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Relations Between Unions and Universities in Research and Teaching: Union Expectations

Gilbert Levine

MY PRESENTATION WILL NOT be in the form of an academic analysis of the state of relations between academia and the labour movement. Instead, please consider this as a plea for help on behalf of labour addressed to the university community.

I deplore the fact that there has been little, if any, real interest by academics to provide counsel and research that is relevant and useful to the labour movement. I often hear from students who apply for employment with me of their interest in labour. Similarly, I also hear from left academics of their Labour interest. In spite of this, there is very little real connection between labour and the universities.

This is not to say that there is not any research in labour relations in Canada. There is not a lot, but there is some. For example, before it was axed by federal government cuts Labour Canada biannually published a book listing hundreds of current research projects in industrial relations. The publication *Relations Industrielles* of the University of Laval regularly publishes articles on I.R. research. The annual conference of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association is a forum for presentation of papers on I.R. research. In addition, a number of university industrial relations departments, such as Laval, Montreal, Queen's, etc. hold annual conferences or publish annual reviews.

Speaking as a non-Quebecois working in the labour movement, I think it is ironic that:

- 1) Virtually none of this research is done at the request of labour.
- 2) Practically all of it is unread by labour.
- 3) Most of it is not useful to labour.

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So, if labour desperately needs research and all of this research in industrial relations is going on - why is there this barrier between research production and research utilization by labour?

There are several reasons. Some of the barriers are created by labour. Some of the barriers are created by Academia. What are some of the barriers on the Union side?

There is still a large reservoir of distrust of academics by labour leaders. Even those academics who profess support of the labour movement are often regarded by labour as middle class, hostile, lefty, out of touch with reality, etc. There are some labour leaders who still say that the school of hard knocks is the only worthwhile school.

But I believe some of these barriers are being lowered. Things are changing a little. For example:

- 1) We are seeing more union leaders with a university background. It may be a coincidence, but the leaders of the two largest unions in Canada are both graduates of the London School of Economics.
- 2) The research and technical staffs of unions are growing. Most are university graduates and they are far less distrustful of universities.
- 3) The problems facing unions today are very complex and they cannot simply be resolved by the exercise of traditional power. They need an analysis of technological developments, international trade, the world economy, fiscal arrangements, etc. Unions at present do not have the technical resources to address these kinds of issues. There is a strong need for unions to have the outside technical research which universities could provide.

These objective factors would, therefore, indicate that the barriers on the labour side have been, or ought to be, lowered.

Let's examine some of the barriers which appear to make it difficult for universities to help labour. I have found that the academic interest in helping labour has been minimal. This may well be explained by the nature of I.R. research, which is mainly geared towards management's problems and geared to management consulting contracts. So I.R. academics have not come forward with offers of assistance to labour.

But even Marxist and other left academics have not come forward with offers of help. Let me generalize from my own experience. After 30 years of full time work, I am a veteran in the labour movement. I work for CUPE, the largest union in Canada. I have been a somewhat high profile person in both labour and academic circles. I have been the only labour person who was president of the Canadian Institute of Industrial Relations. For many years I attended conferences of the Learned Societies. I have even been accused of being open to Left ideas. In all modesty, I don't believe I have been an obscure person working for an obscure union.

In spite of all of this, academics have rarely come forward to say: "Hey,

I want to help.” They rarely say, “I’ve got time, I can get some money, I have resources, I have student slaves, and I want to help.”

I have academic friends who have carried on research on labour issues for years but have never stopped to ask, “Is this useful?” Why is there this lack of interest by academics in conducting research of interest and value to Labour. I don’t really know, but I want to speculate on a couple of reasons:

- 1) One reason may well be the research grant system. The subject matter of any I.R. research may well be determined by the availability of grant money. No grant - no research. And somehow there may well be more grant money available for research that is not of direct assistance to labour.
- 2) Where do academics get recognition for research that they do?:
 - they get credit from fellow academics
 - they get kicks from giving papers at the Learned’s
 - they get recognition on their C.V.’s for research that has been published.

All of these seem to add up to more recognition elsewhere than can be gotten from providing assistance to a union in need of research.

