local union can present at conferences and conventions.
- Take part in organizing campaigns, especially at facilities where there are many women employed.
- Use your meeting to practice meeting procedures and public speaking techniques.
- Prepare a brief WOS presentation during new member orientation.
- Have a gate greet and distribute WOS information.
- Reach out to non-members and talk to them about joining the union.
- Participate in Rapid Response and Toxic Trade actions.
- Help out at political phone banks. Better yet, host a WOS Day at the phone bank.
- Attend local union meetings and get involved.
- Host a dinner/lunch/reception for women who aren’t involved with WOS.
- Collect email addresses and develop a communications network for local union women.
- Sponsor a membership drive for the USW Associate Member Program.
- Hold a National Labor Committee (NLC) fundraiser.
- Create and maintain a “News You Can Use” bulletin board.
- Write articles and take pictures of your activities and submit them to your local union and district office for inclusion in newsletters and on websites.
- Hold voter registration drives and work with the Get Out to Vote (GOTV) campaign in your area.
- Host a health screening event.
- Invite financial advisors to do a presentation or to host a clinic to educate members about their finances.
- Write letters to the editor and articles regarding issues of public concern and issues affecting women and submit them to your local newspapers.
- Create a scholarship fund.
- Start a drive to collect old cell phones and cosmetics for people in shelters.
- Invite a speaker to make a presentation on violence against women, sexual harassment, etc. and have them bring literature.
- Volunteer time at women shelters, rape crisis centers, senior centers and with organizations that deal with at-risk youth.
- Lobby elected officials on issues that affect your work and personal lives.
- Join in community clean-up day activities and lend a helping hand during local disasters.
- Help those in the community who are less fortunate: prepare holiday food baskets; host or collect donations for a food bank; hold bucket drops and sponsor seasonal drives for toys, coats, blankets, and window fans.
- Participate in fundraisers for cancer research, United Way, Heart Foundation or other health related issues.

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. Remember, your union brothers may want to give input, so include them when possible.

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.

Set dates that can be worked backwards in a 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.
Ways to Make Your Committee Work Effectively

- Make sure everyone, whether they are on the committee or a volunteer activist, understands the committee’s purpose and agrees with it.
- Keep your activists’ contact information updated.
- Don’t hold meetings without a clear reason.
- Give advance notice of meetings, complete with a distributed agenda and reading materials.
- Conduct short, concise meetings.
- Start and end meetings on time. If work isn’t done when time is up, negotiate a time for further discussion.
- Have an agenda for each meeting/activity. Schedule important items first on the agenda.
- Encourage everyone to participate during meetings and activities. Utilize seating arrangements that encourage equal participation.
- Use name cards if attendees don’t know one another.
- Discourage members who monopolize the discussion.
- Allocate time for discussion according to the importance of each issue.
- Send members a summary of the meeting, keying on decisions made and on assignments given.
- Be very specific about tasks and deadlines.
- Don’t discuss, re-discuss and continue to discuss items.
- Conclude each meeting with a summary of what is to be done by whom.
- Double-check for agreement on important issues. Seek opposing points of view.
- Don’t allow unrelated discussions during meetings.
- Make sure everyone gets credit for the accomplishments of the committee.
- Allow some social time following each meeting.
- Appreciate your activist’s time constraints.
- Stay positive, stay energized.
- Always thank your sisters and brothers for the work they do for the Union.

Ways to increase participation in your activities

- Have activists invite a non-participating sister to the meeting/activity.
- Poll attendees, determine their needs and design activities around their responses.
- Involve prospective activists in a mentoring program.
- Focus on retaining activists as well as recruiting new ones.
- Use activists’ areas of expertise by involving them as leaders.
- Follow up with those who drop out to find out why they are no longer participating.
- Conduct a community issue survey to find out what “hot buttons” are important to members.
- Encourage all participants to assume leadership positions.
- Publicize local union functions and encourage your activists to attend.
- Follow up with prospective participants.
- Educate local union women about programs available to them through the union.
- Publicize and accent activist’s accomplishments.
- Look for public relations opportunities everywhere. Contact the media and politicians about political issues affecting women in your area.
- Make participants feel important.
- Share information filtered from the top.
- Greet people at activities; make them feel welcome, talk to them and help them get involved.
- Make sure long-term activists are willing to share leadership with newer participants.
- Invite union brothers when possible.
- Create activities that include all union members.
Ways to develop leaders from your Women’s Committee

Education
Identify specific areas in which leadership skills are needed and work with the local union and district education staff to prepare programs.

Encourage leaders
Provide encouragement and support for women who:
- Seek election or appointment as stewards
- Want to serve on negotiating, organizing or other important committees
- Want to seek local union or council elective office.
- Undertake special projects on behalf of the union
- Get involved in community projects as a representative of the union
- Get involved in political campaigns on behalf of the union

Recognize leaders:
- Provide information about successful Women’s Committee projects, and the women who lead them, to your local union, your District Women of Steel Coordinator, District Director and Women of Steel at the International for inclusion in newsletters, web sites, etc.
- Recognize leaders who have demonstrated outstanding leadership. When the Women’s Committee makes a significant gain on an issue, take time at the local union meeting to recognize each member who helped.
- Give proven leaders the opportunity for advanced training in union or academic programs.

