Conversations with the Experts
Negotiating Flexible Schedules and Work Family Benefits: Why They Are “Win-Wins” for Labor Unions

Bio: Susan C. Eaton will become an Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard in January 2000. She is completing her dissertation on work-family and gender issues for the Industrial Relations program at the Sloan School of Management. She also holds a Master's in Public Administration (MPA) from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and an A.B. magna cum laude from Harvard-Radcliffe. She co-authored, with Professor Lotte Bailyn and several others, a report on the Ford Foundation action research project on work-family as a catalyst for organizational change. She worked for twelve years as a union organizer, negotiator, trainer, and manager for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), AFL-CIO, CLC. Her jobs included Assistant to the President for Program and Services, Field Services Coordinator, and International Representative. She specialized in health care and worked primarily in the South as well as from the national office. Since leaving SEIU in 1991, Susan has been writing and conducting research in the area of women and union leadership, women workers and industrial sectors in the US and Canada, labor law reform, alternative dispute resolution, nursing home and home health care work organization and productivity, work-family issues, and clerical work. She is an editor of the Civic Participation Network’s Work Section.

A Conversation with Susan Eaton

Unions have been organizing and bargaining for family-related benefits for a long time, including child care (ACTWU and ILGWU, among others), shorter hours (including the weekend and the 8-hour day!), and a family wage so that parents don't have to choose between work and home. Today, though, the issues are even more complicated and the solutions can be even more creative. Here are some reasons why negotiating flexible scheduling is good for unions and their members:

Polls and surveys, and talking to working people, tell us that the ability to "balance" work and family is a number one issue; even above job security, or better wages and health insurance, for many employees at all levels of skills.

Most employers associate unions with rigidity, rather than flexibility -- but unions can make sure that flexibility is organized fairly, from the perspective of the workforce. This means having it negotiated, with organized employee voice in the decisions, so that it is equitable rather than arbitrary. Both workers and employers have to see a gain from flexibility, for it to become accepted as an even better way to do things. People may need different arrangements at different times in their lives. The FMLA is a start, but it does not offer paid leave or even very definite flexibility, and it only covers half of the workforce.

Flexible hours (including starting and quitting times, compressed work weeks, part-time schedules -- even working at home for part of the scheduled work day in some jobs) have been shown in many research projects to contribute to both higher productivity and more satisfied workers.

Researchers have a big job to do here, to continue documenting the effects of such 'experiments,' which are found much more often in theory than in practice! Union members, too, can provide valuable sources of data.

- Most paid work-family benefits are more likely to be found in unionized workplaces -- such as paid family leave, education assistance, job-sharing, paid sick leave, continuing benefits on leave, and even part-time work with paid benefits and the right to return to a job. Why not make this also true of flexibility?
• Sometimes negotiating flexible hours must be done at the level of the employees themselves, or a work group or department, instead of company-wide. Union stewards and worksite leaders are in a position to make sure the hours are shared fairly and equitably, instead of at ‘management’s discretion.’

Unions can make a difference in the family-friendliness of any workplace, and the solutions may vary depending on what workers care about most. For instance, in Service Employees International Union (SEIU) nursing home negotiations that I worked on in Georgia, we successfully bargained an arrangement in which the workers themselves plan and negotiate their schedules. Immediately, attendance improved tremendously -- because people could work out their own arrangements with each other, and were more able to keep to them (and more committed) since they had made the agreements. Some wanted more hours, some fewer and all were able to get every other weekend off. The staffing ratios improved, the workplace improved, and the patient care improved! This was also true with registered nurses, in the Baptist Hospital of Southeast Texas, also organized by SEIU.

Another example of negotiating fairly involves rotating shifts and overtime -- which can be negotiated so that no one person or group unfairly works the hardest schedules; the Fire Fighters’ unions have arranged for long consecutive hour shifts, but also for long times off to be with their families and to recover from dangerous and difficult work.

• Organized labor has taken on the issues of working-families at all levels, and different resources are available to help local unions and members as well as national unions. See the AFL-CIO web site at www.aflcio.org and check the Working Women’s department.

• Family-friendly workplaces are a great reason for workers to organize! After all, most people organize for dignity and respect as well as better wages, benefits, and working conditions. And respect for the responsibility of raising a family, caring for elders, or helping in the community, is a fundamental union value, and has been since the beginning of the labor movement. But just as the “family wage” for working men is no longer a part of union assumptions, now that women are 40% of union members and also often support families, fair wages and more manageable, fair and flexible hours for working families are emphatically part of the current labor movement’s agenda.

Editor’s note: See also the excellent Labor Project for Working Families web site (http://www.laborproject.org/) that gives examples of contract language and actual union processes, run by Netsy Firestein and colleagues. The Project goal is ‘to work with unions to develop workplace policies for families, including child care, elder care, family leave, flexible work schedules, labor-management committees, and much more.’ Send Netsy your contract language, too!

For further information on this topic, check the web sites above or sign up for the excellent moderated “work-family” list-serve by e-mailing Bob Drago at drago@psu.edu.

For recent/related publications authored by Susan Eaton, please visit the Work-Family Research Literature Database (www.bc.edu/wfnetwork) and search for entries under the author’s last name.

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