

Sisters Under the Skin: Diversity of Women & Labor in Hawai'i

by Leslie Lopez, PhD



Hospital Laundry, June 1974. Ceramic tile mural. 13 ft wide X 11 feet high. School Street façade of United Public Workers Building (renamed in 2006: Henry B. Epstein Building), Honolulu, Hawai'i.
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Given this age of temperature checks, one of the most important indicators of the health of Hawai'i's workers and economy can be found on the "union density" webpage at the Center for Labor Education and Research website [1](#). The table on this site provides longitudinal data on union density in Hawai'i over the past 20 years. Hawai'i has remained in the top three. How does the public benefit from high union density? Civil service employees represent the largest number of unionized workers in the state and provide key services to public schools, parks, hospitals and roads. In addition, unions reduce wage inequality, set pay standards for non-union employers, and provide important benefits like sick leave and health insurance; which is a public health issue in a pandemic.

The correlation between unions and the health and safety of the community is well established. Employers do not willingly offer increased wages, pensions, or health care to their workers. In low union density states, or what are known as Right To Work (RTW) states, wages are lower and workers are less likely to have employer-sponsored health insurance, pensions or sick leave. All workplace benefits have been hard-won by working people. Thanks to their bravery, we have benefits we might take for granted, like time off, sick leave, pensions, seniority, OSHA regulations, and even more timely now, PPE face masks for essential workers.

Due to our high union density, Hawai'i also ranks #1 nationally in health care². There is no single politician responsible for this accomplishment. For this, we owe a great debt to the following people and events: the crowd of 500 laundry workers, ladies auxiliary, teamsters, and ILWU clerks and longshoremen who faced tear gas, high-powered pressure hoses and gunfire during the August 1, 1938 Hilo Massacre; the 75,000 sugar workers and their families who risked everything in 1946 and went on strike for 79 days to win an increase wages, rights,

and dignity at work; the pivotal six month dock of strike in 1949 challenging wage parity; and more recently, the 51 day hotel workers' strike winning sexual harassment protections, increases in child/elder care fund, medical leave, and wages. Lana'i pineapple workers impacted workers globally. In 1951, 800 pineapple workers went on a 201-day strike. They won a 15 cent raise for themselves, as well as a seven cent an hour increase across seven companies owned by Dole for 9,000 workers. What is most important about all of these strikes is that workers organized regardless of race, religion, color, or gender.

The momentum generated by these strike waves led to the Democratic Revolution of 1954, marks the turning point when Hawai'i workers took power away from the Republican dominated legislature controlled by the Big 5 Oligopoly and put it back into the hands of working people. This change also marked the occupational shift in Hawai'i's economy from dependence on plantations to tourism, which increased occupational opportunities for women in Hawai'i.

Hawai'i would not have been able to accomplish any of these gains without the labor and contributions of women; women who as Mother Jones described were, "the slaves of slaves", precariously navigating plantation work, family care-taking, and organizing. The intention of this essay is to provide snapshot glimpses of women's organizing, and recognize the core work they do for the people of Hawai'i. The snapshots will be presented in the form of vignettes, in the past and present, across various roles, and address how their labor specifically contributes to our quality of life on a daily basis. The purpose of each snapshot, or vignette, is to provide the reader of a sense of the complexities of women's' experiences in organized labor, the diverse perspectives they bring, and how the commonality behind their intent to contribute to the greater good for the future of Hawai'i.

[Past Women Leaders in Hawai'i: the legacy of their work lives on](#)

"We work that if you have a problem in your unit and you want this problem to be solved, we solve it not only for the sake of the membership; we solve it for the non-union members. If it's a good union, it's good for all." - Helen Lake Kanahele

