



Cathy Tombow of Cleveland Women Working gives attorney Donald McCann carrots as prize for the "Pettiest Office Procedure," August 24, 1977.

WORKING 9 TO 5 OHIO WOMEN'S PUSH FOR EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

By Melissa Ricksecker

THE 2016 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OFFERED the fulfillment of a long-fought battle by women's rights activists in America when a major party selected a woman to be its candidate for the United States presidency. Feminists were elated when Nancy Pelosi — the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House — proclaimed from the podium of the Democratic National Convention, "We are preparing to shatter the highest glass ceiling in our country." First Lady Michelle Obama stated optimistically that, "Because of Hillary Clinton, my daughters — and all our sons and daughters — now take for granted that a woman can be president of the United States."

The 2016 presidential campaign provided a grand stage on which some bitter truths about the state of feminism and gender equality in America were brought into the spotlight. The campaign emboldened extremist

hate groups, including anti-feminists. In the guise of plain or honest speaking, extremist rhetoric was brought into the mainstream. In his inflammatory anti-feminist rant on *Breitbart News*, "How To Make Women Happy: Uninvent the Washing Machine and the Pill," for example, British journalist and alt-right celebrity Milo Yiannopoulos opined, "This is the world that feminist propaganda has created: a world of unhappy women and feminine men, where self-medication, childlessness and slaving away in a cubicle are touted as the path to utopia."

Ultimately, the glass ceiling was not shattered. Republican candidate Donald J. Trump won the Electoral College vote, becoming the 45th president of the United States, even while Clinton won the popular vote. According to CNN exit polls, although 70 percent of all respondents said that Donald Trump's treatment of women bothered them, 52 percent of white women (and 88 percent of Republican women) voted for him over Hillary Clinton. As American journalist and author

Michelle Goldberg noted in the online magazine *Slate*, “On Tuesday, faced with a choice between a highly competent if uncharismatic female candidate and the deranged distillation of the angry white male id, America chose the latter.”

By the time the term “glass ceiling” was popularized in 1986 by a *Wall Street Journal* special report describing the invisible barriers that prevented women from reaching the top of the corporate hierarchy, the push for women’s equality in the workplace had already blossomed across the country. In the 1970s, feminist consciousness-raising groups had evolved into working women’s advocacy groups such as Cleveland Women Working (CWW). Founded in 1975, CWW was an organization of working women concerned about equal opportunity rights for office workers in the United States and especially in the Cleveland area. They counseled and educated women about legal rights and job problems, and advocated for women with discrimination problems. In addition, they monitored government agencies that enforce anti-discrimination laws and specific employers for compliance with the law, publicizing their findings and issuing special reports based in their research. Speaking in Cleveland in 1978, actress and activist Jane Fonda called CWW “one of the strongest of the number of working women’s organizations springing up around the country.”

In 1977, CWW merged with a Boston association called 9to5 to form a national organization, the Cleveland-based Working Women Organizing Project (WWOP). Boston 9to5 had its origins in December 1972, when a small group of female office workers published “9to5,” an eight-page newsletter for office workers. With humor and empathy, anecdotes and facts, it laid out the case for working women to come together in solidarity. By 1973, the newsletter had evolved into a grassroots collective for women office workers that addressed issues which at the time had no names — pay equity, lack of opportunities for advancement, sexual harassment and family leave. In 1983, WWOP changed its name to 9to5, The National Association of Working Women, to reflect its national focus and reach. It was headquartered in Cleveland until 1993, when President Bill Clinton appointed 9to5 leader Karen Nussbaum to the U.S. Department of Labor. The national organization moved to Milwaukee, with Ellen Bravo as executive director, but maintained a national office in Cleveland.

