

# The Changing Role of Labor Education

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*Labor education is a discipline particularly vulnerable to a corporate mindset in higher education. Today, these programs face state budget cuts, declining union membership and an increasing focus on organizing, rather than education, on the part of labor unions. The author addresses what these threats mean for the structure and research agenda of labor education programs and what avenues may be taken to address the future. —Editors*

Labor education programs at public colleges and universities in the United States are facing a triple threat to their continued existence. State universities are facing budget cuts in the hundreds of millions.<sup>i</sup> Unionization rates have fallen—to the lowest level since the 1930s—and as a result, the number of potential students in labor education programs has declined.<sup>ii</sup> Finally, unions are diverting resources from education programs to organizing efforts as they recognize that growth has become the most critical task facing them today.<sup>iii</sup> This paper addresses what these threats mean for the structure and research agenda of labor education programs, and how the labor movement must serve as a counterbalancing force to ensure that research and education do not ignore the values of working-class America.

## **The Role of Labor Education Programs**

At American colleges and universities, labor education programs fill a unique educational niche. First and foremost, they are adult education programs aimed at producing a unionized workforce that has the education and skills necessary for dealing with an increasingly mobile and corporate culture. They differ from the education programs offered by labor unions themselves in that they serve a much greater variety of clients within the labor movement, including state, regional or international labor unions and federations, as well as

labor-management cooperation committees and individuals who want to gain further knowledge about labor issues.

### **Historical origins**

Labor education programs have their roots in the progressive movement of the early 20th century, with the first organized university program being founded in the 1920s at the University of Wisconsin's School for Workers.

The prevailing style of unionism prior to the New Deal was “craft” unionism. These unions, comprised of skilled tradesmen, controlled wages by controlling the supply of trained workers. With that methodology in mind, most of these unions provided their own training in the form of apprenticeships. But with the arrival of the New Deal, a new type of unionism arose. Industrial unions organized *all* workers in an industry, without regard to skill level. This massive organizing effort brought millions of people into the labor movement who had no ties to previous union members. Whole new groups became union members for the first time, including African Americans, women and immigrant groups, previously excluded from participating in the labor movement.

These new members lacked the history of the craft unionists and needed to be educated about what it meant to be a union member. The industrial unions established their own training programs, but found that was not enough. Ultimately, they used their newfound political power to convince state legislatures to establish college-based labor education programs in states (now referred to as the Rust Belt) where labor's influence and collective voice were the strongest. As a result, between 1935 and 1950 many labor education programs were established. <sup>iv</sup>

In more recent years, public-sector and white-collar workers have joined the labor movement, offering a different challenge to labor education programs. These workers have a need for credentials, in order to receive promotions or certifications. Labor education programs thus began offering certificate and college-credit programs. Examples include Indiana University's Division of Labor Studies, which offers a Bachelor of Science in Labor Studies, and UMass Amherst, which offers a Master's degree in Labor Studies.<sup>v</sup>

### **Educational services to labor organizations**

One way that labor education programs serve labor organizations is by providing contractual, customized education to the various unions. These programs

frequently enhance local apprenticeship programs, offering labor history or classes on organizing and servicing a diverse membership. They also offer basic labor skills classes, such as grievance handling and collective bargaining. Additionally, programs involving more advanced topics, such as arbitration and theories of the labor movement, are offered.

### **Educational services to individuals**

Labor education programs serve individuals in two different ways: non-credit, general knowledge programs and credit-granting degree programs. The non-credit courses are designed to produce a more educated labor movement, without individual acknowledgement, while those offered for credit are designed to give individual recognition to persons who complete degree-level courses.

For the most part, labor education classes are restricted to current union members and help provide an avenue for members to reach different levels of responsibility within their unions. There is, however, ongoing discussion among labor educators about the proper universe of potential students—some believing that only union members should be the target group, with others believing that all of the working class should be the target. Some programs are offering classes directly aimed at recent immigrants—often taught in immigrants' native languages. In addition, a push is on for labor education programs to offer classes at the grade school and high school levels, so students who are not currently exposed to unions, due to the decline of union density, are receiving labor movement exposure.

### **Research services**

Labor education programs support research that examines the role of collective action in the work world. Many labor educators publish on the subject of organizing, examining either past efforts<sup>vi</sup> or future tactics.<sup>vii</sup> Others publish about internal organizational strength. Still others publish about union commitment—the concept of how strongly individuals are connected with their unions. The educators in labor education programs are often cited in the popular press on labor issues, providing an independent source with credibility, friendly to the labor movement.

