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**The Importance of Political Economy
Education for Workers**

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The Importance of Political Economy Education for Workers

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My first lesson in political economy came to me when I was kid, about 12 years old. At the time, my family owned a small business—a general store and gas station—in a small town in Eastern Connecticut. Due to market forces, including the rise of corporate chain stores, my parent’s business was struggling. By the late 1980s we were facing bankruptcy and foreclosure. Fortuitously, there was a rising demand for skilled construction workers at the time. Through his friend network in the volunteer fire department, my father was able to join the local carpenters union and immediately began working in the industry—including at several local power plants. Within a year of his becoming a union carpenter, our family experienced a transition from being working poor to being middle class. We had health insurance, I got glasses and braces, and my dad built our family home—the home I now bring my children to visit as he enjoys his retirement thanks to the union pension.

The two-part lesson was pretty simple – the economy can and will throw people under the bus, even if they are doing everything right, and banding together with fellow workers can build the power needed to bring home a bigger share of the value you produce through your labor. As I came to be working age I only ever applied for jobs at unionized workplaces, working summer jobs as a Steelworker at the local paper mill and

box factory, as a Laborer at the local nuclear power plant, as an SEIU member washing dishes at the nursing home, and ultimately as a carpenter myself when I entered the apprenticeship program.

It was during my career as a carpenter that I experienced my second piece of real-world political economy education during the financial collapse of 2008 and ensuing Great Recession. Like all of my fellow union members, I was unemployed for nearly two years as the economy grinded to a halt and new construction projects were back-burnered. Unemployment insurance ran out, but the bills kept coming in. As my union sisters and brothers were facing home foreclosures, we watched the federal government bailout banks that were deemed “too big to fail.” Most of my union siblings were infuriated, but we lacked a shared understanding of what was happening. Some aligned with the perspective of Occupy Wall Street, which was that the financial capitalists had gotten too powerful and were fleecing the people. But many others succumbed to the Tea Party perspective – that it was the government’s fault, not capitalism.

I would speak out at union meetings. I organized fellow union members to attend protests, rallies, and marches in Hartford and in front of large financial institutions that received bailout money. Ultimately, at the recommendation of my always wiser partner, I decided to apply to and return to

college at this time to bridge the long period of unemployment. It was at the University of Connecticut that I discovered labor education. When I entered the MA/PhD program in sociology my advisor, Michael Wallace listened to my back story and immediately directed me to meet with Mark Sullivan, the Director of the UConn Labor Education Center. Mark and I hit it off right away and conjured a way to fund my graduate assistant work through labor ed and I spent the next three years developing, organizing, and facilitating labor ed programs for unions around the state.

However, as a graduate assistant I was working for the first time in my life in a non-union environment, which led to my next life lesson in political economy. One day in the fall of 2013, by way of email, the university decided to radically reduce insurance coverage for the 2,100 graduate assistants at the university. A number of us pulled together an emergency meeting. Our union organizing committee was formed overnight. After building out the committee to have a broad base of representation across a diversity of departments and organizing a list of hundreds of supporters from those departments, we opted to align with the United Autoworkers. We won recognition of our local in April of 2014. After a year of negotiating, we won our first contract in 2015, including significant improvements in health benefits, and that fall I was elected as the first president of the new union. Through the card drive and contract campaign I learned firsthand the importance of having a shared understanding and shared vision – without that common base we could not have won so much and in such a short period of time.

After completing my dissertation and tenure as union President, I accepted a job at Rutgers working on labor education in the Department of Labor Studies and Employment Relations, where I work now. Picking up as the new Director of LEARN, I thought a lot about my life lessons as I started to reshape our labor education offerings. I wanted workers to understand that the capitalist economy is ruthless, that solidarity was our best chance of not only surviving but also thriving, and that we needed to have a shared analysis and a shared vision in order for that solidarity to be most effective.

The history of LEARN (originally the Institute for Management and Labor Relations), like that of most university-based labor ed programs, dates back to the early post-war period and focuses on nuts-and-bolts trainings for labor and management to ensure a functioning labor relations system. A system as free as possible from unnecessary labor unrest and work stoppages.*

For decades the program carried out this mission dutifully and effectively. But as the share of unionized workers has continued to decline, especially since the 80s it became clear to me that merely providing nuts and bolts classes on bargaining, labor law, grievance handling, and public speaking was serving an ever-smaller share of the workforce. With this reality in mind, I envisioned two related pathways forward which could compliment the nuts-and-bolts labor education training – organizing training for non-union workers and political economy education for all workers.

**For a fuller history of labor education in the US and the tensions between nuts-and-bolts education vs social transformation education, see the article by Devinatz and Bruno in Revaluing Work(ers) (2021).*

These two strands are of course not at all new to labor education but had largely been off the table at formal university-based programs. Organizing training was something I had done a lot during our union drive in Connecticut. Political economy was something I had mostly taught to traditional undergraduate college students – using Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rodgers’ book, *American Society: How it Really Works* (2015). To begin to incorporate this type of education into labor education I looked to the expertise of Les Leopold and the staff at the Labor Institute who have been doing this important work for decades.