The group’s aim was also to create an organization that could organize office workers, but practical gains

proved to be difficult. Early collective members often faced a wall of indifference and inaction on the part of their employers. In 1975, 9to5 co-founders Nussbaum and Ellen Cassidy decided the time was right to create a union for clerical workers. They launched Local 925 in Boston in partnership with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). In Cleveland, stakeholders expanded upon this idea in 1981 by forming SEIU District 925 in order to organize office workers into chapters throughout the country. In a 2005 interview about the District 925 legacy, John Sweeney, president of SEIU in the 1980s, recalled, “9to5 workers . . . realized that eventually they had to achieve some form of collective bargaining and that they had to be part of a bigger, stronger movement, that they couldn’t just do it by themselves, that they needed more resources.”

In the years 9to5 was headquartered in Cleveland, organizers continued to do important work on the national level. They moved the needle on women’s equality in the workplace through documented research and direct action: testifying before Congress, counseling women on the 9to5 Job Problem Hotline, educating about legal rights through publications such as *The 9to5 Office Worker’s Survival Guide* (1982) and *The 9to5 Guide to Sexual Harassment* (1992), and attempting to increase public awareness of the problems women face in the workplace. National victories included the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, improvements in the Civil Rights Act of 1991, and the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA). They initiated a federal investigation of employment practices in Cleveland banks, held government hearings to document discrimination, published class-action charges against employers and campaigned to increase office security and equipment safety. 9to5, National Association of Working Women, is still an active organization with chapters in Atlanta, California, Colorado and Milwaukee, but is no longer active in the Cleveland area.

District 925 (the union) and 9to5 (the association) used humor and a light touch to raise community consciousness and address serious concerns about the issues facing women clerical workers. Speaking in 2006 about the District 925 legacy, Chicago-based community organizer Heather Booth recalled that the members, “were such a breath of fresh air. They were so bold and interesting and fun and insightful and energetic and skillful and dedicated. And the energy and spirit around them was just really moving.”

Ohio Humanities provided critical early funding for *The 9to5 PROJECT*, a one-hour television documentary and interactive website that tells the story of the movement to gain respect, rights, and raises for U.S. clerical workers, the vast majority of whom were women. The project fills in a missing chapter in the history of both the second wave women’s movement and the labor movement. The project’s organizers leveraged the support from Ohio Humanities to secure major grants from other funders, including the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Project Director Julia Reichert is a veteran filmmaker who has directed three Oscar-nominated documentaries, *Union Maids* (1976), *Seeing Red* (1984) and *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (co-directed with Steven Bognar) (2010). *Union Maids* and *Seeing Red* were primetime specials on PBS and also had robust theatrical runs. *The Last Truck* was aired during prime time on HBO. Her 1971 film *Growing Up Female*, which she co-created with Jim Klein, was inducted into the National Film Registry in 2011.

One of four posters from the 1982 Pay Equity Campaign by SEIU and 9to5, National Association of Working Women, September 1982.

(OPPOSITE PAGE)
Making waves in the office typing pool are Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton in an outrageous comedy of three women who dream about getting even with their chauvinist boss.

“What a man needs is to come home and get a couple of martinis from a woman who is reasonably well-rested.”

Sen. Jeremiah Denton
(R-Alabama), 1982



From the more than 50 percent of women who work outside their homes, the political message for the 1980s is clear: “What we need is to be recognized and paid fully and fairly for the work that we do—and we don’t intend to rest until we get it.”

Pay Equity. Another step toward justice.

Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, CLC • 9to5, National Association of Working Women

One project they organized was a contest to identify the “Pettiest Office Procedure.” CWW’s Mary Jung and a small band of office workers handed out leaflets in front of downtown office buildings over the lunch hour. The contest was a huge success. The winner — a boss on a new diet who had instructed his secretary to go to a specific market to get him fresh carrots every day, chop them up in a particular way and present them to him at lunchtime — was announced at a press conference covered by the *Cleveland Press* and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. This consciousness-raising project resulted in great press coverage for the five years that it continued.

