

Arlene Holt Baker

Retired Executive Vice President, American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) | Washington, DC

“The ceiling is cracking a little, but it is not fully cracked.”

Retired labor leader reflects on her ascendency and what it will take for other black women to rise into leadership positions

Elected in 2007, Arlene Holt Baker is the first African American to hold the post of executive vice president of the AFL-CIO, one of the three highest offices in the largest federation of unions, which represents 12.5 million workers in the United States. She rose to that position through the ranks of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), serving as an organizer, international union representative and area director in California, where she brought public sector workers into the labor movement.

Baker, a tireless champion for America’s working families, served in a number of positions and capacities at AFSCME and the AFL-CIO throughout her career. She led the AFL-CIO’s Gulf Coast Recovery effort after Hurricane Katrina and has fought for the right to organize; immigrant rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights; voting rights; and for the right of union members to participate fully in the democratic process.

Baker’s story reflects on her rise to power and the role that black women can and should play in preserving and advancing the labor movement.



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My ascendancy in so many ways was because of the opportunities that I was able to take advantage of. A key factor was having wonderful mentors and supporters. Mentors were critically important. That support was from my beginning days in the 1980s as an organizer with AFSCME, throughout my career as a labor activist, and later as a labor leader within the AFL-CIO.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney was a great mentor. He had the vision to understand that it's

movement, but it is an independent constituency group representing black workers. And we could grow, thrive, learn and develop skills.

I believe that the labor movement will grow and will be saved, but it will be dependent on the labor movement joining with other movements that are focused on social and economic justice issues. The labor movement must join with immigrants and their fight. They must join with gays and lesbians in their fight. And they certainly must join with all people of color and women in

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important for women to have a voice and a place and to be listened to as equally as men. I also had great African American male mentors and other women whom I admired—women who were sisters and who you could go to at any time and talk to about your frustrations. They would shore you up so that you could make it another day. So, mentorship and a support system within the house of labor was important.

One of the greatest training fields for African Americans to learn and develop their leadership skills was and still is the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. It isn't outside of the traditional

a broader movement for social and economic justice. It's collaboration and movements working together that will ensure that the labor movement will survive.

We really have no choice. The labor movement must survive because without strong worker's unions, we will not be able to maintain democracy as we know it. The truth, as I see it, is that our democracy depends on the survival of the labor movement.

The fact is that currently the most likely group of women who are willing to join a union are

women of color, particularly black women. I don't think black women's leadership has been brought to bear to the level that it should be. But the fault is the labor movement not making sure we have elevated and given women the opportunity to be full participants in organizing strategies and campaigns. You just can't rely on black women to knock on doors. They need to be at the table where the organizing strategies are being developed.

We are aware of black women who have the skills. I believe there are thousands of them that have the skills to be great organizers and strategists. We need to go looking for them; and our unions have to be open to accepting them. They exist today in workplaces, on college campuses, and in the private sector, and in the public sector, and in the nonprofit world. They exist.

I think what labor is beginning to do right is make more opportunity available to people of color. There's more access to the labor movement in different roles — whether they're elected positions or opportunities to have professional positions. What we haven't done enough of is reach out far enough or wide enough. We've got

to really make it evident that there is opportunity within the labor movement for all people to ascend to elected positions, as well as the staff positions. We just haven't done that well enough.

There have been breakthroughs. The ceiling is cracking a little, but it is not fully cracked. You can't think your job is done when you have one or two examples of people of color or black women who hold a leadership role or a top staff position. It is not good enough to have one or two examples. There has to be multiple examples of that. What we've done right is we've opened up the doors. And where we've probably got a lot of work to do is in retention and having people feel that they are totally a part of the team.

When people of color get the opportunity to be leaders, we have a responsibility to fight with everything within us to bring others along. We cannot, once we get in the door, close the door behind us. We've got to make darn sure that the door is not just cracked but is opened wide for others to come in. And if it's not open wide, then we have to be part of a movement that says, "We'll have to knock it down so that we can save our movement."