Why American Unions Need Intellectuals

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Sixty years ago, in *The New Men of Power*, C. Wright Mills made a perceptive observation about the troubled relationship between labor leaders and radical intellectuals during an era of cold war militarism and conservative advance. Wrote Mills:

> To have an American labor movement capable of carrying out the program of the left, making allies among the middle class, and moving upstream against the main drift, there must be a rank and file of vigorous workers, a brace of labor intellectuals, and a set of politically alert labor leaders. There must be the power and the intellect.

It did not happen. Labor leaders soon became entrapped within a stultifying bargaining regime, and the "working class" failed to fulfill its radical destiny. As for the intellectuals, they found careers and rewards aplenty in the mid-century academy. Indeed, Mills himself soon abandoned what he came to call "the labor metaphysic" and launched a provocative quest for a new set of actors who might transform America and the world.

But today union leaders and intellectuals are more entangled than at any time since the 1940s. If one has a generous definition of "intellectual," it is easy to find lots of students, academics, researchers, journalists, and writers, many of radical pedigree, working in, around, and for the U.S. labor movement. Unions have long sought help from high-profile outsiders in support of their strikes, bargaining agendas, and political objectives, but today these connections have grown so dense that some of these figures, many pro-labor academics, now find themselves enlisted, at times even drafted, into the disputes that have recently wracked some of the nation's key unions. Not since the early cold war split the labor movement and divided American liberals have otherwise independent writers and academics played such a public role inside the labor movement.

Two years ago, top officials at the Service Employees International Union, perhaps the country's most influential trade union, organized a conference call with more than two dozen academics to explain why a dissident California local, United Health Care West, posed an obstacle to the national union's health care organizing strategy. In response UHW reached out to its own group of professors, and when they signed on to a letter of support, UHW spent several thousand dollars to publish it as an advertisement in the *New York Times*. In this dispute both sides also posted advertisements and Web links on Talking Points Memo and at the Huffington Post, blogs with plenty of liberal readers but that spend little energy covering union affairs.

Meanwhile, in the recent dispute that has divided UNITE-HERE and also pitted that union against the SEIU, both sides have been assiduous in courting and in some instances winning support from scores of pro-labor academics and outside activists. In the summer of 2009, partisans of John Wilhelm, now UNITE-HERE president, secured nearly 250 signatures, many from members of the Labor and Working-Class History Association, on a "letter of concern" to the SEIU executive board lamenting that the big union was "dividing the progressive movement at a critical moment in history."

In response, the SEIU purchased the entire back page of the *Nation* to explain to that magazine's well-educated readers why the new UNITE-HERE leadership was actually the most disruptive element in the internal union dispute. All summer long, a barrage of e-mails and phone calls from both sides sought to win over the academics, or at least neutralize their voice.

My point is not to evaluate the pros and cons

of these internal trade union fights, or even to note the role played by the academic partisans. (I tend to be on the side of the SEIU's critics and competitors.) Rather, I want to explore how we got to this moment, where these academics and other non-members seem to be playing a significant role in the life of the trade union movement.

In the nineteenth century, when trade unions in Europe and North America were young, insecure, and often socialist, autodidact intellectuals were everywhere. Many had been radicals, veterans of 1848 or 1905 expelled from the old country after revolutionary defeat or repression. Mills dedicated *The New Men of Power* to "J.B.S. Hardman, labor intellectual." Hardman had been cast out of Russia in 1907 by special vote of the czar's imperial cabinet. Such men and women were seen as interlopers by those steeped in the tradition of Samuel Gompers and other advocates of pure and simple unionism.

