



Local Executive Board Members  
from left:  
Ruth Plenty-Walls  
Sandy Wright  
Gail Fleming  
Pamala Addicks

## Women of Steel Training Forges Strong Union Women

The “Women of Steel Leadership Course” is a program designed to train and empower female members of the United Steelworkers (USW) to fully participate in every aspect of union life.

Originally developed in Canada—with the backing of then-district director and current USW President Leo W. Gerard—the training program spread to the entire union in 1989. It has been growing and changing the face of USW ever since.

Hundreds of women go through the intensive Women of Steel Leadership Course every year, offered at the district level. Follow-up training programs are now widely available, often tailor-made to fit local needs.

Women of Steel exists as a recognized—and organized—part of the union at every level. Many women members attend Women of Steel meetings in their locals, in addition to their union meetings.

The initial leadership course is intended for women who have had little exposure to union activity in what traditionally has been a very male-dominated union. Women who have gone through the training often help recruit new students and serve as their mentors.

The course covers everything from the basic structure and rules of the union to how

meetings and elections are run, how to be a better public speaker and how to get involved in the USW’s Rapid Response Network.

Gail Fleming, a Steelworker for 27 years, is now one of the record five women on the 13-member executive board of her Baltimore local, a local that is 90 percent male.

It was the Women of Steel Leadership Course that gave her “the confidence and knowledge about my rights that I needed to be a successful union activist,” the heavy equipment operator says.

Fleming recalls her feeling many years ago—a feeling shared by other women—that “whatever we wanted to do, the men would

not listen and just shoot it down.” But the training persuaded her “that things could be different,” and along the way she found men—including leaders—supportive of her running for office.

Today she is proud of the advances women have made in her local, changes she says would not have been possible without the training and the ongoing support of Women of Steel.

“The dynamics of local executive board meetings have really changed, and I think people listen to each other better,” Fleming says. “And with five of us serving together, we have strength in numbers.”



Gail Fleming