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## "To Hell with you, Charlie": The UAW has a long history of confronting sexual harassment

### Abstract

[Excerpt] Possibly no union was better poised to meet the challenge of sexual harassment after Anita Hill's testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee than the United Auto Workers. For half a century the UAW has addressed sexual discrimination on the job. This commitment, though wavering at times was sustained by the determined women who worked on the international staff, the strong women on the shop floor who battled second class citizenship, and the civil rights and women's movements that both pressured and supported the union's efforts. Thus, when the nation turned its attention to sexual harassment in 1991, the UAW was ready.

### Keywords

sexual harassment, UAW, United Auto Workers, discrimination



# "To Hell with you, Charlie"

**The UAW has a long history of confronting sexual harassment**

■ *Linda Housch Kwanza Collins*

Possibly no union was better poised to meet the challenge of sexual harassment after Anita Hill's testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee than the United Auto Workers. For half a century the UAW has addressed sexual discrimination on the job. This commitment, though wavering at times was sustained by the determined women who worked on the international staff, the strong women on the shop floor who battled second class citizenship, and the civil rights and women's movements that both pressured and supported the union's efforts. Thus, when the nation turned its attention to sexual harassment in 1991, the UAW was ready.

Sexual harassment has been a concern of women auto workers since they first began working in the industry. Supervisors routinely demanded sexual favors of women in order to keep jobs or move into better jobs. Historian Nancy Gabin describes how many women workers were motivated to join the union to be protected from sexual harassment—more than to improve their wages or working conditions. She suggests that the male-controlled union seemed more responsive to this "woman's issue" than to other

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crucial women's issues such as equalizing wages. In one example, a female worker at Midland Steel recounts why she decided to join the UAW, explaining, "when you belong to a union, the foreman can't screw you. Last month my foreman asked me to go out with him, (and) I told him 'to hell with you, Charlie, I know what you want.' He got mad, but he didn't try to spite me. He knew damn well the union would be on his neck if he did."

Although Caucasian women first began showing up in large numbers in 1940, African American women did not fare so well in the industry. The automakers refused to hire African American women workers until 1942, when an interracial coalition of UAW International leadership joined with outspoken women and men in Detroit's African American community to demand access to defense/auto industry jobs for African American women. Armed with the new federal Fair Employment Practices Act (FEPA), the coalition successfully pressed Ford to reverse its discriminatory policy; GM followed later. (Ford had the largest number of African American male employees and also some very lucrative federal defense contracts.) Even after automakers opened the doors to these industrial jobs, they selectively hired "light skinned" but not "dark skinned" African American women.

Rather than seeing African American women as sisters in the struggle to end sexual discrimination, Caucasian women first resisted their entry into the workforce. Mason Hodges, an African American worker and UAW member, recalls what happened when the first African American woman was hired at the Briggs plant in Detroit in the early '40s. Not only did white women stage a work stoppage and walkout, they also locked the woman out of the women's restroom/locker room. Local union leaders, who were male, demanded that they unlock the door. When the women refused, Local 208 union leaders broke down the door and threatened to recommend firing anyone who caused more disturbances.

After the war, women were pressured to give their jobs to returning veterans. The UAW's Women's Bureau, established in 1944, fought against the removal of married women, often against the actions of its own locals—and some staff and officers at the International. Issues defined by union men as "women's problems," such as sexual discrimination and harassment, received written condemnation without much power of enforcement: no constitutional or contract language directly confronted sexual discrimination. Still, Walter Reuther did issue an Administrative letter on sex discrimination in 1951 to all UAW members—a landmark in unionism.

According to Gabin, the early efforts of the UAW's Women's



Department in fighting for the equal rights of women workers helped to lay the foundation, develop the research and provide the "womanpower" resources for the emerging civil rights and women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, Lillian Hatcher, an African American woman who was assistant director of the UAW Women's Bureau in the 1950s, was also active in early civil rights activities. Women's Bureau director Caroline Davis and staff member Dorothy Haener were among the founders of the National Organization of Women and Olga Madar, the first woman elected to the union's Executive Board in 1966 was the first president of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). This activism, both within and with out the UAW, kept the union engaged in working women's struggles. Women's efforts in the union were boosted by feminist activism at the grassroots and in the courts.