Helen Lake Kanahele (1916-1976) lost both of her parents at a young age. Orphaned at the age of six, she was adopted by a Scotch-Irish woman named Irene West. West enrolled Kanahele in a dance troupe, and by the age of 6, she had traveled the world. By 1948, Helen was a single mother of two daughters, living in a Hawai'iian Homestead home in Papalolea, and her brother worked for the ILWU. She became angered by anti-union pickets of the wealthy wives of employers, known as the "Broom Brigade", so she picked up her own picket sign and supported the picket every day. She joined the ILWU Women's Auxiliary, eventually becoming its president. During the sugar and stevedore strikes, Helen collected donations and food for striking families, cooked and served food in strike kitchens. She was then hired as a laundry worker at Maluhia Hospital in 1948, an extraordinary organizer, she began to organize the predominantly women workers into a unit of the United Public Workers (UPW). In retaliation, the head of the hospital tried to transfer her to the morgue. She filed a grievance and was transferred to work as a custodian at Kalakaua Intermediate School. At Kalakaua, she played a key role in separating grounds work from custodial work – ensuring representation for both. She went on to serve on grievance committees, work as a lobbyist during legislative sessions, and held multiple offices in UPW. Fearless (and famous for her luaus) she was not afraid of McCarthyism and visited the Hawai'i seven when they were in jail. She appeared before the Territorial Committee on Subversive Activities and responded to the committee's questions designed to elicit admission that she had been influenced by others – in her testimony, she took full responsibility which was an incredibly brave act in the face of political hostility. When she started at the Kalakaua, there were

12 "miscellaneous" civil service workers in the Department of Education. By the time she left, she had organized over 300 with clear job descriptions.

"It was always meant that working people had the brains and stamina together they could change the system which exploited them. We have been so touched by the feeling that individually we count for something, that we have forgotten we live in a family of individuals." - Ah Quon McElrath

Born in Iwilei in 1915, Ah Quon McElrath (1915-2008) also lost a parent at a young age; at the age of five, she lost her father who left behind seven children. At the age of 12, she and her siblings began working twelve-hour days in the pineapple canneries. She attended the University of Hawai'i and edited "Social Process in Hawai'i" in 1939 for the sociology club and began volunteering for the ILWU. Her background, education, and experience as a social worker was useful in her organizing and legislative work. Her eloquence, charisma, and powerful presence is why "AQ" is lovingly recognized as the moral compass of the labor community in Hawai'i. She worked tirelessly, volunteering during the 1946 strikes counseling families and connecting them to aid and services. In 1954 she was hired as the ILWU social worker where for thirty-five years she provided educational programs and "just transition" programs moving from plantation to hotel work. As an ILWU 142 Social Worker, she successfully lobbied for increases in public assistance and improved human services for all people in Hawai'i. Her monumental influence in improving the lives of working people in Hawai'i are far too many to describe here, just a sampling of key programs and legislation she was involved in are: Hawai'i's landmark "Little Wagner Act", one of the few acts in the U.S. granting agricultural workers the right to unionize; the TDI Act, which requires employers to provide partial "wage replacement" insurance coverage to their eligible employees for nonwork-related injury or sickness, including pregnancy; an increase in

low-income housing in Ewa and Waipahu; and Hawai'i's landmark Pre-Paid healthcare act – the first in the nation to require employers to provide health care coverage for all workers working over 20 hours per week. Finally, the act establishing the Hawai'i Health Authority is dedicated to her. AQ also served on the Board of Regents, her intellectual and thoughtful political presence is deeply missed, especially during this time. For more on Ah Quon McElrath, including a movie being produced recognizing her contributions, please visit: laborhistory-hawaii.org.

[Snapshots of Labor Women in the Present: Strengths, Challenges in the Pandemic, and the Future of Labor](#)

[United Public Workers \(UPW\)](#)

“When the city or the state privatizes public sector work, it means that more vulnerable people in Hawai'i are relegated to jobs with lower wages, fewer benefits, and less protections.

-Rachel Gibson

For the past four years, Rachel Gibson has been a business agent at UPW. Her current jurisdiction is representing civil service workers at the University of Hawai'i, the City & County of Honolulu, and Hawai'i State Hospital. Her introduction to the labor movement in Hawai'i came during her experiences as an intake worker for Child Protective Services in the State of Utah, which is a RTW state. As a result, Rachel is able to explain the contrast between a state with high union density and a RTW state for public workers. For example, in Hawai'i, public workers accrue vacation leave and sick leave. In Utah, Rachel had 14 days of leave for the entire year; vacation and sick leave combined. In Hawai'i, UPW contracts provide 21 days of sick leave and 21 days of vacation leave annually. At UPW, her work involves contract enforcement, assisting with representation in disciplinary proceedings, FMLA and worker safety violations. When I asked her what she perceived was the biggest threat to organize labor, she didn't hesi-

tate: privatization. Her concerns are validated. According to the Department of Human Resources Development, in the past five years there has been a steady decline of 1,609 civil service positions in the DOE, and 1,535 positions in public hospitals.