Evaluate your program
After your committee has been established for a while, it’s time to step back and take a look at what has actually been accomplished by the group. At least once a year answer the following questions:

- Have local union women increased their participation in local union affairs?
- Are your activities achieving the desired results?
- Are you getting additional women involved in your activities?
- What can the committee do differently to build a stronger committee?

Measuring the progress of the committee will enable you to see the direction in which you’re heading and determine what steps are needed to make your committee more successful.
If you're leading a committee for the first time you'll find that it takes a little work.

You'll have to deal with diverse personalities and opinions and it is your job to create harmony among this group. It may sound difficult, but given a little time you'll find that you can do it! If you just check your ego at the door and utilize some of the following skills, you're on your way to becoming a successful committee chairperson:

- Organizational skills
- The ability to deal with people
- Flexibility
- Being open and receptive to the opinions of others
- The ability to motivate others
- The ability to effectively deal with problems
- Being assertive, not aggressive
- Creativity

If you feel a little unsure of your capacity to act as chair, you can improve your skills by observing an experienced chairperson in action. Your local union meeting is a good place to start. Watch how your president handles your meetings. Municipal or local government meetings can also be useful to you. Check your local television listings. You may be able to pick up some pointers from the privacy of your own home as many municipalities televise their proceedings.

Tips to help you chair your committee

- **Talk with your local union president and get clear direction** as to what is expected of your committee. Share your ideas and get buy-in from the president.

- **You need to know if your president has appointed others to your committee** or if you may choose your core committee.

- **Draft as many volunteers as you can to assist when hosting activities.** The more help you have the easier your job will be.

- **Take time and get to know your committee and the women in your local union.** Talk one-on-one with as many of your fellow members as you can. Ask what they like to do and about their experiences. As head of your committee, it helps if you know each individual's strengths and weaknesses in relationship to what the committee will be doing. This will make it easier to assign projects to people who will get the job done.

- **Establish a clear and concise goal for the committee,** including what you hope to accomplish and by what date. Make sure that everyone on the committee is aware of the goals and the deadlines. **REMEMBER: The goals for your committee should be in line with those of your local union and the International.**

- **Determine how best to run your committee.** Discuss ideas with your president. You may wish to open certain meetings to anyone from your local union who wishes to attend.
• **Make informed decisions that are fair and best for all concerned.** No matter what you do, you will not please everybody, but you will upset most of the group if your decisions are based on pleasing the wants and needs of just a few. Collect as much information as you can on the subject and think it through before your make your decision.

• **Call committee meetings** to discuss progress and make decisions. However, don’t have meetings too frequently.

• **Call meetings and invite all who may want to attend** so that you expand your activist group.

• **Get everyone involved at the meeting.** As chair of the meeting, you should create an environment where everyone can contribute comments and ideas. The more you involve people in the decision making process, the more ownership they will take in the committee.

• **Keep control of a meeting.** Since this meeting is with your peers you will rely more on your ability to manage relationships and deal with any challenges or conflict in a way that is positive and maintains good humor.

• **Keep things moving briskly** by adhering to the agenda and enforcing a strict time limit on all items. Always make sure speakers have enough time to make their points without allowing the meeting to overrun its schedule. This establishes and maintains momentum in proceedings.

• **Be able to assess the mood of a meeting.** Hopefully it never happens but sometimes the mood of your meeting can change quickly from warm and fuzzy to downright hostile. If the atmosphere is tense, act quickly to improve the situation. If the participants are tiring of a subject, move them on to the next item on the agenda. If you feel the participants are tiring of the meeting, conclude it by summarizing the discussion and, if necessary, call for a final vote.

• **Remain calm and act quickly to defuse arguments.** When a debate becomes heated, thoughtless or personal comments may be used, leading to friction and arguments. Defuse this situation quickly by impartially guiding the discussion back to the issues and away from the personalities involved. After the meeting try to help clear up any misunderstandings.

• **Identify your opponents before the meeting.** If your views are likely to meet strong resistance, meet with those who oppose you and negotiate a compromise, or at least an understanding before the meeting.

• **Don’t interrupt.** If you need something clarified, make a note of it and ask when the speaker is finished.

• **Learn to summarize.** Summarizing can be used to end a topic, to end a discussion, to limit the need for discussion and at the end of a meeting to ensure that everyone has a clear overview of what took place or what action is now required. Summarizing requires active listening. It takes practice to summarize, but it is a skill worth developing.

• **Educate, Educate, Educate!** Always be on the lookout for ways to educate your members.

• **Concentrate on the positive and eliminate the negative.**
Always have a dated sign-in sheet for all your activities and save it for your records. (See page 12.)

