



Valerie Ervin

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***“We need to be on the front lines of leadership...
not behind the scenes.”***

From grocery store bagger and single mom to elected official, a former union organizer talks about the power of unions to politicize black women

At 16, Valerie Ervin became a United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) member when her mother—a labor leader in her hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico—signed her up for a job as a bagger at a local grocery store. She became pregnant in her junior year at the University of New Mexico and quit college to work full time. Soon after her son, Solomon, was born, Ervin launched into a successful career as an elected member of UFCW Local 1564’s executive board. She eventually was recruited to become the assistant director of the Women’s Affairs Department at UFCW headquarters in Washington, DC. Ervin went on to work in the organizing departments at both the UFCW and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), and she was a teaching fellow at the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations’ Organizing Institute. Ervin later became a member of the faculty and a dean of the George Meany Center for Labor Studies, which was renamed the National Labor College in 2004.

While teaching organizing at the George Meany Center, Valerie was approached to serve as chief of staff for Montgomery County Councilman George Leventhal. During her tenure, she ran for the school board and won. Soon after, Tom Perez, the current U.S. Secretary of Labor, encouraged her to run for his seat on the county council when he ran for Maryland Attorney General.

Ervin won his seat and served on the council for seven years, including one year as its president, where she worked to effect change for women across the country like her—single, working-class mothers—and their families.

Ervin’s story shows the labor movement’s power to prepare black women for careers in public service—including as elected officials and policymakers.

As a member of the Montgomery County Council, I served to give back in big and small ways by making things better for people, which ruffled a lot of feathers. I was singularly focused on getting things done. People elected me and expected a lot in return. I served as “we.”

We created a summer food program to get children fed who otherwise wouldn't have had anything to eat. And we created the first-ever food recovery program in the country where hospitals and restaurants gave unused food to food banks, churches and shelters. And we

I'm lucky to have become a policymaker. There was no one like me. I've never veered from my roots as a union activist. I grew up in a union. My mother took me to my first meeting. You get a lot, and you have to give just as much. I still carry those ideals and beliefs, and you can't see me without seeing me in that light.

I knew what my constituents were going through. I've lived in subsidized housing. I've been on food stamps. I still have a jar of pennies that I used to have to use for gas money. And I'm not ashamed of it. I know what it's like to rob Peter to pay Paul. When I sit in these decision-making

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secured access to free breakfasts for over 40,000 children. I'm lucky to have become a policymaker. As a black, single mom and former union member, there was no one like me on the Council.

What it comes down to is the fact that I'm working class. And when I look back on my own family, all I've known is women working. Every woman I knew was a worker. That's not foreign or lost on me. I've spent 30 years digging deep because communities are struggling for economic justice.

rooms, I have a way to connect with the needs of the people, because I've walked in their shoes.

The labor movement isn't getting behind black women enough in their own unions. You're seeing an institution of white and black male leaders of a certain generation. And there is a lot of fear of women who are powerful organizers—a fear of the male structure losing its control. I saw that up close and in person in my local in my 20s. My president actually thought I was going to run against him.

As a result of that fear, male leaders will go outside to get women who weren't coming out of unions. They're not seeing people sitting in their own house as potential leaders who could run and represent large numbers of people.

Too many women never get to see their full potential. Some of the most incredible women saw that there was a ceiling and that they had to go someplace else. That was the experience of a lot of women I knew. I was blown away by the talent of those women, and they left because there was only so far they could go. They were recognized as amazing organizers, but they had to leave unions and go on to do other things.

Leaders all over the labor movement need to start looking within—right in their own houses—at women who are shop stewards and organizers. They need to make room for these people.

Right now, when you talk about unions, people's eyes glaze over because they haven't been organizing at scale for many years. We're in a period where families are suffering and children are suffering because labor stopped organizing.

Most women that I've met got politicized inside trade unions. If there's no place to learn about politics internally and externally, a whole generation of black women won't be connected to that powerful source in unions to speak their truth.

The foot soldiers are black women. We are the foot soldiers. They need to hear that really well. We need to be on the front lines of leadership—on TV, in newspapers. That's where black women's faces belong. Not behind the scenes.

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