In spite of this pessimistic outlook for cooperation between academia and labour, I can point to a few success stories over the past two years where CUPE has reached out to academics for research assistance:

- 1) Our union representing support staff at the University of British Columbia was about to be hit by massive cuts and speed-ups resulting from an American management consultant firm’s assessment of the university’s programs. An academic hired by CUPE helped us destroy the consultant’s case.
- 2) At the Metro Toronto Children’s Aid Society, our CUPE membership was asked to endorse a management scheme to be used to evaluate case loads in the agency. A social work professor hired by CUPE helped us see the danger and pitfalls in the employer’s proposal.
- 3) A proposed City of Ottawa annual budget would have resulted in cuts in services as well as staff reductions for CUPE employees. A Carleton University professor in public administration assisted us in preparing a response to this budget which, among other things, suggested a number of job creation proposals.
- 4) A University of Saskatchewan economics professor in public administration assisted us in an educational program on the state of the economy of Saskatchewan. This has helped our membership there to better understand the irrationality of the current campaign of provincial government budget cuts. In a related piece of work, another economics academic is assisting us in contrasting the approaches of the Saskatchewan and Manitoba governments regarding budgeting and program cuts.

- 5) CUPE has frequently called upon academics to prepare papers and articles for our policy conferences and for our publications.

But these examples are a mere scratching of the surface. There are many, many more areas where labour could utilize research assistance from the universities, such as, our response to technological change, health and safety issues, privatization and contracting out, affirmative action and seniority, pension fund investment and control, the pros and cons of industrial day care, the social impact of plant closures, shutdowns and public service cut backs, etc. The list is endless. We even have room for a historian who could write a lively history of CUPE.

We in the labour movement ought to be escalating significantly our demands on the universities for researching, teaching, and many other forms of assistance. Academics, too, should be seeking new ways of stretching out their hands of assistance to Labour.

It will not be easy on our part. There are many obstacles. The ranks of labour researchers are very thin. We are all people who carry heavy workloads and heavy responsibilities. At best, we try to keep control of the brush fires and we are unable to take on the forest fires.

On top of that, I am sad to say, there is no mechanism at the present time that brings labour union researchers together with a common voice. (I believe there have been only two occasions in the past ten years when the CLC even convened a meeting or conference of researchers of affiliated unions). As a result, it is difficult for us even to say in a united way what our needs and expectations are from the universities.

I realize, too, that it won't be easy for academics to reach out to assist labour because it will mean getting out of the rut of teaching, classes, research, committees, publishing, conferencing, etc. But it can be done. Let me give one example that is close to home.

My wife teaches at Carleton University's School of Social Work and was eligible a few years ago for a sabbatical leave. Had she followed the usual pattern, she would have spent a year researching, studying, writing, etc. She rejected that idea. Instead she decided to spend a good part of the year working and consulting in a front line social agency in Toronto. Although she had many years of practical experience as a front line social worker before she entered academia, she felt as a teacher that she ought to know the experience her students would be graduating into in the real world of the 1980s.

There is a parallel lesson here for academics interested in labour. When next there is an opportunity for a sabbatical leave, why not come and do some practical work in a union instead of spending time writing about some theoretical aspect of labour that, in the end, won't have much impact on the world. In so doing, you will not only be doing us a favour, you will be doing yourself a big favour. We all know that theories which are not developed through practice have limited value. Therefore, spending a sabbatical

leave working in a union will provide a splendid opportunity to test out your theories in real practice.

Even with the best of intentions, that is, a willingness by academics to assist labour and a willingness by labour to accept and utilize academics - it is unlikely to happen unless there is some kind of a mechanism put in place to make it happen. I would suggest that this Conference would be a good place to start. Hopefully, if it is to become a regular annual meeting of labour researchers and academics, this should be the mechanism to facilitate the exchange I think all of us would like to see.

There are a number of models of facilitating cooperation that could be examined. The one that appeals to me most is the Quebec example, in which two universities, Laval and UQAM, have negotiated provisions for leave of absence for academics for community service, which includes work in the labour movement. The argument used to establish this was the fact that universities provide an enormous amount of assistance to the business and corporate community. This ought to be offset with some offers of assistance to labour.

This arrangement has resulted in academics teaching and working, for example, for a full year in the CEQ and QFL. This arrangement might well be a model for academics in Ontario to emulate.

Another recent arrangement is the establishment of a body called PRAXIS which is a link between Professors Leo Panitch and Frank Cunningham and OPSEU, the main union representing provincial government employees in Ontario. This will allow graduate students to do work on issues that the Union does not have the resources to tackle.

A further arrangement has been the placement of graduate students from schools of social work at Carleton and the University of Manitoba in unions as part of their field experience. This has strengthened the bonds between the two bodies, has been beneficial to the unions, and has even resulted in a number of students finding permanent employment in the labour movement.

Finally, I urge all academics to seek out ways of working with labour. With the right approach, you will be welcomed. By that, I mean, as a starter, don't come and tell us what we ought to do to save the working class. Ask us what we need. In that way you will learn a great deal and you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you are doing something useful and meaningful.

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