Advertise your meeting. Hang posters and distribute flyers about the meeting to get the word out to as many as possible. Talking one-on-one is always the best way to advertise your meeting.

Always have an agenda. It should be short and to the point! If possible, distribute the agenda and any supporting papers ahead of time so attendees will have a chance to read through them before the meeting. In addition, it allows members to come to meetings prepared with any questions they might have about the material. Always have extra copies available at the meeting.

Having an agenda will also help you pace your meeting. Allocating an overall time limit to complete your agenda is important. Always make sure that speakers have enough time to make their points without allowing the meeting to overrun its schedule.

Make sure your meeting place is ready. See that the room is as clean and as comfortable as possible. Where possible, arrange seating so everyone can see and hear each other comfortably. Placing tables in the shape of a “U” typically remedies this situation for most meetings.

Check your AV equipment before meeting. If you’re showing a film, using an overhead projector or anything else that requires extra equipment and/or electricity, make sure it is in place and in working order before the meeting starts. Also, make sure the all participants are able to see your presentation. If not, now is the time to make adjustments to either the seating or the location of the equipment. Don’t forget about using flip charts and chalkboards.

Make it a point to start on time. If members are late, start without them. Don’t waste valuable time by recapping what happened before they arrived unless the missed information is vital. Otherwise, let them find out for themselves what they missed once the meeting is finished. However, if a key contributor/speaker is late, it is acceptable to wait for their arrival before starting or to change the order of the agenda to prevent delays.

Use time Wisely. While you need to allow time for brief discussions of agenda topics, do not allow participants to waste time by wandering from the point. Tactfully guide the discussion back to the issue.

Start with introductions. For your initial meeting, have everyone briefly give their name, department or work location, and any other information they would like to share. For subsequent meetings, be sure that newcomers and visitors are introduced to the group.

Give your members something new to feed on at each meeting. Change the content of each meeting. When preparing for the next meeting, think about what is currently on the minds of your members and use that as a starting point. Bring in a speaker, show a film or gather literature on the topic to educate your members. It will keep your meetings from growing stale.
Encourage everyone to participate in the meeting. Ask questions to specific people if they are not taking an active part in the meeting. Example:  *What do you think about this Rose?*  

On the other hand, for those who like to dominate the meeting try something like this: *Thanks Sue, that’s very helpful. What do the rest of you think about what Sue just offered?*  

**Provide Breaks.** The ideal meeting should last no more than one hour. However, when longer meetings are required, breaks and refreshments should be built into the agenda. Breaks serve several purposes, they allow:  
- bodies and brains to relax;  
- attendees to discuss matters in small groups which may iron out any awkward differences; and  
- provide the chairperson with useful buffer zones that can be used to extend or shorten a meeting in special circumstances.  

The maximum time you should allow a meeting to run without a break is 90 minutes.  

**Remember:** *The fewer tasks undertaken, the more successful the meeting will be.*
As head of your committee it is important that you know how to contact your activists and district coordinator. In turn, your district coordinator and Women of Steel at the International need to know how to contact you.

For your convenience, the following forms are available for your use. Just photocopy them and you’re ready for your next meeting or activity.

**Chair/Coordinator Contact Information:** This form should be completed by the person(s) heading your committee. You can either fax or mail it to your District Women of Steel Coordinator and the Women of Steel Department at USW International. (See page 15 & 16 for contact information.)

**Participant Information:** Have all your committee members, activists and volunteers complete this form. It’s a convenient way for you to collect and keep your members’ telephone numbers and addresses. Always have copies handy so you can collect contact information from those new to your group and updated phone numbers and addresses from others.

Forward completed forms to your district coordinator and Women of Steel at the International. We will use this information to send Women of Steel news directly to your activists.

**Sign In Sheet:** Have them available at all your events. Do not forward them. Keep them for your records.

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**Women’s Committee Chair/Coordinator Contact Information**

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If your mailing address is a PO Box, list an address that will accept delivery of packages from UPS.

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Participant Information Sheet

District _____ Local ______

Please Print

Name _______________________________________________ Check here if updating your info ______

Mailing Address ________________________________________________________________

City, State, Zipcode _____________________________________________________________

Telephone __________________________ Email Address _____________________________

Name _______________________________________________ Check here if updating your info ______

Mailing Address ________________________________________________________________

City, State, Zipcode _____________________________________________________________

Telephone __________________________ Email Address _____________________________

Name _______________________________________________ Check here if updating your info ______

Mailing Address ________________________________________________________________

City, State, Zipcode _____________________________________________________________

Telephone __________________________ Email Address _____________________________

Name _______________________________________________ Check here if updating your info ______

Mailing Address ________________________________________________________________

City, State, Zipcode _____________________________________________________________

Telephone __________________________ Email Address _____________________________

Name _______________________________________________ Check here if updating your info ______
Women of Steel Department

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For Women of Steel District Coordinator contact information visit www.usw.org//womenofsteel/

click Get Involved under Women of Steel Info Center,

or contact the number listed below.