



Becky Turner

Shattering the Glass Ceiling from Above

In 1995, delegates at the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) convention had passed a strong policy statement on diversity. Following the convention, the union's top leadership decided to make a serious push to bring more women into leadership.

New International President Michael Goodwin appointed three women as ad hoc members of the International Executive Board (IEB), giving them a voice—but no vote—at meetings. This gave additional women insight into the workings of the board and helped open up the meetings.

Those actions lead to big changes.

When the union's 1998 convention opened, only three of the 19 members of the IEB from the United States were women.

When that convention of this predominantly female union adjourned a few days later, there was a female majority on the newly elected executive board.

And two important changes to the union constitution were developed, circulated, debated and ultimately passed in 1998.

First, rather than having the entire convention vote on a slate of officers, the constitution now called for an electoral system in which only delegates from each region elect their IEB representatives.

The second change established diversity seats on the IEB to be filled only after the results of the region-by-region elections were announced.

The impact on the union was powerful. "Our members can now identify more readily with the face of our International Executive Board," says Becky Turner, who became the first female business manager of her local in 2002 and joined the IEB that same year.

"When these changes were made, it sent a strong message that our union was being led by people who understood the problems of working women," she says.

"And it's being led by a group of people who are more like the membership," adds Tamara Rubyn, also the top officer in her local and an IEB member. "Since the changes, I've felt stronger as a leader and my sense of responsibility has grown."

Rubyn also notes that the message of inclusiveness has given organizing in California a lift: "Not only do we have so many female leaders, but there's also room for lesbians—like Secretary-Treasurer Nancy Wohlforth and me—in the top leadership."

"We are very proud that our union acted and mandated change at the top," Rubyn says. "It made our union more able to face the future."



Tamara Rubyn