These aren't high paying jobs, many averaging \$3000/month, but they do include important benefits like sick leave; and the majority of civil service workers (63%) are women. These workers are the aunties in the kitchen in public schools, the food service workers trained in food-handling; the custodians trained in safety procedures who know our kids' names at schools; the neighbor who opens and maintains the community pool or works as a nurses aid; the grounds workers who trim trees, improve the aesthetics of public spaces, and design sustainable landscaping.

Civil service workers are the heart of the community, and most often, the lowest paid are women of color. The hardest hit have been public hospital jobs. As an interesting side note, in 1970 the population in Hawai'i was 770,000 and Hawai'i boasted 31 Hospitals and 5,021 beds. Today, Hawai'i has 3,069 beds and 28 hospitals and the population has doubled in size to 1.4 million.

Rachel is worried that Hawai'i is losing a central workforce of people who maintain the health of the economy and quality of life for the citizens of Hawai'i. She states that the primary complaint from the people she represents is that the state is not filling civil service worker vacancies, so when workers fall behind in their work, the unions are blamed, which is then used to justify outsourcing to private contractors. In other words, it's a setup. She states that although she knows public workers could face retrenchment, she finds it offensive that the poorest workers should pick up the bill.

[Hawai'i State Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations \(HI AFL-CIO\)](#)

The national AFL-CIO is a federation of unions representing more than 12

million working people. It is by far, the largest organization fighting for workers' rights in the United States. In 1966, 160 representatives from 44 unions form the Hawai'i State AFL-CIO. Two women provide key services at the Hawai'i State Federation of Labor: Dion Dizon (HI AFL-CIO, Committee on Political Education) and Cathy Lederer (HI AFL-CIO, Labor Community Services Program). The following highlights the sense of community they share:

"I wanted to respond immediately, because I haven't forgotten what it feels like to be afraid of the unknown and to operate from that fear-based space. When the

pandemic hit, I went to my board; the first thing we did was step up food distributions for the islands, increase the Utilities Program, and offer virtual Learning Sessions."

-Cathy Lederer

Cathy Lederer's family roots are from the plantations on Maui. She says her parent's generation had a penchant toward believing in doing things for the "greater good" and it takes a village to make things work. She is the youngest of 7 children and believes she was raised with a sense of collective action because of her parents. All the children had to pitch in at their home from making and

cleaning up at meals to food distributions; everyone has to pitch in to make things work. Her response to the pandemic was to immediately coordinate food distributions, increase their Utilities Program, and continue with outreach education through virtual Learning Session. Topics covered emergency housing assistance, financial help, communicating during difficult times, and tools for online organizing. The Learning Session goal is to offer information that is responsive to current issues so people can make informed decisions. She is especially proud of the many union volunteers at the food distributions that have been taking place since March and are still operating on Oahu and Maui. Some volunteers come out every week. There are unions like IATSE, where all of its members are out of work due to COVID who volunteer gladly, wanting to do something to help our community. They are an example of how we need to come together to emerge out of this crisis. Cathy also coordinates large scale, union driven community service events such as the "Labor of Love" which is a collaboration of unions, organizations, and businesses that partner together to improve Hawai'i Public Schools. She feels when we unite, we build healthier and stronger communities.

Cathy believes the key to the future lies in education and welcoming new energy to the labor community. She also believes during this unprecedented time, it is of great importance to be flexible and patient with each other and to not deal with obstacles alone, but together, as a community.

"I've tried to involve my family when I could, I brought them to the food distribution to support during the pandemic - I've brought them to involve them in community service. It's called "forced family fun" but that's what we do. It's a family value that we share." -Dion Dizon