Selig Perlman, author of *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (1928) denounced the labor intellectuals of his day for their incapacity to resist "an onrush of overpowering social mysticism" in their quest for a "new social order." Though Perlman was himself a University of Wisconsin professor, he remained suspicious all his life of those who came to the labor movement with an agenda that transcended the job conscious collective bargaining he thought the essence of modern unionism. Thus, when he heard a particularly radical talk at a worker's education summer school late in the 1940s Perlman spat out his worst epithet, "Who was that intellectual?" It turned out to be Emil Mazey, a high school dropout, then secretary-treasurer of the UAW, who had learned his politics in the depression-era socialist movement.

Despite his confusion between the social role of an intellectual and his or her politics, Perlman ended up more right than wrong. In the postwar era, the trade unions kept their distance from both the academy and the kind of people, like Harvey Swados and Sidney Lens, who wrote for *Dissent*, the *Nation*, and similar venues. Clark Kerr, Derek Bok, John Dunlop, George Shultz, and other high-profile economists founded an entire academic discipline, "industrial relations," which took as its subject the union contest with management, but these mandarins—many of whom would rise to key university and cabinet posts—were the kind of analysts who took the existence of a trade union movement for granted and focused their academic and policy-making energies on how governments or corporations should regulate, resist, or reshape this large presence in American life. There were intellectuals who looked to labor in the 1950s and 1960s. But in a movement led by fierce anticommunists like George Meany and pragmatic bargainers like Walter Reuther, there were few opportunities for pro-labor outsiders to play much of a role.

In the UAW for example, virtually all organizers, officers, and other staffers had to come out of the ranks, putting in at least a year in an auto plant, before they could go on the union payroll. The rule was put in place to minimize the influence of the "politicals"—the communists and socialists—whose loyalties were thought to lie outside the union. Thus, in the mid 1950s, when Reuther was looking for a radical black activist to groom for higher office, he urged James Farmer, an anticommunist active in the nascent civil rights movement, to take a job with the UAW. But first Farmer would have to spend a year on one of Ford's assembly lines.

With the civil rights movement gaining momentum, that was too long a wait for Farmer, so Reuther had to do without his talents and those of many others like him. Indeed, even in the years when the UAW remained a dynamic institution, it proved difficult to draw upon veterans of the "sixties" social movements to vitalize the union's organizing staff. For the many autoworkers who did achieve a long-sought promotion out of the ranks, their new "organizing" jobs were akin to a pre-retirement perk.

All this began to change in the 1980s and 1990s, creating the conditions under which students, professors, and writers might play a role more organic to the life of the labor movement. One morning in the spring of 1991, I picked up my phone at the University of Virginia, where I was teaching. On the line was Allison Porter, the first director of the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute. "Do you have any students who might like to enroll in our summer

program?" she asked. I was flabbergasted. I'd been a labor historian for years but had never received such a query from anyone associated with an honest-to-God trade union. Indeed, back at Berkeley, where as a grad student I spent a lot of time on picket lines, even the liberal Bay Area unions had been highly suspicious of student involvement. And why was Porter calling me at UVa, hardly known, then or now, as a center of labor activism?

Porter's call was part of a union effort to finally tap the new talent, activism, and passions necessary to survive in an increasingly hostile political and economic environment. John Sweeney would be elected AFL-CIO president on just such a platform. His fourteen-year presidency did little to stem the steady decline in numbers and bargaining clout, but he did play an important role in breaking down the Berlin Wall that had long divided the trade unions from the main body of the American Left, on campus and elsewhere. He thereby ushered in an era when college activists—antiglobalization, anti-sweatshop, environmentally conscious, pro-immigrant—looked to the labor movement to help advance their causes.

From the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle and elsewhere to the campaign against Nike and Wal-Mart, the unions have gained new allies. In late 2009, Russell Athletic, a maker of university-branded clothing, bowed to the power of this alliance when it agreed to reopen a Honduras apparel factory and facilitate unionization of the work force. Playing a decisive role in this unprecedented agreement, the campus-based Workers' Rights Consortium persuaded ninety-six U.S. universities to cancel clothing contracts with Russell until the company guaranteed its workers freedom of association in all of its Honduras factories.

