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Female Rank-and-File's Representation in the 2022 UC Labor Strike

A Policy Brief by Megan Yao

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Status Quo of Female Rank-and-File in Labor Union

The 2022 UC Academic Worker Strike ended with the union and the UC reaching tentative agreements. Even so, the union remains divided, with a large portion of the rank-and-file strikers casting doubt on the democratic procedures in the union, the strike strategies being “misdirected,” and differing groups of workers’ voices being “underrepresented.” Many who are dissatisfied with the strike outcome point to the dysfunctionality of union leadership, which is dominated by native-born white males.

A closer look at the intra-union division allows us to discover a set of demographic patterns: those against the union practices and strike strategies are mostly workers of relatively underprivileged groups, such as the female rank-and-file workers. The goal of this study, then, is to quantify and gauge the level of underrepresentation of female voices in the strike, and should the latter be meager, propose a policy to strengthen their presence in labor organizing.

¹ Based at UC Berkeley’s Institute of Governmental Studies, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends approximately 30 Cal students to the state’s capital every summer for eight-week public service internships. The Jo Freeman Women in Politics Fellowship supports Cal-in-Sac Fellows whose individual research projects focus on women in politics, including research on public policies that affect women.

Silent Female Strikers: Passive Participation and Followership

I conducted a group interview with 8 subjects, all selected based on the criteria that they 1) participated in the 2022 UC labor strike as strikers, and 2) expressed dissatisfaction with the strike outcome; 4 of them are females, and the other 4 males. I asked them to recount their strike experiences comprehensively in their own language facilitated by my guided questions. I then examined the vocabulary they each chose to describe their experiences, and identified the vernacular commonalities, differences and patterns among their expressions.

Six frequently-used keywords, divided into 2 categories, were identified in the subjects' verbal descriptions. The first category is the indicator of active leadership and participation, consisting of keywords "organize/organizing/organizer", "lead/leading/leader", and "communicate/coordinate". The second category indicates less active followership and passive participation, with vocabulary such as "observe/observing/observer", "watch/watching", and "along/alongside". I counted the number of female and male strikers who, in their responses, mentioned certain keywords, and included the numbers in the table below.

Number of Female v. Male Strikers Mentioning Keywords

Keyword	Number of Females	Number of Males
"organize/organizing/organizer"	2	3
"lead/leading/leader"	1	4
"communicate/coordinate"	3	3
<i>"Leadership" Average</i>	2	3.33
"observe/observing/observer"	3	2
"watch/watching"	3	1
"along/alongside"	4	2
<i>"Followership" Average</i>	3.33	1.67

The result is unambiguous. On average, 2 female strikers mentioned a keyword of “Leadership”, while 3.33 male strikers did the same. On the other hand, keywords indicating “followership” appeared in 3.33 female strikers’ responses on average, while 1.67 for their male counterparts. These findings suggest that female strikers were more likely to fall into a passive participation and follower role than male strikers, which may have impeded their ability to deliver their own voices soundly.

From a qualitative perspective, during the interview, when asked about their roles in labor organizing, female strikers were more inclined towards a reserved answer, such as “I was actually not as active as you may have expected”, “I observed more than organizing”, etc. Moreover, they were more likely than males to identify external factors, rather than internal motivation or beliefs, as incentives for joining the strike, such as encouragement by co-workers, interest in joining a “trending” event, etc.

A Policy Solution: Incentivizing Female Strikers’ Engagement in Labor Organizing

To increase female rank-and-file’s active participation and leadership in labor strikes, thereby improving the representation of their voice and needs, it is essential to create resources for incentivizing their engagement. A state-wide Diversity Program for Labor Organizers should be established and funded, with chapters across all organizations, where female rank-and-file, if interested, can access mentorship, training and scholarship opportunities on organizing labor and advocating for labor rights.

Although the individuals I interviewed did not describe salient intentional marginalization or discrimination against female strikers, increased accountability for union leadership to practice equal opportunity policies within the organization should also be implemented.