Dion Dizon's orientation to workers' rights and social justice came from her mother and grandfather. Her grandfa-

ther told stories of living in a cave on Moloka'i as a child. While working at Pu'u O Hoku Ranch on Molokai, her great-grandfather had an argument with the foreman (luna) who then kicked him and his family out of worker housing. Left with nowhere to go, he moved the family to a cave on Moloka'i that had fresh water running through it. Her great-grandparents worked with Father Damien on Kalaupapa, and eventually became caretakers of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Parish on Molokai. Her family background in Molokai frames her dedication to the importance of involving the whole family in community service. Growing up, she remembers being influenced by the statewide teachers' strikes, and how her mother and aunt who went on strike twice in their teaching careers still remember who crossed the picket lines. The "scabs" got paid during the strike and benefited from the new contract, and their tight-knit community never forgot that fact. Her family values are "everybody pitches in" and her community involvement reflects that - her community involvement is diverse and extensive, volunteering for the State of Hawaii Hunter Education Program, Aloha United Way, the Mediation Center of the Pacific, and native Hawaiian cultural activities. She developed her own relationship with labor during her time as a rank and file member of OPEIU Local 277 where she was able to contribute to collective bargaining agreements and volunteer on multiple labor committees, including the Labor Education Advisory Council. Dion also believes that the power to defend the interests of working people lies in their labor, how they spend their money, and their vote. As the parent of two in college, she believes the younger generation does carry a sense of justice but tend to only look at the hourly wage or salary, and not long-term benefits. She believes we need to teach them their value as working people, and that includes knowing how to work together towards a common good. In terms of the future of labor in Hawai'i, she believes in succession planning - any organization is doomed without it.

UNITE HERE, Local 5

In 1938, the year Local 5 was chartered, it was common for women in the hotel industry to work 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. Paid sick leave, medical plans, pensions, free uniforms were unheard of. The best positions were kept for White males and Filipinos were confined to room boys or kitchen helpers. The average monthly earnings: Caucasian men \$102.90/mo; Japanese \$56.30; Filipinos \$50.10. By 1954, Local 5 was one of the first unions to secure maternity leave. In addition, protections against sexual harassment were one of the demands of the 2018 strike. The next snapshot will focus on two women at Local 5, Morgan Evans (Lead Organizer) and Paola Rodelas (Communications) and the perspectives they bring to labor in Hawai'i.

As someone who worked for years in the lowest paid jobs in a RTW state, I'm hypersensitive about protecting the rights and standards we have in Hawai'i. When we see employers not paying breaks or holiday pay, we have to be careful to not get complacent as to how much we give away and who runs and owns our state.

-Morgan Evans

Morgan Evans (UNITE HERE, Local 5 Organizing Director) was born and raised in a small town in Georgia where the average annual earnings for women is \$26,800. Growing up in Georgia (a RTW state) she adds, "I was accustomed to not having any rights on the job. I was working for minimum wage in the service industry and I had managers take my tips. I was conditioned that that was ok." Her experiences seeing the vulnerability of hardworking people motivated her to want to do something about it, and then a neighbor mentioned labor unions, so she applied. At the interview, the anger and realization of the injustice she faced as a low paid service worker in a RTW state became the impetus of her work. After she accepted the organizer position, she added that it was the only time she was ever a "no call, no show" for a shift. As a graduate of Richardson Law School, Morgan states that she learned

what little the law does to protect workers. Her law degree helps her in understanding strike laws and the risk/assessment process. She has worked as a boycott organizer, a customer organizer, and an organizer of non-union workers at Local 5. In terms of the future, Morgan warns that in the hotel industry in Hawai'i, local hotel ownership has been replaced by private equity. She brilliantly suggests site-based coalition building in order to protect workers, similar to the way businesses and employers build coalitions representing their interests in the energy, construction, travel industry, on the docks, and in the Chamber of Commerce. She says, while it's great that Hawai'i is 25% unionized, that still leaves 75% workers "at-will". She empathizes with restaurant workers and grocery clerks who didn't sign up to enforce regulations as an additional responsibility. In terms of the future, she sees millennials working multiple jobs, with incredible burdens like not being able to afford a home or facing a future of parents with no pension, but she also sees them as tremendously giving and involved in the union. She strongly believes the way out of this crisis is electing working people to positions of leadership.