One of our first official collaborations was an online Movement Builders Academy for New Jersey teachers affiliated with the NEA. From there the partnership flourished and our most recent program was created for Amazonians United (AU) - a burgeoning organization of Amazon workers building collective power within that corporate behemoth. As AU efforts in the New Jersey area progressed, AU leadership saw that progress was slowed by a general lack of understanding of the importance of unions and the power that shifts to a workforce that is unionized.

The Labor Institute and LEARN partnered to develop and deliver a program which incorporated elements of the Labor Institute’s battle-tested Reversing Runaway Inequality (RRI) training and LEARN’s New Union Academy, which was designed for workers in the midst of organizing or who have already won union recognition but do not yet have a first contract. The idea was to combine big picture political economy education with some important nuts and bolts education into one comprehensive program.

The result was the AU Leadership Academy. Participants were recruited into the program by fellow worker-organizers involved with AU and were provided a stipend for their participation. The Academy kicked off with a full-day, in-person RRI training, to cover topics like economic polarization, Wall Street, institutional racism, the destructive force of mass layoffs, and the pro-corporate bias built into our political system.

RRI trainings are led by worker trainers and the content is delivered via small group discussions among participants. Small group work helps workers discover ideas and information collectively, and work together to read, analyze, and grapple with the course materials, rather than receive them from an expert at the front of the room. This sort of experiential learning through discovery has been found by educational scholars to foster a deeper understanding of and a greater retention of knowledge. Perhaps more importantly, it inspires workers to talk to other workers about their discoveries, and some go on to become trainer/facilitators themselves.

The initial full-day RRI program was followed by six “new union” sessions on Zoom covering topics like labor and employment law, labor history, internal organizing, pre-majority unionism, and a power analysis of the position of Amazon labor in the logistics industry and the economy as a whole. Fifty years ago, changes in logistics revolutionized the world economy, upending the lives of millions of workers. Now, Amazon is at the forefront of another revolution in logistics, meaning Amazon workers hold a key position of power in determining how the modern economy works. The AU Leadership Academy is designed to help those workers develop a shared analysis

and vision and to find solidarity within their ranks to make sure the modern economy works better for them.

Following the launch of the AU Leadership Academy, and given the heightened threats to American democracy, the Labor Institute and LEARN have been working collaboratively to develop a curriculum, a book, and a workbook on “Runaway Inequality and the Threats to Democracy.” Again, we have been seeing an overall decline in faith in government, but the lack of a shared analysis and vision among workers.

U.S. Constitution famously opens with “We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” Today, over 235 years later, working people are losing faith in our democracy to deliver on these promises. They see a federal government that is woefully uninterested in tackling the issues they deal with every day.

The reason is straightforward: there has been a decades long effort by corporate elites to take over our democratic systems to protect their own interests, no matter what. As a result of this rigging of the system, we have experienced the extreme concentration of income and wealth in the hands of the very few. The share of all income going to the top 1% of earners nearly tripled from 7.3% of total earnings in 1979 to 21% in 2022. The top 10% own 70% of wealth in the U.S. Meanwhile, our public infrastructure is collapsing, drinking water is barely potable, schools are

understaffed and crumbling, and our cities are facing bankruptcy.

Runaway inequality has fueled the growing apathy of working people. But we've especially seen it with more conservative workers who see the system as rigged against them. They have gravitated towards candidates like Donald Trump who rail against the system but do little to actually improve the lives of working people (and actually exacerbate our problems by further limiting democracy).

The erosion of democracy and the rise of runaway inequality are two sides of the same coin, both perpetuated by the same people to enrich and empower themselves at the expense of everyone else. We can't successfully address one crisis without addressing the other.

We hope the program will help working people understand that Wall Street and corporate elites have been hijacking our democracy. And hopefully they'll understand that we can make our democracy function for working people again, regardless of political party. Together we can prevent corporations from controlling our democracy, leading again to a government that is truly “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Given what is at stake, it is impossible to overstate how important it is to connect the big picture political economy education with the nuts-and-bolts training of workplace organizing. In this time of extreme and rising inequality, democracy itself is under attack, and working people need not only the tools to organize but also the right analysis to build on. In this way, labor education can help to build the political and economic power we need to reduce inequality, expand democracy, and secure a better future for working people.

About the White Paper Series

LEARN launched the "A Better Tomorrow" White Paper series to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Institute of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University. The purpose of the series is to consider the lessons of the past and present and to ponder possible alternative futures. The contributions represent original research and reflections from scholars and practitioners and chapters from forthcoming books by LEARN-affiliated faculty, students, and friends. The arguments put forth in the papers reflect only the views and interpretations by the authors, not LEARN or the School of Management and Labor Relations. The goal is to advance dialogue on the pressing issues of our times and to further the mission of LEARN to "promote harmony and cooperation" and to "enhance the unity and welfare of the people of the State."

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