The group received national attention in 1978, when Nussbaum appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show* in an episode titled “Working Women in Revolt.” In 1980, the hit movie *Nine to Five*, based on the 9to5 movement and starring Jane Fonda, Dolly Parton, Lily Tomlin and Dabney Coleman, drew from the real life experiences of women clerical workers and touched millions of people on a comedic level with a serious message about workplace oppression.

DISTRICT 925 IN CINCINNATI

“Organizing clerical workers means working among women who may have little experience with unions or activism,” Bravo wrote in her 2007 book *Taking on the Big Boys: Or Why Feminism is Good for Families, Businesses and the Nation*. This was certainly true in

Cincinnati, where in 1988, SEIU District 925 organized at the University of Cincinnati. Longtime 9to5 activist Debbie Schneider had moved to Cincinnati in 1984 to organize the clerical workers at the university. The first drive to unionize in 1986 failed. The university ran a letter campaign to dissuade workers from unionizing. Letters warning about dues, strikes, corruption and a loss of flexibility were sent to workers, who were advised that they would “lose your autonomy, your ability to be an individual, the relationships you have,” according to Schneider. The union lost by 29 votes as workers demurred from an initiative that their employer — the biggest in the city — didn’t want.

When District 925 tried again two years later, they won. In bitter and lengthy contract negotiations, the university threatened to take away workers benefit packages, which included generous sick leave, free tuition for their children and good health benefits. Schneider recalled, “the president of the university was really very anti-union, and his whole personnel department was.” In a letter to the editor of the Cincinnati *News Record*, William C. Lodge, the university’s director of employee/labor relations, warned that if the University accepted the union’s demands, students would suffer by paying higher tuition.

The members of District 925 in the departments of Math & Computer Science and Romance Languages fired back with a letter to the editor pointing out the inaccuracies and misleading information. They



concluded with an admonition that “the people who can afford it the least [shouldn’t] be victims of where the University decides to draw the line on cost increases. . . . We believe that now is the time to draw the line on what is taken away from us.” The university’s tactic had backfired. Workers were infuriated that their employer would try to take away their family benefits. More women joined the union, and wore buttons emblazoned with the letters WIT (Whatever it Takes).

Humor played a role in the Cincinnati District 925 playbook as well. “We were very creative about our tactics,” Schneider recalled. “We never felt bound by ‘this is the way unions have always done things.’” In one mini-strike, union leaders took workers on a tour of buildings where lavish expenditures had been made. “Workers were marching through those buildings with whistles and noisemakers, with the press in tow. For a workforce that’s always invisible, it was very powerful to make a big scene.”

Schneider became the national president of District 925 in 1993, when Nussbaum went to the Department of Labor. While president of the national union, she stayed on as the regional director in Cincinnati, actively bargaining and organizing for the union.

THE DISTRICT 925/9TO5 ASSOCIATION LEGACY

When District 925 launched, office workers were one of the largest, lowest-paid, most-exploited and least-unionized segments of the nation’s workforce.

District 925 helped to legitimize “women’s issues” in the workplace as union issues. The union organized women, tackled pay inequity, addressed issues such as family and medical leave, and propelled women into national labor leadership positions — all during a time of great social and technological change. For the next 20 years, District 925 operated as a national local of the SEIU, operating in a number of cities across the country, including Cleveland and Cincinnati. District 925 dissolved in 2001 when it consolidated with other SEIU locals.

The 9to5 association has celebrated hard-won victories over the past 40 years, including the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 and greater investments in child care and health care for working families. The organization has been instrumental in winning state and local victories on these same policy issues, as well as higher wages, paid sick days, parental leave for workers, income and work supports, civil rights, community benefits agreements and policies that support pay equity — all of which benefit the lowest-paid workers in our communities.

The inspiring history of the 9to5 women’s movement in Ohio is instructive of how we can move forward today, when the climate for women in America feels hostile and retrograde. The ultimate glass ceiling has yet to be broken, but the stories of women’s resilience and creativity in the battle for their rights as workers shows that we can move forward. ♥