

What Happened to Workers' Ed?

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The downtown office of the UCLA Labor Center sits on the northwest edge of MacArthur Park, where geese mingle amid the tents of homeless people. It is late fall, and Victor Narro, the downtown office director and a law professor, is inside printing reports written by his students about how to regulate and decriminalize the city's extensive informal economy of sidewalk and street vending. Between 12,000 and 20,000 Angelenos, predominately immigrants from Central and South America, sell food and other goods on city streets. Police regularly harass them, confiscate their property, and slap them with fines of up to \$500.

"They're just people trying to make a living," Narro says. This morning he joins some 150 vendors, community members, trade unionists, and high school students at the City Council to support decriminalizing these small businesses. There, with scores of vendors giving testimony, he submits the reports into the public record.

This kind of activism lacks the familiarity of the picket line and boycott, but is no less militant. Several of the vendors in the hearing room are mothers with their children. "We are not criminals," one tells the council members. The meeting is one measure of the role Los Angeles labor plays in the local immigrant rights movement, at a time when most unions struggle just to survive. While union density nationally has sunk to around 11 percent, 15 percent of the workforce, or about 1.1 million workers, are union members in the Los Angeles-Long Beach metropolitan area. The UCLA Labor Center functions as a sort of policy and research think tank for the network of community nonprofits, legal advocacy groups, and strong unions that make up the city's vibrant left. With collective bargaining effectively out of reach for many, institutions such as the UCLA labor center have been laboratories for discovering new ways to represent the American working class.

Beyond Los Angeles, however, similar university programs are enduring closures, downsizing, and legal challenges to their legitimacy as publicly funded institutions. As American labor searches for a viable strategy to

endure and grow, its limited footholds in many state institutions of higher learning are coming loose.

“The work relationship has two sides,” explains Sarah Laslett, a professor who works at the labor center at the University of Oregon, “and the owner side of the employment relationship is much better resourced in higher education.” Schools like Laslett’s go by a variety of names—worker schools or labor centers are common—and they are predominantly housed in state universities and community colleges. Many were founded at the height of organized labor’s political power in the 1960s, as adjuncts to industrial relations institutes created just after the Second World War.

Where these schools persist, classes are typically short—a week or two—and teach skills in high demand in working-class communities, such as English and vocational training for licensed professions, often without credit. Many also train union staff in contract negotiation, law, and economics. They offer shop stewards courses in conflict management and grievance arbitration. Increasingly, like the UCLA center, they work with immigrant rights groups to offer legal aid and social services to the undocumented. Faculty members at these schools also often conduct the research that unions need in dealing with both employers and government. “Think about the relationship between business and business schools,” says Laslett. “Business relies on higher education to provide trained officials. Think about the resources that are spent on business schools and compare that to the tiny amount that’s spent on labor education.”

The analogy is both antiquated and telling. The postwar consensus on collective bargaining and the mixed economy today seems almost radical, but it is the premise for the existence of state-sponsored labor education. The success of that regime and the long boom it sustained did rest on unions’ strength, yet the state too always played a critical role. Today, as union membership has collapsed, the power relationship industrial relations schools were designed to balance has dramatically reversed. According to a July 2016 report from the Midwest Economic Policy Institute, American trade unions have lost 573,000 members nation-wide in the past decade, contributing to the 1 percent decline in the unionization rate for the American workforce as a whole.

Organizationally, the labor movement has had to adapt to this shrinking base. “Labor establishments”—trade unions, “alt-labor” workers centers, and other nonprofits that represent wage-earners’ interests—have 14,820 fewer staff positions than during the first year of the Obama administration, about a 9 percent fall from the 164,987 paid employees recorded that year by the U.S. census. For unions, labor schools have become more important than ever. “You’ve seen a pull back from unions offering robust education programs themselves,” explains Kent Wong, current director of the UCLA

Labor Center. “Many of the university- and college-based labor centers have been able to provide resources that would not otherwise be available.”