This kind of campus-union alliance provides a model for the long delayed broadening of what constitutes a labor movement. You don't have to pay dues or work under a union contract to consider yourself a partisan. But such a movement also enhances the weight of experts, academics, researchers, writers, and students with free time, sometimes to the marginalization of the workers themselves. The use of such pressure tactics—boycotts and embarrassing publicity—began as innovative "corporate campaigns," during the Reaganite 1980s, when the traditional strike seemed to have become ineffective. Ray Rogers, who pioneered the strategy during the protracted P-9 strike against Hormel, was once anathema in many union circles. But his tactics have now been institutionalized in many unions, making the work of staff researchers and publicists basic to routine organizing and bargaining.

In fact, public policy, not the privatized world of collective bargaining, now constitutes the key arena in which unions and their opponents battle to reshape the future. When Wal-Mart sought to defend its wages and pricing policy from union critics, it hired Global Insight, a Cambridge-based economic research firm, to organize an academic-style conference with papers and panels, not all in lockstep with the big retailer, to counter labor's barrage. And when the unions faced an onslaught of criticism from companies and Republican politicians denouncing the card check provisions of the Employee Free Choice Act, union allies commissioned Cornell's Kate Brofenbrenner to conduct an empirical study. She found that, in organizing drives, virtually every instance of coercion, economic and even physical, arose from the employer efforts to thwart the union campaign. Her findings were released at a high-profile Capitol Hill press conference.

This new relationship between unions and intellectuals became apparent to me, as well as to columnist and *Dissent*nik Harold Meyerson, when we were invited to address the HERE research staff during separate weekend retreats in coastal California. I expected to talk to just a handful of number crunchers. During its heyday, when the UAW represented a million and a half workers, the research staff consisted of Nat Weinberg and three or four of his friends, old socialist comrades of the Reuther brothers.

So I was surprised when more than seventy young and energetic researchers awaited my talk, brought together by a union with fewer than two hundred thousand members. There was even a former student of mine whose experience in Virginia's living wage campaign had turned her on to the labor movement. What could they possibly do to occupy their time and justify the expense of keeping all this ex-colle-

giate talent on the payroll?

Unfortunately, they had plenty of work. HERE's decision to create a cadre of corporate campaigners was based on the grimmest of circumstances. As Meyerson later wrote, "Traditional private-sector union organizing—signing up workers who want to join a union, winning a certification election conducted by the government, and securing a collective-bargaining agreement in negotiations with the employer—had become a dead-end." So HERE had to organize and bargain with as little recourse to the National Labor Relations Board as possible. The union used all those researchers to dream up new and creative ways to pressure hotels and casinos, first to get to a card-check certification and then to bargain for a satisfactory contract. If an anti-union casino in California wanted to expand, HERE's staffers would make sure there were plenty of zoning headaches; if a living wage ordinance was on the ballot in Santa Monica, the union would generate reams of economic data to prove that it was needed.

The work of these researchers has blended seamlessly with that of the union's public relations operation and its political mobilizations. Indeed, today few union organizing drives can succeed without this kind of "air" game, in which Web sites are built, newspaper and television ads created, and the endorsement of politicians, clerics, academics, and celebrities solicited. Cesar Chavez and his farm worker union pioneered this kind of campaign in the 1960s and 1970s. It has been emulated by the unions that seek to tarnish Wal-Mart's image, shame management at Smithfield Foods in North Carolina, organize university food service workers, and convince the public that executives at the Cintas Laundry mistreat their employees.

The result of all this activity is that academics, intellectuals, and their students and followers have become functional to American unions in a fashion that would have surprised both Mills and Perlman. Their politics and cultural sensibilities no longer put them at odds with the main body of the American labor movement. The largest UAW local west of the Mississippi represents teaching assistants, tutors, and readers on the University of California's ten campuses. Andy Stern's leadership of the SEIU has recently come under much critical scrutiny, and the leadership offered by other unionists such as the Teamster's James Hoffa or the UAW's Ron Gettlefinger has often seemed weak and unimaginative during the current economic crisis. But most liberals and academics today see existing trade unions as allies, agents, and leaders for the kind of America they hope to construct.

