



Dr. L. Toni Lewis

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“Allow them to do the work.”

A call for representative leadership and giving successful black women organizers the chance to lead

Dr. L. Toni Lewis has a lifelong commitment to pursuing social justice, instilled in her by her family and its two-generation legacy of union leadership. A graduate of Georgetown University School of Medicine, she joined the Committee of Interns and Residents (CIR), the largest physician’s union in the SEIU, while completing her medical residency and rose to a number of leadership roles in the union.

From 2007 to 2010, Dr. Lewis served as national president of CIR. There she worked for better hours, pay and benefits for medical residents. In 2010, she was named chair of SEIU Healthcare, which has 1.1 million members. She also serves as an international vice president on the board of SEIU.

Despite her experiences within SEIU, Dr. Lewis acknowledges that many African American women do not have the same opportunity to ascend to leadership positions within unions. Dr. Lewis knows the importance of helping to open leadership opportunities for people of color within the broader labor movement while at the same time working hard for the union she loves.

I was not the first female president, nor was I the first black female president of the doctors' union. However, when you look at some senior staff leadership positions, or the management of the hospitals, or who is making decisions on finances, I see fewer and fewer people who look like me.

I've gone around the country visiting members and different locals. I spend a lot of time talking to women on their way up—millennial women and also seasoned veterans. And I love and respect all the work that they do. Healthcare is a caring service. It can be a ministry to a lot of

very awesome solidarity moment, and then I can have moments when I feel uncomfortable. The source of the discomfort is that I always feel such a deep responsibility to all those who worked so hard to make sure that I have an opportunity like this, whether directly or indirectly. And I want to make sure that my voice is always reflective and respectful of their experience. So, I would love to see leadership be more uniform, more reflective of our membership, and this country.

I wish leadership was a merit-based, talent-based, soul-based system where the minute we identify leadership promise, that person becomes a leader.

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folks. You're with people in their most intimate times of life—death, cancer, birth of their first child. A lot of times, the doctors, nurses, home-care workers and healthcare workers that I serve are more often thinking about their patients.

Hanging out with the home-care workers was the best thing in the world for me. They are the women of color who take care of you in your home and in nursing homes. There is a pride and a kinship that we felt. Then I go to governance meetings, and it can be night and day what the rooms are like. And I can tell you, I can have a

But it doesn't work that way. Not only can it be more difficult for black women and men, it sometimes can even send you out of the union that you love so much. So the first thing we have to do, just to be a little bit of a doctor here, is acknowledge we have a problem. We're not in a post-racial union society. There are several talented people that we're missing out on just because we have a structure that doesn't acknowledge, feed, nourish, and open up the space for that leadership to grow. So we need to acknowledge that we have a problem and build in more mechanisms to identify that talent

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and create the space where black leaders are safe to grow.

If we don't do something differently as a labor movement, we won't be here. This labor movement, this power, will not be there for our children and our children's children.

I talk to my mom all the time about what it was like to have me during really tough times. I was born before she got the union job. She tells me she had a jar of coins that were saved up so she could afford to get to the hospital when it was time for me to come. She wondered how she could afford to pay those bills. There wouldn't be a Dr. Toni Lewis without her union job, the union family, that collective action and strength. Through that union job, she had a group of people around her to empower her. And the job gave me the opportunity to go to school in Washington, DC, hundreds of miles away. For me growing up, it was kind of just the way that

things were—you find your union and you find your family. There's your strength. Looking back, I feel privileged to be working in a union so every family has those opportunities.

The statistics are there showing the ability of black women and other women of color to organize. We have to collectively go get those winning organizers and immediately move them into positions of strategy and power. Make them deciders. Too often in the labor movement you'll see that, despite good results, people will question the competence of black women organizers. How many times have I heard, "Black people just came out to vote," as if when black people win, things happened by accident? But when a white man wins a campaign, it is because of strategy, good organizing and concrete goals. Numbers don't lie. Winning is winning. So we have to get in there and make sure that we learn from black women organizers and allow them to do the work.