

**Plenary Remarks by  
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Presented at "Women Working to Make a Difference," IWPR's Seventh International Women's Policy Research Conference, June 2003

I'm delighted to be here, and I want to thank ----- for that kind introduction. It's a real pleasure for me to be with you. What a terrific group you are! You're black and brown and white -- lesbian and straight -- with disabilities and without - - young and old and everything in between. You've come here to study from every part of America, and all over the world. But there's something beautiful you have in common. You're here because you believe in your heart in building a better life for women... economically, socially, politically...and each of you in your own work is doing everything you can to make that happen.

I want to start out by paying tribute to Heidi Hartmann and the other wonderful women at IWPR...and to congratulate them on the 15th anniversary of IWPR. In the space of 15 years, you have made IWPR into the most important feminist think tank in the country. You're having a terrific impact on the issues that really count for women... issues like pay equity, decent jobs, health care, family leave, and much, much more. I thank you and congratulate you for that.

We're here to talk about "Women Working to Make a Difference"... and Heidi suggested I talk about my own experience with the union movement and how it makes a difference for millions of working women. The truth is that I didn't grow up in a union family. I was the daughter of cotton sharecroppers in Texas... and we had none of the benefits that union members enjoy.

In rural Texas back in the 1950's, unions were just about unheard of. For the women in my family, good wages, and health insurance, and disability insurance, and pensions were as far from us as the moon and the stars. I worked for 30 cents an hour hoeing cotton when I was 10 years old...and by the time I was 19, my pay went up to a grand total of \$1.50 an hour. At that time, I didn't know a thing about unions.

When I was working in the cotton fields, my biggest dream in life was someday to get a job as a clerk at Sears, so I could work inside all year round and get away from the hard physical labor on the farms. But then something large happened. I went to work as a secretary in a union local in Texas, and my life has never been the same.

Before long, I found that I could move to the frontlines and struggle for a better life for working women and men -- and I could make a difference. Believe me, it wasn't always easy. We had to fight tooth and nail for just about every tiny little victory. But in those times when management was willing to listen and talk things out...when they were willing to take the high road...we could get a lot accomplished.

It was a few years after that happened that I was elected executive vice-president of the AFL-CIO, and had the honor of becoming the first person of color to be an executive officer of the union movement. Has this movement given me a chance to make a difference? Has it changed my life? The answer to both questions is, absolutely yes. Am I alone? No -- far from it.

In the more than 30 years since I first started working in the Laborers Union local, I've discovered that for millions of working women...the ones who build our homes, teach our kids, cook our food, and care for us when we're sick...the path to a better life has been the union movement.

And in the last several years, I've had the chance to see this with my own eyes, everywhere from Maine to Honolulu. I've learned about women like Maria Posada, a hotel maid at the Rio Suite Hotel and Casino Suite Hotel in Las Vegas. Five years ago, she earned just \$8.25 an hour -- and the only way she could get health insurance was by paying for it out of her own wages. Maria's husband worked non-union construction jobs with no benefits...so they lived in fear that someone in their family would need to go to the doctor. Then, two years ago, the workers at the Rio formed a union with Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 226 -- they won a contract -- and today, Maria earns \$11.21 an hour -- she has health insurance for her entire family that's paid by the company -- and she has a guaranteed pension and a voluntary 401-k plan. Now, she says, "I know the difference" between having a voice on the job and not. "There is no way I would work at a non-union hotel again."

I learned about Geri Kelly, a nurse at Ketchikan General Hospital in Alaska. She always loved working with patients -- but the way that hospital management treated Geri and the other nurses was terrible. There was no pay scale for the nurses -- and a lot of the time, when there were few patients, nurses would be just sent home with no pay. That's why Geri and the other nurses formed a union with United American Nurses and won their first contract a year ago. Now, they have a voice in staffing. They meet every two weeks with the managers to put together staffing procedures that work for everyone. They also won the right to 30 hours a year of cross training... so Geri, who is a medical surgical nurse, can now give support in the intensive care unit, and the newborn nursery, and the ambulatory care unit. It's made a huge difference in her life. She says, "We think about how things affect all of us, and we're more cohesive."

"This is a cool thing."