At the same time, unions face unprecedented hostility from virtually the entire business community and from almost every Republican officeholder. For their part, most Democrats have long since forgotten how to defend the unions in any fashion designed to stir the soul, as the recent bailout of the auto companies so graphically demonstrated. Organized labor is embattled, not just at the bargaining table, but in a fundamentally ideological way that calls its very existence into question. In this context, academic intellectuals play a vital role as defenders, legitimizers, and even spokespeople for a movement that no longer quite knows how to explain itself to a larger public.

This is something the business community and free market ideologues understand. They pump millions of dollars a year into training programs designed to build the next generation of right-wing writers, journalists, and ideologues. The unions have nothing like this, which is why the AFL-CIO appealed with increasing desperation to the academic community to put out manifestos, petitions, and other statements during the fight over the Employee Free Choice Act. Many intellectuals and writers stepped up to the firing line, including historians Michael Honey, David Brody, and Ruth Rosen, but they were outgunned by right-wing journalists, organizations, and public relations people, who eviscerated union claims that the proposed law would advance the public welfare. Politics really is a war of ideas, so the union movement needs articulate men and women, not just to become effective operatives, but as forceful advocates in the public square. It matters if a Robert Reich, a Paul Krugman, or less notable wordsmiths believe that unionization is essential to remaking the American middle class.

In this context, the university has become an

essential recruiting ground for the current generation of union staffers, organizers, even top officials. At the SEIU's Washington headquarters, according to one well-placed observer, almost all the staffers who work in research, political/governmental affairs, and communications are relatively recent college graduates, many veterans of the student social justice movements that have flourished in the campus milieu. This is also largely true of the organizers in the field, even though the national union, and especially the locals, have made a concerted effort to hire rank-and-file workers for these jobs. In other unions, the pattern is similar if not quite so pronounced: less evident in the old industrial unions, far more so in those unions that organize in the service sector.

Many of the most committed and effective ex-students were "turned on" to the unions by influential teachers or by the labor internship programs that have arisen at the University of Massachusetts, CUNY, UCLA, Rutgers, and other schools. At the more elite universities, including Columbia, NYU, Brown, and Yale, where campus administrations have resisted graduate student organizing efforts, chronic struggles to form a campus union have generated wave after wave of energetic militants, many of whom find their way onto union staffs.

But few become union "lifers." An extraordinarily high level of ideological and personal commitment is necessary to compensate for the constant travel, the long hours, the social isolation, and the arduous work that is the life of a labor organizer. Many are imbued with what one recent college graduate called a "cowboy mentality," a sense that their work is more than an ordinary job, even superior to other work within the labor movement itself.

Burnout and turnover are constant problems, but for those who stay even a few years, their employment is akin to a religious or ideological calling. It is a vocation that can only be sustained through continual reinforcement—from their peers, from their union higher-ups, and from those academics, writers, and outside activists who first made them think that a job in the labor movement was something special. Indeed, that is why Meyerson and I were invited to the HERE retreats: to put their hard work in its larger political and historical context, to explain again why unionism was a crucial lever for social change in America, to tell these staffers that they were part of something big and bold.

So is this a good thing or not? Given the messy and contentious disputes that have convulsed SEIU and UNITE-HERE, one is tempted to urge the academics and writers to back off. But this may well be impossible, because the transformation of so many unions from insular collective bargaining agents into hybrid formations that put an unprecedented emphasis on policy and politics gives leverage and functionality to those whose job it is to trade in ideas and advocacy. This is not what either Perlman or Mills might have imagined, but it is a condition we are going to live with in the years ahead.

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