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“I don’t see a lot of us African American women in top officer spots of unions.”

A transit worker and union leader shares her perspective on the challenges facing her industry and the need for unions to diversify leadership

As a single mother, Pennie McCoach was drawn into the transit industry 14 years ago because of the good benefits and pension offered. After encountering racism and sexism on the job, she sought the help of the union and well-organized African American women co-workers, who recruited her into the role of a union steward. Now as a union leader, she opposes the privatization of the CTA, pushed by proponents like Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel. She and her co-workers will have to fight hard to maintain their family-supporting wages and the health of their pension plan in the next round of collective bargaining, given that they are increasingly working side-by-side with workers earning a third of those wages without pensions. At the same time, McCoach sees the low-income African American community in Chicago struggling to get to work as CTA cuts routes on which they rely.

There is a growing trend towards privatization in the transit industry, with detrimental impacts for African American workers who hold those family-supporting jobs and for black communities that rely on public transit to get to work. Public sector jobs like those in transit have long been a source of good jobs for black workers, where wages are higher than in other industries and wage inequality between black and white workers is lower. Black women in particular benefit from public sector jobs. Compared to other industries, the public sector has the highest proportion of black women in the top tier of wages and the lowest proportion of black women in the lowest tier of wages.

McCoach sees what is happening to jobs like hers and knows her co-workers must work together to save what they have. Her story is also evidence that there are black women like her waiting in the wings and ready to lead unions, if only given the opportunity.

I work as personnel in the yard. I put trains together. I troubleshoot and put them into repair shops to be repaired. I didn't think I'd be doing this work, but my son's grandmother used to work in the train yard, and she recommended the job since the benefits were good and there was a pension. I've been there 14 years. Once I got involved with the job, I enjoyed it. I enjoy working with people and helping people.

Public transit is really important here in Chicago. It's affordable, and it's definitely needed in the

These repairmen don't have the pension we have. We also have individuals on our property who are part of a Second Chance program. The mayor pushed for this program to hire individuals with criminal backgrounds. They come in doing the same work as us but making only \$9.25 an hour for work we're doing for \$27 an hour.

The job has transitioned, and we all need to work together no matter what. It has been a challenge, being a black woman and dealing with the male population. Women just recently, in the last 20 years, were able to get into the CTA. I found

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African American community and in low-income areas. I got very angry when the Transit Authority started to cut routes. When somebody is making \$8.25 an hour, transit is their only way of getting to work. When their route is cut, they have to walk blocks and blocks before they can get a connection.

Our mayor is a strong believer of privatization, and some of our transit system has been privatized. It affects our pensions and our future—having individuals come in and take these jobs at a lower wage. Some of our repairmen have been privatized and now work for a company from New York. The CTA doesn't want to train our repairmen to repair the trains.

that working with a predominantly male population, they're not going to assist you. There were not a lot of African American women doing the job. You got racism and sexism, both -isms. You had to prove yourself—that you're capable of doing the job as well as Caucasian males and males period. When you needed help, the men would leave you alone and let you fend for yourself. That's what made me get involved with the union.

Before I started the job, the ladies before me formed a group called ATU Local 308 Networking Women. They would meet at each lady's house and talk about the issues we face as female employees and African American

employees. By us organizing, it made us stronger. Our issues were heard. If it was just one individual, it would be, “Here she comes complaining again.” But the union helped. Once Networking Women brought their issues to the union, the union supported the issues they had. At the time they had African American males in leadership of the union who supported the group. They had stewards come out and speak to different terminals. We didn’t even have female bathrooms.

I first got involved with the union when two African American female stewards recruited me. They saw me as an outgoing person and said they thought I’d be an asset to the union as an African American female. After six months of seeing what was going on, I saw I needed to get involved. I started attending union meetings and taking steward classes. At the classes, a gentleman encouraged me to run as his assistant as a steward. Now I’m on the executive board of the union.

I don’t see a lot of us African American women in top officer spots of unions. I see a lot of us where I am now. I feel the labor movement can do more. Leaders could empower African American women and give them more opportunities to step into leadership. I still see the union being a dominant male organization, dominated by Caucasian men. It’s 2015. There should changes.

There should be more organizing of black women—making us stronger, more vocal, and more supportive of each other and of the labor movement. Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union, is my idol. She doesn’t mind getting out there and fighting. She doesn’t mind the consequences. She fights for all of us, not just African American women, but for all of us. I’d like to be in a position like that.

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