



Laura Rico

Teaching by Example

When American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Edward J. McElroy, Secretary-Treasurer Nat LaCour and Executive Vice President Toni Cortese convene a meeting of their union's Executive Council, they see a diverse group of union leaders.

Of the elected officials on the council, 22 are women, eight are African American and five are Latino.

It's not accidental, but rather the product of a long and sustained commitment to diversity and full participation: AFT has a standing committee on Civil and Human Rights, a mandated biennial national conference and training programs to help activists build effective local committees.

As far back as 1955, the union's commitment was so strong, that it lost one-third of its membership rather than allow segregated locals to continue to exist.

Ruby Newbold is in her fourth two-year term as a member of the AFT Executive Council, and also serves as president of her

Detroit local and as chair of AFT's Human and Civil Rights Committee.

"It was the vision of the founders of the union to be diverse and have diverse leadership," says Newbold. "It makes our union so much stronger and effective when the leadership looks like the membership."

It also helps with work in her local—where the majority of members are women of color—"when my members see so many women of color on the council."

Newbold was proud when the AFT Executive Council reached the milestone of having a female majority, after elections at its last convention.

"I didn't even notice that we had become a majority," is the comment of another AFT Executive Council member, Laura Rico, president of her local in Southern California. "It's been such a comfortable environment, and the comfort level is so high that the sound of your own voice has power."

Rico, who is in her third term on the AFT Executive Council, was elected to the AFL-CIO Executive Council at the federation's 2005 convention.

She applauds the AFL-CIO's push to diversify leadership across the labor movement and within its own leadership as well. "I know that the AFL-CIO is working to create the same kind of environment that we have on the AFT council," she says.

"That's so important because it is the most important place for the voices of working people to be heard."

Rico knows that much more needs to happen. "For now," she admits, "when I go to AFL-CIO Executive Council meetings, I still count the number of women."



Ruby Newbold