Labor education programs also help to provide information services to unions through work with other groups on campus.<sup>viii</sup> These include contract

research, access to information from research groups such as the National Bureau of Economic Research, training in use of and access to services such as LexisNexis™ and news collections. Some large unions provide these services from within, but smaller ones obtain help from university labor education centers.<sup>ix</sup> These centers are also able to handle databases, as well as provide a conduit for communication between unions and among unions, and with employers in labor-management cooperation groups. Databases can include contracts, possible organizing targets and important community contacts, as well as mailing lists of members. In the communications area, assistance can include providing Web training or even space.<sup>x</sup>

A new partnership between Indiana University and the Indiana State AFL-CIO is indicative of some of the possibilities. Organize Indiana Project (OIP), a Web site that is maintained by Indiana University's Division of Labor Studies, includes links to unions, research information and government sites. It also includes current news about labor and upcoming events of significant importance to the working people of Indiana.<sup>xi</sup>

### **Funding Issues for Labor Education Programs**

The University of Minnesota's Labor Education Program recently conducted a survey among university labor education programs. It examined the funding structures of the various programs currently in existence at U.S. universities and colleges. Twenty programs were found to be currently operating in states ranging from Maine to Hawaii and from Minnesota to Florida. The majority, however, are concentrated in the Rust Belt, encompassing the Northeast and upper Midwest. There is a gap between Nebraska and the West Coast; and only three programs are in the Deep South—at the University of Alabama, Georgia State and Florida International University (FIU).

Most programs receive the majority of funding from their respective states, although two schools receive less than 50 percent of funding from the state: the University of Oregon's program is funded at a 48 percent rate, while the University of Connecticut's program is moving toward zero funding from the state. A significant number of other programs get 60 percent to 70 percent of their funding from the state, including those at the University of Arkansas, Cornell, Iowa State University, and the Universities of Massachusetts, Minnesota and Missouri. Still other schools receive support for salaries only, such as FIU and Georgia State. The Universities of Alabama, Kentucky and

Maine are currently receiving 100 percent of their funding from their respective states.

### **State budget cuts**

The recession of 2001, along with the largest federal tax cut in history (which, among other things, redefined certain types of income as nontaxable), had a greatly negative effect on the revenue collected by the states. The combination of reduced taxable income, stock market losses and reduced personal income due to the recession cost states billions of dollars in revenue. For example, Illinois faced a \$5 billion budget deficit in fiscal year 2003-04, while California's deficit is an astronomical \$45 billion—more than the gross national income of 126 countries.<sup>xii</sup>

Budgetary problems seem to be universal among public universities. Examples from two universities with labor education programs illustrate this trend. The University of Illinois (UI) has suffered a 25 percent cut in state funding over the last two years, resulting in the elimination of 1,100 jobs, including 230 faculty lines. Its labor education program in particular has absorbed a 33 percent cut in faculty lines.<sup>xiii</sup> At the University of Wisconsin, state funding was slashed by \$250 million in fiscal year 2003.<sup>xiv</sup> The pioneering UW Industrial Relations Research Institute is slated to be eliminated as soon as the current students move on. Michigan State University (MSU) absorbed a \$31 million budget shortfall.<sup>xv</sup> Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, has gone through a series of budget cuts, placing the funding level lower than five years ago, despite escalating costs.<sup>xvi</sup>

While many of the programs continue to receive significant levels of funding from their respective states, there is definite downward pressure. At UI, for example, salaries for teaching staff are 100 percent funded, but recent cuts in the University's state allocation have resulted in two out of six positions going unfilled. The director has said that if a secure source of funding can be found to cover the salary of an additional person, one may be hired, but not with state money for the foreseeable future.

Referring to labor education programs at Iowa State University (ISU), university president Gregory Geoffroy expressed a common fact: "These are highly visible units that broaden and enrich the learning experience at Iowa State University. Unfortunately, when we're forced to reduce the university budget, these units

must rely even more heavily on fees for services and private giving to balance their budgets.”<sup>xvii</sup>

### **Searching for other funding sources**

If public funding is in decline, universities must obviously constrict their services or find funding from other sources. Other university programs have sought to make up for the public funding shortfall with grants from individual donors, foundations and corporations. Not surprisingly, these sources favor corporate-oriented programs and have not been a significant source of funding for labor education programs. In the absence of government funding for all public education and research, labor education must find funding from outside sources.

