

Q&A interview

An interview with Margaret Blackshere

You have to work hard; you also have to be lucky

By JENNIFER HALPERIN

Along with her name, title and other job- related information, Margaret Blackshere has a small green shamrock printed on her business cards. A symbol of pride in Irish heritage, Blackshere's shamrock also seems like a nod to the luck she says helped catapult her from a kindergarten teaching position in downstate Madison, Ill., to her current position as secretary-treasurer of the Illinois AFL-CIO.

Her high-level labor involvement has taken her around the world. In the last few years, she has been part of trade union delegations to Central America, Bulgaria and Chechoslovakia. Not many women have moved into such lofty positions in their state labor organisations — a fact that Blackshere says encourages her to work hard and do her best to represent the interests of the labor movement. But in the often cantankerous political atmosphere of the Illinois General Assembly — where the Republican-controlled Senate is decidedly pro-business — this can be a challenging goal.

Q: Did you imagine this is where you'd end up?

A: Absolutely not. Not as a kindergarten teacher. I thought that was what I was going to do the rest of my life. And then I got involved in politics to try to pass a referendum in Madison, Ill., and I got bit by the bug. I'm from a town that is very steel-oriented. The Metro East area is heavily union, so I was very aware of labor issues. Then I married a man who was in the Teamsters, so I knew about the labor movement through his job. When I started teaching with a bachelor's degree, I made \$3,500 a year in the 1960s. The superintendent said to us, "Next year I'll be able to give you a raise." And we went to him the next year and he said, "Well, it still doesn't look like we'll be able to do it." We thought this was a lie. He lied to us. So by 1968 we went on strike for five weeks. We were threatened with jail. But we wanted to make a difference and improve things. It wasn't so much the money; we wanted to have some say in things like textbook selection and building designs for new schools going up. Once you get the opportunity to participate, you never give it up. You fight to keep it. I eventually became a lobbyist for the Illinois Federation of Teachers (1977-1993) before coming over here.

Q: Do you draw on your own experiences as a union member when you advocate for AFL-CIO members' needs?

A: It helps. But while teaching can be a frightening experience sometimes, some of these people

really are risking their lives all the time. I think of some of the workers whose jobs I wouldn't ever, ever want to have unless it was strictly to feed my family — iron workers out on scaffolding, mine workers going underground. Then I wonder why anyone would think any safety conditions that could help wouldn't be worth the money they would cost. It's amazing to me. Like with Senate Republicans wanting to make the scaffolding act voluntary. I don't think very many companies would enforce it if it were voluntary. Laws were created because things were voluntary. That's what no law is — voluntary participation in something. Law makes you do something.

Q: Does public opinion steer legislators' votes on such issues, or do other forces?

A: I think it all depends. I've had legislators say to me that only about 10 or 15 issues really generate mail or remarks from their constituents. So a lot of decisions are made 'in-house,' so to speak. There are some thoughtful legislators who consider how things affect the whole state, and there are those who think of their own constituents, their own county, their own district. That's how we get into pitting downstate versus suburban versus the city. It can be very difficult to convince someone of the importance of protecting people who are high up in the air on an I-beam without scaffolding when such a building is never going to happen in their district.

Q: What kind of perceptions would you like to change when it comes to labor in Illinois?

A: I can't understand how some people can keep saying over and over and over again that businesses don't come to Illinois because we have awful worker's compensation rates. That's bullshit — that's the only way of putting it. It simply isn't so. For one thing, we do have businesses coming to Illinois. And we have a wonderful labor-management system working in Bloomington (with the Diamond Star company). If you ride through that town, it is regenerated. And that was done with the United Auto Workers there from the get-go.



Margaret Blackshere

That was done with the worker's comp rates we currently have. The company still came. We have Motorola coming into northern Illinois. Why'd they come if we're so terrible? We're not. I'm sick and tired of Illinois worker's comp rates being compared to Iowa's. I want to be compared to Pennsylvania and Ohio and Michigan. When you compare us to industrial states like ourselves, we do swell.

Q: How rare is it for a woman to hold a position like yours in labor?

A: There are 50 state AFL-CIO federations, and they all have a president and a secretary-treasurer. Three other women are state officers, and none is in an industrial state. Illinois has the third-largest state AFL-CIO, and of the top 10, the officers are all men except for myself. It's interesting going to national meetings and having yourself always identified as one of the few women in this position. I can't tell you how many nice notes I got from strangers — women who are involved in the labor movement — who have looked at stages and daises of their labor meetings and always seen all-male faces. It just inspires you to try to do better. It's a real

humbling kind of thing to think that this little school that I started out at could end up producing someone that people think of as somebody special.

I often have said to my children and to young people I work with that two things have to happen if you want to get places: You have to work hard. But you also have to be lucky. If you don't work hard, it won't happen out of luck. But there are a lot of people who work very hard who don't get the opportunities that I have had. As a mother and grandmother, I feel very comfortable seeking to improve what happens to women in this society without the expense of my sons' success. I don't want to do to men what happened to women. I just want them to move together.

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