"You are told your whole life to work hard, go to college, and get a job. But my parents lost their home during the recession, and I was in the workforce feeling like everything was a lie." -Paola Rodelas

Paola Rodelas (Communications) grew up in San Diego and had a natural interest in Ethnic Studies and Immigrant Rights. As an immigrant from the Philippines, she saw her parents working multiple jobs, as did she after she graduated from college during the height of the recession. She had heard about unions in Ethnic Studies but noted that unions were discussed more as something of the past, with no modern context. While working multiple jobs an acquaintance mentioned that a PR firm was hiring. What she didn't know was the PR firm was hired by anti-union right-wing interests intent on going after the teachers union at her alma-mater. She describes it as "soul-sucking work", but she was

inspired to see how the teachers' union fought back and exposed the corruption of the school board, which was taking bribes from the construction industry funding the attacks on the teachers' union. She states that it gave her a unique opportunity to see how far companies would go to discredit unions, and she learned about how powerful unions can be in fighting corruption. In her work in communications at Local 5, she does everything from graphics design to media campaigns, but she also enjoys directly working with the community through educational outreach to local high schools. Paola is also seen gently encouraging members to speak publicly at events and rallies and leading chants during direct actions and strikes – all while photographing the events as well. In addition, UNITE HERE has been at the forefront of immigration reform and immigrant education, and Paola's played a key role in organizing them. In terms of the occupational shifts during the pandemic, during our interview Paola rightly observed that Hawai'i has been here before, and that workers previously transitioned from plantation to tourism. She wonders what the next transition will be? However she also noted that in her work in communications, general questions on the website are forwarded to her. One of the most common questions she deals with are from workers across all aspects of the workforce wanting to unionize. There's a hunger for it, she says.

International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW)

"We have to work more in cooperation with each other as unions, and I think we generally do that in Hawai'i. There is plenty of organizing potential. We have to be attentive to our members, transparent,

and accountable to our members. Just build accountability and transparency into the fabric of your organization".

-Maria Santiago Lillis

Maria Santiago Lillis has been organizing for IAM since 1996, and was appointed as Grand Lodge Representative with the International in 1997. Under her leadership, Local 1998 has grown to represent approximately 3600 federal and private sector bargaining unit members and doubled the number of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBA's) from 14 to now over 30. Because these CBA's are held with employers in both private and federal sector areas, Maria deals with federal law, national labor law and state regulations. She jokes that she represents workers from "womb to tomb" including the Tripler Army Medical Center and the Punchbowl Cemetery. Similar to Ah Quon McElrath, Maria's background in sociology and counseling has proven useful in her work from responding to the needs of members to understanding intimidation tactics at the bargaining table. She has successfully run multiple campaigns, and credits her success to being nurtured by Local 1998's Executive Board, her General Vice Presidents, and several Grand Lodge Representatives on the West Coast. She especially prides herself on winning back-pay or lost wages for her members. She explained how these gains not only restore economic loss, but dignity in one's work. She has developed authentic relationships with member ohana by paying close attention to everything, from the beer they like, to knowing and asking about their families. She built multiple relationships and connections to the community in her previous experiences working in Waianae, Pearl Harbor, Castle Medical Center, and Kamehameha Schools Bishop Estate. Maria has a reputation for fairness, creating a welcoming and empowering space for members. Her first priority is the safety of the members, which comes across clearly when she's talking about her work, especially to employers. By placing safety as central in bargaining, her work influences the safety of the community. She is strong, focused, and

refuses to "take the bait" intended to shake her as a woman during contract negotiations. The biggest challenge she sees to labor at present are subcontracts or service contracts intentionally designed to confuse who the actual employer is, the political landscape, and the non-competition clauses in contracts non-represented workers are now expected to sign. Her advice is to know the law, nurture seeds, and build the resilience necessary to find the clarity in spite of misinformation and confusion.

This cross-section of and snapshot of women in labor in Hawai'i in no way represents the contributions of women as a whole. Just to name a few, Joanne Kealoha, Eadie Omanaka, and President Donna Domingo at ILWU; Irish Barber, President of IATSE continue carrying forward the work of AQ and Helen, and so many others. The perspectives and experiences these women bring are direct and unmediated by books or the cushion of a trust fund. Given that the majority of nurses, teachers, hotel cleaners, secretaries and food servers are women, the health of the State of Hawaii depends on listening to their suggestions and heeding their warnings.

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Leslie Lopez, Ph. D. specializes in labor education curriculum development at the Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR) at the University of Hawai'i at West O'ahu. She is currently developing and teaching courses in Labor Studies. A licensed teacher, Leslie has worked in teacher education and faculty development, and at a college preparatory school for Native American students where she won Teacher of the Year. Leslie is also the co-founder, board member and organizer for LaborFest Hawai'i.