

Where do we get the next generation of progressive leaders?

Grow your own

by Len Norwitz

As the political landscape of the West becomes more volatile, and the issues at stake more vital, there is a compelling need for community and worker-based organizations to run their own candidates for elected office.

Pressing concerns and issues need to be resolved. Resource extractive industry practices — mining, grazing, fishing, managing timber, agriculture — are raising tough questions for all of us. Land use and community responses to growth are topics of daily discourse. Civil rights for gay men and lesbians, pregnant women, terminally ill citizens, immigrants and people of color are at the top of public policy discussions. Boom and bust economies in urban and rural areas are creating new patterns of temporary, part-time and mostly low-paying work. The

Federal government's move to devolve resources and responsibilities down the political ladder has left local governments scrambling to shore up the safety nets of general assistance, health coverage and public education.

The influx of new residents to our region adds urgency to these issues.

On top of this, the majority of states in the West have passed term limits on state legislative tenure — increasing the shuffling of elected office holders.

The vacuum is being filled too often by monied candidates and anti-government ideologues. However, the announcement that national organized labor wants to run 2000 of its own members by the year 2000 is tremendously encouraging. The door is open for candidates to run. Our organizations should be the proving grounds for the folks that populate school boards, city councils, county commissions and state legislative bodies.

We must identify leaders that are ready to step up to the electoral plate, and help

prepare them. Only when trade unions, issues organizations and community-based groups get their own members elected, will their interests be addressed by elected bodies.

So how do we do it?

Over thirty years ago Nicholas Von Hoffman wrote that “leaders are not found... they are made.” Each organization holds its own unique answers to leadership, but on the whole we know that good leaders develop a following and lead other people; listen; are accountable representatives; work hard; are inclusive; delegate appropriate roles/tasks to others; share credit, success, power; mediate conflict and resolve problems; display courage under fire; know how to have fun.

Electoral candidate leaders will also need to know how to: raise money (until we get publicly financed campaigns), speak publicly, go door-to-door, interact with diverse groups of people, ask others for help, and strongly lobby a position — to mention a few things.

Vibrant organizations are developing these skills and enhancing these traits in their members and leaders. We need to be very aware of developing campaigns and efforts that will avail our members of skill building opportunities. And members/leaders need to be effectively trained if they are to succeed.

In addition, be aware of some other considerations. A resource book, *Women for a Change*, by Thalia Zepatos and Elizabeth Kaufman, makes the following suggestions:

- Get involved in a variety of activities in a meaningful way. Diversify your experiences and base of knowledge into areas that you are not familiar with. If you are a school bus driver and an activist in a transit union, join a neighborhood association or watershed group. Check out what is going at the places of worship in your community, volunteer at the Y in town, coach a little league sports team, become an escort at Planned Parenthood. But be aware, signing up for community projects three months before declaring as a candidate will be seen as opportunistic resume building. Put in a couple, three years.



Former activists and current state legislators (top)

Betsy Dunklin,
Idaho State Senator;
and
Jo Ann Bowman,
Oregon State
Representative

Former activist and current Multnomah County Commission Chair, Beverly Stein (center)



- When working on issues or projects, get results that you and others can point to.
- Volunteer on political campaigns so that you are familiar with the dynamics, costs and time lines. And find a campaign mentor — another elected official or someone that is retired.
- As you widen your base of support, start compiling it in a database.
- Have solid support from your family, close friends and key contacts. You will need them as you deal with the public scrutiny and pressures of this effort.
- Investigate the appropriate outside resources. (See box below)

Of utmost importance for our leader/candidates is the experience of being an accountable organizational representative. Simply

stated, we must produce organizational candidates who understand what being a representative means and what accountability is all about.

So, who represents your organization in coalition discussions? Who reports back to their local or region or sub-group after a board meeting? Who casts votes on tough decisions that your organization makes? Who surveys or polls members for input? Who puts aside their own self interest for the sake of the organization? Who takes on the boss or gets in the face of decision makers when there is a call for action? Let's be strategic about our candidacies and put together long term plans for candidate growth and development. ■

RESOURCES:

Many national organizations offer training for individuals seeking to run for public office. The following is a list of campaign resources:

National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), campaign skills training for women: materials include NWPC's campaign manual, *Political Campaigning-A New Decade: The NWPC Guide to Winning in the 90s*; and supplementary handouts. Contact: NWPC; 1275 K St. NW, Suite 750, Washington D.C. 20005; 202/898-1100

The Women's Campaign Fund (WCF); the program focuses on key policy issues, political strategies and campaign tactics. Contact: Women's Campaign Fund; 120 Maryland Ave. NE, Washington D.C. 20002; 202/544-4484.

YWCA Institute for Public Leadership: this program was developed to reach women of all backgrounds in pursuit of the YWCA mission to empower women and eliminate racism. The hands-on workshop helps potential candidates assess their chances to win, practice presentation skills and wrestle with tough issues. All participants receive a copy of the YWCA's Campaign Sourcebook. Contact: YWCA Institute for Public Leadership; 9440 N. 25th Ave., Phoenix, AZ 85021; 602/944-0569.

American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) Contact: AFL-CIO, Organizing Institute, 1444 I Street NW, Washington, DC 20005; 800/848-3021.

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