At the same time, the forces that make labor education so valuable are also threatening its very existence. In 2015 the professional association of labor educators issued an internal report on the status of labor schools over the past two decades. It found that at least nineteen of the seventy-two programs had closed. Most that shut their doors were located in public institutions in states controlled by Republicans: Ohio, Michigan, Alabama, and Georgia. And in Scott Walker’s Wisconsin, where unions have lost over 100,000 members in the past five years, the School for Workers at the state university in Madison is under siege. “I don’t think we’d be able to run this department without state funding,” explains a faculty member. “In some ways that’s the whole point.”

Even in places where unions remain fairly strong, labor colleges must fight well-funded attempts to shrink or kill them. Take what happened to Sarah Laslett, the professor from Oregon. Back in 2008, she was teaching at the Evergreen State Labor Education and Research Center in Washington state when it came under a concerted attack by the conservative Landmark Legal Foundation for allegedly spending public funds on programs that did not serve a “valid public purpose.” On the board of the non-profit, also known as the Ronald Reagan Legal Center, sat Edwin Meese III, Reagan’s former Attorney General, as well as other erstwhile top officials in his Justice Department. The foundation gained attention in 2007 for nominating Rush Limbaugh for a Nobel Peace Prize.

The Washington State Auditor dismissed Landmark’s claims against the school. But the foundation kept flooding administrators with FOIA requests for a decade’s worth of emails and classroom materials, draining the organization’s time and money in fulfilling the requests. There was no official action taken by the College or the State of Washington as a result of the internal audit findings, but the school was swept by broader currents in public higher education following the financial crisis of 2008, losing half of its funding as the state turned to austerity. In 2010, the center moved from Evergreen State to the South Seattle College.

There the campaign to close the school was renewed, this time by the Freedom Foundation, another wealthy nonprofit with ties to the Walton Family Foundation and the laissez-faire American Legislative Exchange Council. In 2014, the group filed two complaints against Laslett as the program’s director. One alleged illegal lobbying; the other that the center “us[ed] public resources for political campaigns” in violation of a public ethics statute. The latter charge referred to the participation of some 150 attendees of a summer program hosted by the school in a union drive at Sea-Tac Airport. The union drive failed, but as summer turned to fall, the local workers center, Working Washington, in conjunction with a number of area unions and funding from the SEIU, put a \$15 minimum wage on the

local ballot. The law passed, spurring the movement for similar laws that has rolled through city and state governments in the past three years. In the wake of the victory, the Freedom Foundation accused the school of electioneering for the minimum wage increase, rather than picketing an employer to accept collective bargaining.

Rallying for union recognition is not a “political campaign.” In September 2016, the school was cleared of any wrongdoing. Yet the legal attack on the Seattle center reveals the ambiguous relationship of the university to the American political economy. Union density is higher in Washington state than in the nation as a whole: about 17 percent as compared with 11 percent. High-profile companies like Boeing employ tens of thousands of union members, and the ILWU represents workers at the Port of Seattle. Nevertheless, even there, a commitment to collective bargaining can be construed as the improper use of public resources. The state’s commitment to labor centers like the one in Seattle is fickle. In states where unions are weak, little remains for labor’s opponents to take away.

Labor education provided the training and the vision for reform movements that shaped generations of American politics, and they can do so again. Brookwood Labor College, a school that operated for nearly two decades outside of New York City, gave the trade-union movement access to the skills of professional economists and lawyers; the historian Steve Fraser described it as the “cadre school” for the “embryonic CIO.” The Highlander Folk School, the “Brookwood of the South” in Grundy County, Tennessee, was a coordinating center for the nascent Civil Rights movement. Eleanor Roosevelt first publically protested for the end of Jim Crow at the school in 1939, and both Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., underwent training there. These are just two among the many workers’ schools that spread across the pre–New Deal landscape. University labor schools today offer a similar promise. “The vision of the labor centers is to . . . transform the labor movement,” Narro says.