I've learned about Martha Thames, who works for Head Start in Toledo. One of the reasons that she and her sisters and brothers on the job organized into the Ohio Association of Public School Employees was they needed higher wages...but another reason was stairs. Management was assigning classrooms on upper floors to the older employees with 30 years seniority...forcing them to climb several flights of stairs every day, regardless of how painful it was. Martha and the other workers won higher wages -- but they also won seniority rights, so the senior employees no longer have to climb all those stairs. And you know what? The little kids who attend that Head Start are also benefiting. With a union contract, there is a lot less turnover among employees...so the students feel a lot more secure by seeing familiar faces at school every day.

All that Maria, Geri, Martha and their sisters and brothers have won through their unions -- higher wages, health insurance, a pension, a voice on the job, basic respect and dignity -- has definitely made a difference in their lives.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that the union movement is the one and only way that working women can win better lives. There's so much else that we need, as you all know very well. We need a higher minimum wage -- affordable quality health care for everyone, not just the rich and not just the lucky -- a bigger Earned Income Tax Credit, which is one of America's biggest success stories in providing real help to the working poor --education, training, and access to technology that prepare working women to be as successful as they can be -- strong, effective equal pay laws, so that women are paid fairly for their work -- affordable child care that we can trust -- and living wage laws, so

that our jobs that are funded from taxpayer money are paying enough to keep workers above the poverty line. Each one of those is absolutely necessary.

And we also have to guarantee that every working woman and man has the opportunity and the freedom to join together for collective power through union membership. It makes all the difference in the world. It's no wonder that most American workers who don't have a union say they would join a union tomorrow if they were given the chance. So why doesn't that happen? Why aren't millions more working people in unions? Here's the real answer -- and this may be the most important message I am bringing today. Wherever you look, employers are fighting back -- and fighting dirty -- when employees try to join together in unions. Ninety one percent of employers set up mandatory closed-door meetings to attack unions. Eighty percent hire union-busting firms. Fifty percent threaten to do away with workers' jobs if they join together in unions.

Now, ever since the New Deal back in the 1930's, the law has said that when you work hard for a living...when you're living from paycheck to paycheck...you deserve the right to provide for your family -- to improve your life -- through a union. That right is just as sacred as freedom of speech, and freedom of religion, and the right to a fair trial.

But the truth is that here in America in 2003, you can express any opinion you want -- you can worship where and how you choose -- but if you want to exercise your freedom to join a union and bargain for a contract, you're in for big trouble.

We in the union movement are determined to shine a light on the secret war. That's why we started the campaign called Voice at Work, to stop employer interference, so more workers can freely join unions. We're asking our allies in our communities...

women's groups and religious leaders, students and faculty members, civil rights organizations and community activists, lesbian and gay activists, environmentalists and more... to stand with us and help us expose the nasty tactics that employers are using... because it's those same forces who are fighting against all the issues that we and our allies are working for. And in community after community where it's happening, it's working.

Today, on behalf of the 13 million members of the union movement...and on behalf of the millions more who yearn to join...I ask all of you for your support and help, everywhere that working people are trying to win a better life through their unions.

Why are we doing all this? Why are we making this struggle? It all goes back to what Woody Guthrie sang 60 years ago: "This land was made for you and me." His song is still true.

This land wasn't made for union-smashing and race-baiting and gay-bashing...for oppressing women, and immigrants, and people with disabilities.

This land wasn't made for us to be poor, scared, insulted, and denied a voice when we need it most.

This land wasn't made to break our spirits in the sweatshops and break our backs in the fields.

This land was made for you and me to live with security, and equality, and hope.

This land was made for every young girl in America, including my granddaughter, to have a future of freedom and promise...wherever she works, however she looks and lives, whatever she dreams.

Together, we can turn this society of ours around. Together, we can build a country that values us all. Together, we can create a community where every woman is treated with dignity, regardless of her income, or skin color, or orientation... regardless of whether her family came here on a slave ship or the Mayflower nearly 400 years ago, or through Ellis Island at the turn of the last century, or across the Rio Grande last year. Together, we can make the land we love into the land we know it should be...where justice is finally done.

If we don't do it, nobody will -- and we will.

Thank you.