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DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LABOR RESEARCH

by Bruce Poyer

LCR 255 (January 1989) suggested some topics that labor should consider developing for its own research agenda. This article suggests topics which labor officials and labor educators should begin to develop in order to bring worker interests and concerns into the research work of others.

No One Says It Will Be Easy!

Labor in California gets little academic support for its direct institutional interests. For example, the U.C. Regents voted a few years ago to retain expensive legal assistance to help convince U.C. employees not to opt for unions and collective bargaining. The Regents thus ensured that communication between labor and academics would thereafter be even more difficult than it has been historically.

Academics, however, do not consult with the Regents when they develop their research and publication priorities. They do hear from many sources about the interests of employers and managers. They need to hear more from labor representatives about the basic interests of all workers, whether organized in unions or not. Labor leaders and educators could also do more to influence other kinds of research that neglects workers and their needs, including government and foundation-supported research.

For further discussion, some topics that should be of greater research concern both to labor and to academics include the following:

(1) Economic policies affecting employment and unemployment: The economic theorists (not the "institutional" economists) can be counted on to continue justifying higher "ac-

ceptable" levels of unemployment decade after decade. But they do so on the basis of national data that is both inadequate and misleading in measuring the magnitude and consequences of unemployment in our economy. We fail to measure the enormous impact of underemployment, or the growing use by employers of the "contingent" or "peripheral" labor force (including part-timers, home workers, contract and even "leased" workers). We fail to measure the disappearance of more and more workers into the depths of the "underground" economy (where there are no payrolls, no taxes, and no worker protections or benefits of any kind). As the Bush Administration takes over, there is incredibly belated recognition of the serious impact of recent economic policies not just on the homeless, but on all the low-income poor who struggle at or below the poverty line.

In more general terms, our scientific and technological research from all sources continues to propel sweeping changes in our production processes, materials, techniques, and jobs. But these changes are often based on blind faith in technology—and the profits that can flow from it—and our social research neglects the careful measurement of impacts on workers, consumers, and the environment. To mention only one example close at hand, the high-tech design of the BART system has imposed unnecessary costs, operating problems, job losses, and safety risks, all of which have never been carefully or fully measured. These design factors have nonetheless reduced BART's potential for reliable and efficient transportation service in the Bay Area. More thorough research on the high costs of high tech might result in a very different picture of the potential for improving productivity by more intelligent organization and use of workers, especially including more careful consideration of their ideas and inputs in both production and service oriented work.

(2) The so-called "Safety Net": Labor needs and should demand more help from academics and other researchers, not only in defending Social Security programs from continuing attacks, but also in defining the enormous potential for expanding our use of social insurance in basic worker security programs. We have begun to identify the waste and inefficiency involved in the use of commercial insurance (at least in auto policies): we need more exposure of similar commercial insurance problems in health care programs of all kinds, and in Workers' Compensation and other disability programs. Why, for example, do employers cover only about 5% of the nation's disability costs in their

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Workers' Compensation programs, when more than a third of the disability burden originates in the nation's workplaces? How much workplace disability cost do the employers manage to shift to Social Security and SSI, and to dump directly on disabled workers? What kinds of risk spreading and administrative efficiency could be achieved if all disability, on and off job, were covered by an extended, nationwide, Social Security program?

In California, why is there so little academic interest or analysis or input of any kind with respect to all state worker security programs, including Unemployment and Disability Insurance, Workers' Compensation, and the minimum wage and overtime provisions of the Industrial Welfare Commission? For example, Workers' Compensation in California has become hostage to special interests that have produced legislative stalemate—while the rights and needs of disabled workers are ignored, and the profits and reserves and exorbitant expense accounts of the insurance carriers soar. Such issues are of great concern to workers, but of no apparent academic concern.

(3) The international economy: For workers in any nation to be able to deal with the ability of transnational corporations to exploit them on an international basis, it has become necessary for labor in all nations to work toward the development of (a) minimum international labor standards, beginning with the effective prohibition of child labor, and (b) provisions to ensure basic rights of workers, like freedom of association, and the freedom to form unions of their own choosing. The great need for research both to guide this effort and to sustain it over the long run is suggested by the fact that labor standards in this country vary enormously from state to state, and have been subject to continuing legislative battles at least since the Progressive era of the early 1900s. (In the labor history of most industrial countries, of course, these battles have been waged with employers over a much longer period.)

(4) Job referral and training and retraining of workers: There is enormous potential for improving the most basic kinds of job referral services for workers, especially as they are tied to training and re-training and re-location needs. While services and programs handled by the U.S. Employment Service could be expanded and better coordinated, research is needed to identify both the national problem and the range of possible solutions. With respect to all work training, labor needs continuous research on who gets it, and who controls it, and whether it serves to increase or decrease workers' options, and if and how it contributes to evolving labor relations.

(5) Many other important topics can only be mentioned briefly here, such as

(a) The current wave of mergers/takeovers and buyouts; labor and many other groups as well need more objective and courageous analysis of their impact on the economy, including the loss and downgrading of thousands of jobs, and the risk to

pension funds of junk-bond investments involved. These pension funds are the deferred wages of workers; often the same workers whose jobs are lost or downgraded;

(b) The use of Social Security reserves to reduce the impact of our general budget deficits: how can we ensure that many billions of these reserve dollars, now accumulating in the retirement fund, will be available in two, three, or four decades, for the purpose of paying benefits which have been promised to workers? Who has the responsibility to enforce this long-term social contract? Shall we trust those who create and justify and manipulate the deficits in our nation's general budgets? The issues involved here have been raised by Brookings Institute economists, with little national publicity; labor and academics need to pursue them on behalf of all workers;

(d) National health care: this issue will not disappear; instead, the contours of a workable national system may well emerge from one of several state programs now being developed for the uninsured, including California's. Will labor and academics seize this opportunity for needed research and responsible public policy analysis?

(d) Social Security disability: the benefit support of nearly half a million disabled Social Security recipients, who had met the strict definition of "totally disabled," was brutally disrupted by the Reagan Administration, which then moved to "correct" the damage it inflicted by restricting the appeal rights of the disabled victims! Labor and academics should cooperate to raise the national level of indignation when such blatant travesties of justice occur.

Conclusion

While others might list different topics, the point here is that labor needs to give some version of an academic agenda more consideration. Labor needs help to re-establish its role as a defender of essential rights and interests of working people. The corporations would like to convince the nation that they can usurp labor's role; there are academics and other researchers who will help them, but there are also those who could help labor rebuild its historic role.

Finally, labor needs to call upon and make better use of labor educators (and other professionals who work directly with labor organizations and with workers), in further development of an academic research agenda. Labor educators in turn need to expand their role as intermediaries between researchers and workers. They can encourage research that gets out of the library stacks and directly in touch with workers, and that also gets into workplaces, where academics seldom go. That kind of focus might even help to establish the fact that workers, and not capital and technology, are still the most important inputs for the production of high quality goods and services.

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