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DEVELOPING A LABOR RESEARCH AGENDA

by Bruce Poyer //

A faculty committee recently completed a five-year review of activities of the Institute of Industrial Relations at U.C. Berkeley. In response to some of the committee's suggestions and criticisms, the Institute's Center for Labor Education and Research is reviewing its applied research work, as it relates both to labor education programs, and to more academic kinds of research. In discussions so far, wide differences have surfaced on basic concepts of "research" in labor education. This *LCR* article offers some suggestions for further discussions of the need for "applied" research in labor education. A future *LCR* article will discuss further suggestions for improving the inputs of labor representatives and labor educators into more formal kinds of research, including academic.

A huge gap between "applied" and "academic" concepts of research has developed, partly from labor education programs. They may neglect research altogether, or make it specific and relevant only to particular times, or problems, or situations. Or they may focus primarily on basic training in the tools and skills of union representation, or other programs that do not require much applied research development. In addition, many labor organizations have limited interest or finances to support research of any kind. Some of their representatives believe that relative power or "clout" of the labor-management parties finally determines all issues. Others are concerned only with ad hoc efforts to support organizing or bargaining or legislative action of the moment; their common refrain is "whatever you can give us, we need it tomorrow."

On the other hand, faculty members develop the academic research function as their special province, although they maintain only a casual identification with workers, or with labor organizations, or even with labor education programs. Their primary interests are in theories at a high level of generality or abstraction, and in publishing for the limited consumption of colleagues, other research specialists, and regular students. Their work is seldom useful to labor leaders on the policy firing lines. Even those with special labor interests have had little direct impact on organized labor, except through arbitration activities.

Utilizing Existing Resources More Effectively

Labor research and education resources in California lag far behind those in industrial states like Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio; nonetheless, applied research might be developed and utilized more effectively in the following areas:

(1) Sharing more information on contract improvements

An important source of applied research is experience in collective bargaining. In these times of dominant employer power, labor shares too much gloomy experience from the struggle to survive take-backs, de-certifications, and other offensive tactics of employers and their lawyers. But both labor and management continue to develop new approaches which deserve more study and attention, especially in terms both of productivity and job security. These approaches include such basic experiments in labor-management cooperation as that of UAW and NUMMI in Fremont; profit-sharing plans and new uses of ESOPs; flexible work-scheduling; worker input in decision-making; job training and re-training programs; extensions of "contractual" leave time, including educational leaves; and child care programs. On these and other subjects which other negotiators might suggest, labor could share more positive experience and information to help extend basic improvements to more bargaining jurisdictions.

The Labor Center at U.C. Berkeley is sponsoring a series of discussions to develop inputs on these subjects, beginning with the UAW-NUMMI experiment. The negotiating and administrative experience to be shared in this series will come from those

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who have developed it. In the first program, which is announced in this mailing of *LCR*, it will come primarily from the plant workers and the UAW negotiating team at NUMMI. Applied research reports on this series will be developed by the Labor Center.

(2) Bargaining for health care:

In negotiating health benefits, labor organizations especially in the private sector have not been able to cope effectively with the organized power of hospitals, doctors, and other health care institutions and providers. Costs have soared beyond the efforts of individual unions or bargaining units to contain them, coverage has been reduced, and some employers even seek to eliminate altogether the health benefits of retirees. In 1989, costs of negotiated health benefits are expected to increase by as much as 20-30%. Thus more wage increases, which have been lean enough in recent years, will be transferred to pay higher health insurance premiums; more negotiated health benefits will be reduced; more out of pocket payments will be required of covered members; and these pressures will make bargaining more difficult. Labor's passive role as the collection and disbursement agency for a considerable segment of the health care industry is part of the growing problem of excessive health care cost inflation.

The Labor Center at U.C. Berkeley offers education and applied research services to labor on issues involving the cost, utilization, and quality of health care, and the organization and administration of negotiated health benefit programs. Some private sector unions and labor-management trust funds utilize these services, or relevant inputs from other sources. But most do not. As one result, private sector unions in California cannot match the level of health care protection which has been achieved for workers and retirees in the health benefits program of PERS (the Public Employees' Retirement System in California), although this program is a model which could be implemented by private sector unions. In addition, the education and applied research inputs that all labor organizations (both public and private sector) need for more effective health care bargaining become even more important as the state legislature begins to consider proposals to extend health benefits to many thousands of workers who now have little or no protection, including those in the growing "contingent" and "underground" labor force, and those who continually lose health care coverage from more frequent spells of unemployment.