Nathalie Contreras has been part of that transformation. After eleven years working as labor organizer, she is now a mother and just one semester from completing her degree at Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles. She got her start first working for unions after taking classes at the UCLA Labor Center as an undergraduate. Then she did an externship with a day-labor workers center: IDEPSCA—Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California. Today the institute operates six day-laborer hiring halls across the city, where workers can take classes in English, as well as in labor and immigration law. The model it helped pioneer, of community non-profits geared towards organizing workers and legal training, has spread throughout the country to become a regular feature of the philanthropic world. The Marguerite Casey Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the now-defunct

Discount Foundation are just a few of the funds behind the proliferation of workers' centers in American cities. And students like Contreras, often relayed through university programs, are their new cadre.

Victor Narro worked with IDEPSCA to set up the first day-laborer workers centers in Los Angeles in the 1990s. After Contreras became one of his students in the mid-2000s, she began organizing day laborers and screening employers to ensure that wages were paid and good working conditions maintained. Then she began working for Unite Here. The UCLA Labor Center "gave me a firm grounding on labor economics, and an appreciation of how the labor movement has shaped the history of this country," she says. "It's at the core of why I've decided to do labor law."

The UCLA Labor Center provides sturdy institutional backing to the region's healthy working-class movement. The *Los Angeles Times* editorial board uses its reports on wage theft and healthcare access when formulating its policy positions. In 2015, the paper described one of the center's summer youth-training programs as having "already changed the immigrant rights movement" by training many of the activists leading the push for Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. In New York City, the labor-backed Murphy Institute at the City University of New York is cautiously projecting growth in public funding, faculty, and influence. But these cities are more like defensive bunkers than evangelizing missions when it comes to building power at the national level: these are the regional economies where unions are strong. "It's an aberration," says Paula Finn about the Murphy Institute, where she is an associate director.

For much of the twentieth century, the centrist argument for a unionized workforce was twofold: labor discipline and aggregate demand. The organization builders of the last labor movement were able to couch their pitch for collective-bargaining agreements in these public-spirited terms.

In the modern union movement's birthplace, however, neither argument holds any longer. The centrist policy experts and politicians now defending collective bargaining are the likes of Larry Summers and Andrew Cuomo, the very wing of American liberalism whose ambivalence about class conflict sustained unions'—and the Democratic Party's—demise. Just at the moment economists have rediscovered wage growth and a return to the old industrial-relations machinery as solutions to the consumption-dampening effects of historic income inequality, decades of neglect have left the gears rusted and innumerable parts missing. The right-to-work laws that have spread throughout twenty-eight states have left unions increasingly unable to fund themselves through agency fees, leaving many loyal union workers embattled with little money behind them. The mass industrial unions that in the mid-century economy brought employers to the table and forced them to narrow profits and share income simply don't exist in most industries.

Nor can unions sell themselves any longer as harbingers of class peace. Wildcat strikes are almost unheard of, and today labor unions must agitate and be disruptive to merely exist. As CUNY's Finn says, "to enforce the contract requires a kind of constant mobilization and education of the membership."

Where unions maintain strength, as in New York and along the Pacific Coast, it is in part because they have managed to rely on the state to maintain its commitments to the postwar employment system. Industrial relations schools and labor education programs were a critical component of that commitment. It is the places where these schools exist that unions have explored ways of building a new labor movement. UCLA's Narro says that he "is working with workers centers to look beyond foundation grants for resources." Piecing together budgets is a familiar ordeal. "Government grants and contracts is the other thing people look at, but that fluctuates. Membership fees is a challenge. A lot of these workers are low-wage workers. They don't have the ability to sustain organization the way union workers do."

"What is the model going to be?" Victor Narro asks. Where the future of labor education is uncertain, atrophy seems as likely as regeneration. For the working communities labor schools are designed to serve, a vital political culture hangs in the balance. Back in his office, Narro answers a phone call from one of his colleagues studying the low-wage car wash industry. "It's the rest of the country where labor standards are going down the drain," he explains. "Who's gonna pick up the slack on enforcement when the Department of Labor cuts funding?" He nods, listening to the other end of the line.

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