In the late '60s and early '70s, women's conferences increased significantly and began to address broadly based political and socioeconomic issues such as unequal pay, seniority violations, and maternity leave. Classes for women developed in university labor education programs and in unions, for collective bargaining, parliamentary procedure, grievance procedures, and leader-

ship skills. These seminars also provided the space for women to share stories and exchange survival strategies. Out of informal social settings at the educationals, sexual harassment emerged as a major issue for UAW women.

The UAW joined a Michigan taskforce on sexual harassment co-chaired by Joyce Kornbluh, director of the University of Michigan Labor Studies Center's Program on Women and Work, and Patricia Curran, head of the Michigan Department of Labor's Office of Women and Work. "This was a pivotal event," recalls Kornbluh, "because it's the first time a bridge was built between feminists and unions and other institutions on the issue." The taskforce held statewide hearings in 1978 to gather information specifically on sexual harassment in the workplace. It drafted and lobbied for the first law in the U.S. making sexual harassment in the workplace illegal. Says Kornbluh, "A collective voice began to emerge, defining sexual harassment as a *social issue* rather than a private pain." Dozens of women stepped forward to tell their stories and describe their inability to combat their mistreatment. Based on the public hearings, the Taskforce organized a statewide conference in 1979. Over 650 people attended what is believed to be the first statewide conference on sexual harassment in the U.S.

Odessa Komer, then Vice President of the UAW in charge of the Women's Department, was "horrified" by the testimonies given by women workers, including two autoworkers. Komer successfully urged then UAW President Douglas Fraser to update and strengthen the 1951 UAW Administrative Letter on sexual discrimination. The 1981 letter, distributed to the entire membership, focused specifically on sexual harassment. It reiterated the UAW's strong commitment to create a sexual harassment-free workplace for its members and offered specific steps to stop harassment and empower women workers to take action. The UAW letter came five years before the Supreme Court finally defined sexual harassment as sexual discrimination, and therefore a violation of Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964.

### **THE "VELVET HAMMER" APPROACH**

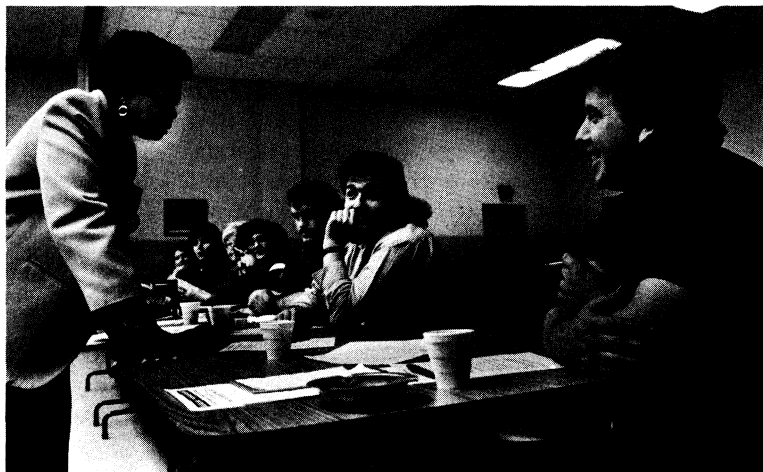
Also deeply affected by the conference was UAW member Dottie Jones. Before taking union leave in 1978 to work at the UM Program on Women and Work, Jones had worked as an auto assembler at Chrysler where she served as shop steward. The Ypsilanti plant had a majority of female workers, Jones recalls, with half of the official union posts held by women. Even though she hadn't been troubled with sexual harassment at her plant, "All

I had to do was listen to one woman tell her pain," says Jones. "I thought, 'My God—I have to do something about this.'" Jones returned to the UAW in 1984, where she joined the Women's Department staff, and leads its anti-sexual harassment program.

