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FOR UNIONS, CLASS IS IN AGAIN

A RENEWAL OF THE HISTORIC ALLIANCE BETWEEN WORKERS AND ACADEMICS OFFERS HOPE FOR A REVITALIZED MOVEMENT.

By KELLY CANDAELE, PETER DREIER. Los Angeles Times. Feb 17, 1997.

When AFL-CIO President John Sweeney decided to move the organization's annual executive board meeting from a resort in Bal Harbor, Fla., to a hotel in downtown Los Angeles, he was making a statement about the future of America's labor movement. The board is meeting this week in the capital of America's low-wage force to let the public and union members know that the winds of change are blowing the labor movement on a new course.

Sweeney, elected in 1995 on a reform slate, knows that to revitalize the labor movement after years of decline-- today, only 15% of the work force is unionized--unions not only must recruit millions of unorganized workers, but they also must refashion their public image. That task will require rekindling an alliance with intellectuals and students that came apart in the political and social turbulence of the 1960s. Toward this end, the nation's labor leaders will join academics, organizers and students for a teach-in this Thursday night and Friday at UCLA. The discussions are intended to forge a new partnership between the nation's campuses and its working men and women.

Sweeney's first step in bridging this gap was Union Summer, a program to mobilize and recruit a new generation of college students into the labor movement. Thousand of students from around the country spent last summer researching, leafleting and picketing on behalf of farm workers, janitors, striking machinists and other working people attempting to improve their lives. Contrary to the stereotype of the apathetic campus of the '90s, the program drew on students' inchoate idealism. Their attraction to Union Summer combined a commitment to public service, a belief in social justice and a growing sense of anxiety about their own economic future.

Another sign of the union-campus linkage is the increasing number of academic labor studies, like those at UCLA and Los Angeles Trade Tech College, which connect labor's past with today's economic and social realities. Putting theory into practice, Los Angeles area professors and students did much of the research to support the "living wage" ordinance that is now before the Los Angeles City Council.

Another factor in the union-campus coalition is the increasingly conflictive labor relations on campus. Like other major employers, colleges and universities are downsizing, employing more part-time help and contracting out decent paying union jobs. In response, campus employees such as secretaries, teaching assistants, professors, janitors and technical workers are looking to labor for help.

From the Depression through the 1960s, academics were a key ally of America's union movement. They shared labor's belief that government activism was necessary to promote economic prosperity and social justice. Leading academics and intellectuals like economist John Kenneth Galbraith, social critic Michael Harrington and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr often worked side by side with labor leaders to craft legislation and organizing strategies to help move America's working people into the middle class. They viewed unions and their leaders as the linchpin of progressive politics. For example, United Auto Workers head Walter Reuther was a key financial and political backer of the 1960s civil rights crusade.

By the late 1960s, however, the alliance between labor and intellectuals began to unravel. There was fault on both sides. To the consternation of campus activists, most labor leaders supported the Vietnam War. On the other side of the divide, many union members saw colleges as training grounds for radicals ignorant of or unsympathetic to working Americans' concerns. In 1972, a large number of union members expressed their disdain by voting for Richard Nixon over the antiwar candidacy of George McGovern. This rift, coupled with the decline of manufacturing jobs and the unions' failure to organize women, minorities and service workers contributed to the shift of "Reagan Democrats" to Republican candidates in the 1980s.

Despite the rupture, many serious veterans of 1960s activism joined the labor movement as organizers and researchers. Many other activists moved into the academic world to become college professors. These two groups helped forge the new relationship that is symbolized by this week's meeting at UCLA.

This alliance between scholars and labor faces daunting new challenges, particularly the globalization of the economy. Unions need new organizing strategies that cross national borders. And scholars need new intellectual tools that will help us understand and solve the problems inherent in a global economy.

On the labor side, Los Angeles dock workers recently struck for one day to express solidarity with their counterparts in Liverpool, England. And employees at the Japanese-owned New Otani Hotel in Los Angeles recently visited Tokyo to enlist the support of Japanese workers.

On the intellectual side, economists, sociologists and others are developing practical proposals to confront widening global economic disparities, regulate footloose multinationals, address complex trade and immigration issues and promote international labor rights.

In the 1930s, a popular union song asked, "Which side are you on?" The labor teach-in at UCLA indicates that increasingly, students, professors and unionists are on the same side once again.

Credit: Kelly Candaele teaches labor history and economics at Los Angeles Trade Tech College. Peter Dreier teaches politics and directs the public policy program at Occidental College

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