What other sources, then, do labor education programs turn to? The major alternative is program fees from clients. This includes fees charged to unions and tuition collected from individuals. Another major source is grants from the federal government. These include grants from the Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) and the Federal Mediation & Conciliation Service. Individual donors and foundations, such as the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, also provide funding for these programs.

Organized labor is clearly the obvious source of outside support. However, the labor movement is faced with its own threats to survival. The percentage of U.S. workers belonging to unions has been dropping ever since the Bureau of Labor Statistics has kept comparable statistics. Only 13.2 percent of U.S. workers belonged to unions in 2002—the lowest level since before the Wagner Act of 1935 was passed.<sup>xviii</sup> This is in stark contrast to the high of 20.1 percent in 1983, when the BLS first started tracking unionization rates.

There are many reasons for the decline in unionization rates, one of the most important being the loss of manufacturing jobs.<sup>xix</sup> Since 1998, 2.4 million manufacturing jobs have been lost. Among the most visible of these casualties is the heavily organized basic steel workers, as one steel company after another has gone bankrupt. And as a result of the reduction in numbers of unionized workers, the pool of students from which labor education programs draw has decreased.

There is little argument that union organizing has become the first priority for the American labor movement. With membership density at near-record lows,

the AFL-CIO has asked its affiliates to commit 30 percent of their budgets to organizing. This, of course, will require a reallocation of resources away from other elements of union activities, including labor education.

One casualty of this reallocation is the elimination of the AFL-CIO's Education Department. The department formerly produced educational materials, which were distributed to affiliate union education departments and labor education programs, allowing many unions and labor education programs to offer classes that presented a similar view on the labor movement. These included programs on popular economics to counter the corporate view of the world and materials to help with organizing. Since the demise of the education department, there is no single source for such materials.

### **Where, Then, Does Labor Education Go from Here?**

As long as labor education is not designated for complete public funding as an academic discipline, it seems clear that these programs need support from organized labor in order to survive. Direct support is critical, as is political support to help maintain state funding; however, at the present time, organizing is, and properly should be, the top concern for the labor movement. Without a sustaining number of members, the movement will become irrelevant to the vast majority of Americans. The survival of labor education, then, may depend on its ability to demonstrate a concrete connection to organizing.

A recent program in cooperation at FIU shows both the promise and problems associated with trying to change labor education in order to increase organizing. The South Florida Carpenters Regional Council contracted with the labor education program at FIU to offer organizing classes to both established residents and new immigrants. This series of classes reached into the core of the union and challenged some of the long-held beliefs of its membership, exposing significant rifts between the recent immigrants and the established workers. Had this series been run by internal union educators, it could have brought the union to its end. However, the presence of an "outside" university educator allowed the differences to be expressed without the union taking sides. The instructor states in his conclusion:

Although it is exceptionally hard to do, this type of education probably has a greater impact than conventional labor education classes. It truly unites theory with practice, education with

action. For that reason, it can be the most rewarding labor education ever undertaken by a labor educator.<sup>xx</sup>

Another example of the type of change that labor education programs need to make is improving union staff training to aid in the transformation. In many cases, union staff have little time for training and must learn on the job, even as the union movement changes around them. Labor education programs can offer these staff members an opportunity to pick up the necessary theory to go along with the practice they already possess.<sup>xxi</sup>

Another way to demonstrate relevance is through research designed to make a connection between labor education programs and eventual organizing success.<sup>xxii</sup> Prior research has shown that union participation leads to higher union commitment, which in turn leads to more organizing efforts.<sup>xxiii</sup> Recent research has suggested that there is a link between union members who participate in labor education and later union participation.<sup>xxiv</sup> Establishing a direct link between labor education and union organizing efforts should enable labor education programs to enlist the full cooperation of the labor movement in lobbying for the restoration of government funding for all public education and research.

These examples are illustrative of the kinds of connections that must be strengthened. Labor education departments can also explore the possibility of providing some of the services previously offered by the unions themselves, such as member education, research and publication. Finally, the supporters of labor education programs must make a major effort to convince organized labor that its support is essential to counterbalancing the increasing role of corporate America in our public colleges and universities.

## ENDNOTES

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