Jones uses what Komer has coined "the Velvet Hammer approach" because of its smooth but hard-hitting style. One major premise of Jones' workshops to union leaders and staff is that the harasser has "no edge or excuses." During the workshops, Jones says to any prospective harassers, "only animals operate on instinct. People make choices. It's a conscious decision to physically or verbally harass a woman." Sexual harassment is often perpetrated by insecure men who feel threatened that a woman is taking away a "man's job," Jones observes. She asserts that sexual harassment is a degrading act similar to rape. "A woman is being violated and it's got nothing to do with sexual attention. It's an abuse of power, wanting to dominate."

In 1984 Jones and Linda Ross produced, "Would You Let Someone Do This to Your Sister?" a film that addresses sexual harassment within union and other workplace environments. Narrated by Jones, the film portrays the horror and suffering of five women workers from both traditional and "nontraditional" occupations who were subjected to sexual harassment on the job.

Often shown at educational seminars at the UAW Black Lake Center, the film reaches a broad audience. Jones recalls how once after the film a man stood up and admitted he had been guilty of harassing women and pledged to apologize in public to all women at his plant.



RUSS MARSHALL



# When I *say* NO, *I mean* NO.



Sexual harassment is against the law.

A happy, but unusual incident. "This issue will divide a union," Jones says. Many men are against sexual harassment but keep silent when witnessing it. "Unions will deal with it if it's management," Jones points out, "but it's different with a co-worker. . . it's the peer pressure. We try to get the brothers to understand how sexual harassment poisons the workplace and divides the workers."

"We also stress the *illegality* of sexual harassment rather than focusing on it as a moral issue," Jones says. Men may be more willing to point out unacceptable behavior to other male workers if they can focus on the illegality and repercussions of sexually harassing female co-workers. The UAW's current campaign against sexual harassment is based on this approach: "When I say NO, *I mean* NO. Sexual harassment is against the law."

The other tactic used by the UAW is taken after the film's title: "Would You Let Someone Do This to Your Sister?" By forcing men to project the victims of sexual harassment as their working wives or daughters or sisters, men personalize the issue and get away from objectifying women or finding excuses, claiming that women "asked for it." Though this approach reinforces patriarchal values, it also forces men to acknowledge that the victim could be a member of their own family. And, like the illegality argument, it does not try to reach men on moral grounds.

Jones primarily works with management and union leaders, rather than conducting workshops for local unions (other staff members conduct workshops for locals). Her experience is that little change happens on the shop floor unless the leaders are committed to making it happen. "It's not enough to conduct workshops on sexual harassment at the local level if top level leaders are not sensitized as well," she reasons.

But Jones' concern remains with the women workers. Victims of sexual harassment often internalize their abuse, thinking that they did something wrong to deserve it. They need to understand

the grievance procedure and how a union's disciplinary system works: it gives the male an opportunity to stop his behavior before being fired, and gives the woman some sense of control of the process. Jones also addresses a woman's self-esteem; because most women's self-esteem and often health are shattered by the experience, women are encouraged to go to rape counselling or battered women's programs to get the kind of emotional support they need. Women's networks, such as the Coalition for Labor Union Women, also offer support for women that they can't get on the shop floor.

## CONCLUSION

In the 1990 contract negotiations with the Big 3 automakers, the UAW successfully pushed for contract language that prohibits sexual harassment. The UAW and the Chrysler Corporation distributed a joint policy statement to its membership after negotiations. Significantly, the statement noted that sexual harassment can be other than physical: offensive remarks, gestures, and jokes that "focus on a person's sex, clothing, or appearance may be considered sexual harassment." The statement also encourages employees to use the grievance procedure to make sexual harassment complaints.

The battle to create and enforce sexual harassment-free workplaces continues. Of course, the UAW doesn't operate in a vacuum: its anti-sexual discrimination actions have been pressured as much by external events and organizational alliances as they have been by internal dynamics. In addition, ambivalence among male auto workers remains: Jones could not refer to a single case in which a UAW union local was able to turn a fight against a sexual harassment into a union-building occasion. "I know we won't successfully eradicate sexual harassment without the support of men, Jones points out, ". . . and we do have some men of quality."

"Comes the time when everyone's got to stand up and say 'That's enough!'" ■

## RESOURCES

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