(3) Bargaining for legislated worker security programs

Both workers and their elected union representatives necessarily concern themselves first with the "bread and butter" issues that arise in the workplace: job classifications and rates, work schedules; on-job working conditions, grievance and arbitration procedures, etc. In the process, not enough time and attention is given to legislated programs which offer important protection to workers who are sick (state disability insurance), disabled or in-

jured on the job (state Workers' Compensation and federal Social Security and SSI), or laid-off (state unemployment insurance and the federal Employment Service).

Labor organizations and labor educators could develop a broader base of union members who understand and keep up to date on the issues in legislated programs. More worker inputs could both define and support the positions of labor's legislative representatives. In this process, better use could be made of relevant applied research which is available; some of it comes from academic sources, but most flows continuously from government and private sources. Specifically, labor in California could make much better use of information and data on the organization, administration, and financing of Workers' Compensation, DI, and UI, and could raise the level of worker involvement in issues affecting these programs. Employers and their insurance industry allies have organized more effectively than labor in recent years to seek reductions in essential protection offered to workers in these and other state programs.

Nationally, both research and education about the Social Security system urgently needs higher priority on labor's agenda. Social Security offers the most basic protection that most working people have, for retirement and for disability and survivor protection. Yet our dialogue of recent years has been limited to cuts and threats to the system, now including the threat to use its growing reserves to finance national budget deficits. Social Security research and discussion lacks an essential focus on the positive potential for expanding our use of social insurance in basic worker security programs. State worker security programs which over-utilize expensive and wasteful commercial insurance need re-evaluation in that context, and labor's voice should be heard in the process. In this regard, the applied research inputs necessary for more effective labor education need considerable development in California, as our recent experience with Proposition 103 indicates.

(4) Bargaining on deferred wage issues:

Labor's need for dependable research inputs has been sufficiently demonstrated by the expropriation of more than \$17 billion in "surplus" pension fund assets by private sector employers, who continue to take advantage of a loophole in ERISA. Labor clearly needs assistance in defending against (a) the use of negotiated pension funds to buy junk bonds for high-risk take-overs (in some cases including risks to the pensions promised to the same workers whose jobs will be lost or downgraded); and (b) continuing employer efforts to replace more secure defined benefit pension plans with defined contribution plans (which shift the future benefit liability from the companies directly to the workers). Labor could also use more research inputs to assist in its efforts to exercise greater control over both the investment and the divestment (from South Africa, for example) of negotiated pension funds. Other forms of deferred wage bargaining, including the use of ESOPs, profit-sharing plans, and even worker,

ownership and control, have also become more common, and require new kinds of specialized labor research assistance.

(5) Bargaining on employee assistance programs:

Labor could encourage and facilitate more workplace experiments which help to alleviate drug and alcohol abuse through rehabilitation, and help to reduce the impact of AIDS, while protecting the rights and dignity of those afflicted with these diseases. Research inputs in the design and implementation of child care programs and facilities are also needed, especially on an inter-union basis, since the most effective programs usually extend beyond the collective bargaining jurisdictions of local unions. Such programs usually require coordination with community and area and state resources (and legislatures), and can therefore benefit from both applied research and educational assistance.

Conclusion

If labor educators broaden their view of the kinds of research that are relevant to the problems of today's labor organizations and today's workers, they could play a more active coordinating role in helping to organize and facilitate applied research

programs. In the process, they might even help to get academic researchers to give more direct attention at least to workers' problems (if not to the institutional problems of labor organizations). Labor itself could help that effort, by considering and articulating what is relevant and what is needed.

Labor should realize that there will never be enough labor educators or researchers in California (or in any other state) to support labor's goals and efforts strictly on a local union basis. More effective assistance, especially with applied research, can be rendered on particular problems which labor both identifies and organizes itself to meet on an inter-union basis. Many of these problems, as suggested above, also require research (and education) that is planned and coordinated to address inter-related approaches in contract negotiations, in the community, and in local, state, and national administrative or legislative bodies.

The current re-evaluation of research activities at the Institute of Industrial Relations at U.C. Berkeley opens the door for labor to make suggestions to labor educators, academicians, and University administrators. Labor's inputs are especially needed to develop a more relevant and useful applied research agenda.

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