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9to5

Organizing Low-Wage Women

By Ellen Bravo, Gloria Santa Anna and Linda Meric

When 9to5, National Association of Working Women was founded in Boston in 1973, the terms “sexual harassment,” “pay equity” and “family leave” didn’t exist or weren’t widely used in the American vocabulary. But experiences with sexual degradation on the job, under-valuation of women’s work and lack of consideration for family responsibilities were common. So were the consequences, financially and emotionally, for women workers.

The women who started 9to5 worked as secretaries in Boston’s prestigious colleges, angry over daily reminders from those with power that support and clerical staff were powerless. They attended a weekend workshop for office workers where women attendees listed problems: low pay, limited advancement opportunity, little control over working conditions. A bank teller didn’t make enough to get a loan from the bank she worked for. A hospital clerk couldn’t afford to get sick; a university secretary couldn’t send her children to college. For the most part, workshop participants were proud of their skills and work. Their goal was not so much to get out of office work as to upgrade it—to change the way they were treated and the way they were paid.

Ten women got together after that workshop and printed a short newsletter, which they passed out in front of subway stops and large office complexes. The response was overwhelming. The group called a meeting and 300 women showed up, bursting with grievances. In November 1973, they formed an association of working women and called it “9to5” after the usual hours of the business day.

The movement began to grow. Women in other cities formed similar groups. In the mid-1970s, they joined together to make 9to5 a national association. Staff and volunteers answered questions about job problems and held workshops on how to ask for a raise, plan for retirement and organize to win better treatment on the job. And many began to celebrate actual victories. Women reported asking for raises for the first time in their lives—and getting them. Groups of clerical workers met with managers to demand policy changes, including accurate job descriptions and job postings. Women in the publishing, insurance and banking industries filed discrimination charges and won millions of dollars in back pay as well as new promotions and training programs. A few corporations, pressured by 9to5 activists, set aside money to help pay for employees’ child care.

Inspired by the group, actress Jane Fonda decided to make a movie about the concerns of office workers, interviewed 9to5 members, and called her movie “Nine to Five,” greatly increasing the group’s visibility.

In addition to empowering women individually and in groups, 9to5 helped change the policy environment, bringing women’s voices into national and local policy debates on issues directly affecting them. Issues that were trivialized when the group started became part of the public agenda. Using interviews with the media, actions, testimony and educational programs, 9to5 members also influenced laws. They watched years of hard work result in passage of the 1978 Pregnancy Discrimination Act, the 1991 Civil Rights Act and the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act on the federal level, as well as numerous state pay equity, family leave and other laws.

In the late 1980s, 9to5’s agenda expanded to address the needs of those working at the margins of the economy—part-time and temporary workers, women who cycle on and off public assistance programs because they can’t financially meet their families’ basic needs. 9to5 activists with direct experience of welfare drew attention to connections between women’s problems at work and their need to rely on public assistance. What happens to women who lose their jobs because of discrimination or lack of family leave, they asked? If you really want to reform the welfare system, they told policymakers, start by looking at the need to reform *work*. In the 1990s, 9to5 became involved in struggles for living wages and state self-sufficiency standards. The group has also been prominent in struggles around removal of the social

safety net. While working for short-term improvements, 9to5 points to the root causes of poverty and discrimination and the need for lasting solutions, as well as the need for alliances with other women's, labor, faith-based and community organizations.

Today, 9to5 organizes around four main policy areas. Our national priority is winning family-flexible policies for low-wage workers, such as expanding of the federal Family Medical Leave Act so it's more accessible and affordable, guaranteeing workers paid sick days and parental leave for school activities. Our work on jobs and income supports includes efforts to win: family-supporting jobs with living wages and health care; affordable child care, education and training for low-wage families; and more consideration for family care in welfare and unemployment policies. 9to5's anti-discrimination work includes support for affirmative action, stronger pay equity and sexual harassment laws, and the addition of sexual orientation and gender identity as categories protected from discrimination. Lastly, we organize to expand protections for temporary and part-time workers and curb abuses by temporary employment agencies.

Over the years 9to5 has helped raise the *expectations* of low-wage women. Most women were already aware of problems on the job. As a popular 9to5 button put it, "My consciousness is fine—it's my *pay* that needs raising." Thanks to 9to5, women workers have gained greater awareness that they deserve better treatment. Yet most still *lack the belief that change is possible*—or the concept that they themselves are the real agents of change. 9to5 tries to address this gap by helping members recognize and expand their leadership skills, and above all by showing the difference that collective action can make. The organization popularizes success stories to de-mystify the change process, revealing the many small steps that lead to victory.

Some of 9to5's women activists include Kiki, a single mother in Pennsylvania who got tired of going to interviews for jobs she was qualified for only to be turned away because she was caring for her daughter. Today, Kiki leads organizing to add protection against workplace discrimination based on parental and marital status to state law, and she hosts regular media presentations on women's workplace rights.

Rene, an activist in 9to5's Poverty Network Initiative chapter in Milwaukee, got involved telling her story as part of 9to5's efforts on welfare issues. Now Rene organizes other women to tell their stories to media and elected officials about challenges being a good parent and a good employee when you don't have paid sick days. Rene is active in 9to5's current campaign to collect 10,000 postcards from voters pledging to support candidates who support family-friendly workplace and public policies.

9to5 Colorado member Holly registered new voters at welfare and unemployment offices, at low-income housing and child care centers, helping other low-wage women make the connection between issues they face in everyday life and decisions that elected officials make. The women she registered voted and, most importantly, got involved in 9to5's organizing to hold elected officials accountable after the elections.

Above all, 9to5 strives to be a vehicle where working women can see that the particular pain they've experienced isn't personal—it's not about one bad manager or one set of policies or one election, but about power. Rather than striving simply to put more women into power, 9to5 aims to put more power in the hands of all women and all other groups who've been denied it.

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