

## **Building Class Identity: Lessons from Labor Education\***

**Robert Bruno and Lisa Jordan**

As many in both the labor movement and new working-class studies understand, education can serve as a tool for building class consciousness. Union based training programs that use politics and economics to fuel class identification and solidarity have a long history. During the 1920's and 1930's union members from around the country regularly attended educational sessions in union halls and community centers, and such programs positioned organized labor as the vanguard of a working-class movement. Labor unions and working-class agency were united in a conceptual frame that critiqued capitalism, political power and inequality. However, by the end of World War II, labor education increasingly focused on contract interpretation, labor negotiations and grievance handling. But it was not just the unions and their approach to education that changed. The social context in which unions operated and the popular discourse around political and economic issues shifted over the years. By the end of the twentieth century, not only had debates about socialism and laborite-New Dealism vanished, but workers had also been left with a popular discourse focused on the stock market, industrial competition and globalization. Moreover, workers had been left without a framework through which to analyze the impact of these variables on their own lives.

---

\* Chapter in *New Working-Class Studies*, Edited by John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

American workers know something has been going on and that at least since 1970 it is not good for them, but their labor and popular education has been stripped of a language to describe and analyze what is happening. By all economic indicators a deregulated and unbound capitalism has triumphed over labor led efforts to maintain a credible state enforced social safety net for all workers. With the loss of organized labor's economic and political influence came an attenuated belief among union and nonunion workers in the values embodied in a left liberal approach to public policy. By 1980, workers, even union members, were voting more conservatively. But perhaps more importantly, they were taking less seriously their often self-proclaimed identity as members of the working class. To counter these trends, we believe that workers' education should emphasize a discourse of class and insist on class as the organizing reality of contemporary life.

To fulfill this goal, we have developed a political economy curriculum, which we have used with unions but could also be used in other settings. Unlike the standard paycheck orientation of many workers economic education, this curriculum draws heavily from radical political-economic ideas and addresses "root" causes of economic inequality. Our objective is to make visible and understandable the structural conditions which most determine economic reality. We emphasize the role of labor markets, public policy, workplace and political power, racism and sexism over individual and moral qualities to explain socio-economic circumstances. In short, our educational program prioritizes class distinctions and class struggle. The course links politics and economics in a unified approach that helps to deepen workers' understanding of *how* and perhaps

more importantly *why* the world has changed around them. A class based approach to teaching political economy provides the language workers need to describe their own experience and to consider creative forms of resistance.

This is not, however, an easy or uncontroversial task to perform. When Bill Fletcher, then AFL-CIO Director of Education, challenged the education and labor community to use the word “class” in classrooms and union halls, there was uncertainty as to how to incorporate *class analysis* into conventional union sponsored courses. Labor educators seemed concerned about an often exaggerated yet real “discomfort zone” between critical analytical approaches and the experiences of workers. In other words, they assumed that facts and figures were good for workers but a theory to explain how all the data fit together was seen as out of place in union education programs.

We contend that theory not only has its place in labor education, but that it is critical to defining the political and social context in which learning occurs, and in constructing the content of every curriculum. In short, while the student brings his or her own knowledge of the work world and relations of production to the class, theory offers the student a roadmap to discovering the common basis of seemingly disparate phenomena operating within an “identifiable process with identifiable actors, structures and directions”<sup>1</sup>. Drawn from our experiences in developing and teaching a course titled “Working-Class Struggle and the Politics of Power,” this chapter provides a rationale for the course and a brief overview of the strategies we use to raise the class consciousness of working class students.

As labor educators we work primarily with workers who are union members, but the approach outlined here will be effective in a variety of other settings. For example, the emergence of Working-Class Studies Programs at Youngstown State University, the University of Illinois and the University of Minnesota, and efforts like that of the UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers) Local 789 to educate nonunion workers through “open-source” unionism, provides a potential outlet for this type of political economy education to a broader working-class audience. But while we designed the course for union members, to be taught in union settings, the core themes and strategies we present will, we hope, prove useful to anyone who wishes to incorporate greater attention to political economy in their courses and to built on students’ economic and political experiences to help them learn to think in terms of class struggle and activism. If one of the goals of new working-class studies is to generate more critical understanding of class in America, and if education is one way of moving toward that goal, then the field must develop models for working-class education. Our approach offers one such model.

“Working-Class Struggle and the Politics of Power” examines the development and structure of the American economy and the importance of political action to protect workers’ economic interests. The course uses class as an analytic tool to examine social structures and social relationships from different angles. In doing this, students primarily consider ways to mobilize workers politically around class identity by exploring answers to the following questions: What values dominate American political beliefs? Have these values changed over time? Where do the contemporary conservative threats to union workers come from? Who is behind the drive to “globalize,” “downsize,” “privatize,”

“contract-out,” and “deregulate”? Are there alternatives to this neoliberal agenda? What happened to the politics of the New Deal? What are the political and economic ideas used by “New Right” corporate and public officials to weaken the power of unions? What is the role of the Federal Reserve Bank and government policy in determining unemployment and inflation rates, the on-set of recessions, economic inequality and the balance of shop floor power between capital and labor? The goal of this analysis is to integrate the students’ everyday experience with an understanding that developments in the economy are not random events. We use the students’ material conditions and a discussion of various theoretical perspectives to help workers develop a language to describe their own experiences and critique the way in which others describe them. As part of this process, throughout the course students define and redefine what they mean by “working class,” including the historical tensions created by race, gender, sexual orientation, and national identities.

This chapter begins with an explanation for why the study of political economics matters and what a course like “Working-Class Struggle” reflects about the state of contemporary working-class culture. Section two describes the teaching strategies we used to raise the ability of union workers to theoretically critique the political economic system from within their working experiences. Unlike teaching with students who happen to be workers, education about being a worker can never lose its connection with the relations of production. Educators must recognize that while workers may not be ideologically prepared for class analysis, they are materially aware of their class status. The third section provides an overview of our approach to linking students’ experiences with political

economy and activism. Weaving class analysis in and out of a series of lessons on the economic political realities confronting workers and by extracting concepts and constructing theory from a common sense approach to workplace and community life, class analysis happens and is properly named. This approach also minimizes students' discomfort with theoretical analysis, because it grounds such an analysis in their experiences. Finally, we provide a brief description of the six sessions that make up the course, including course materials, class exercises and specific techniques we use.

### **From Class Culture to Radical Political Economy**

The fact that “Working-Class Struggle and the Politics of Power” has become a popular course testifies to both a surge in workers' class resentment and a changing economic class landscape. As the economic destruction caused by neoliberalism continued into the twenty-first century, average workers not only saw their material conditions worsen, they also became less accepting of the conventional business cycle explanation of downtimes. We quickly recognized that the majority of our worker students were easily jettisoning their capitalist ideological “chains.” In class discussions workers heartily condemned the inequities of capitalism—at least a grossly unfair capitalism—and we could have searched endless hours among our students to find one lone defender of the economic system.

Contrary to what a great deal of mainstream and left class scholarship had declared, workers were not suffering from false consciousness. Workers knew that because they sold their labor they were being marginalized by the political system. Producing values was, they noted, their ticket to oppression. So when given the chance to

take a course that promised an analysis of the difficulties they were living through, workers enthusiastically enrolled. To a large extent, capital had already provided the material groundwork for radicalizing workers' consciousness. Before we had constructed a course curriculum, economic devastation had been shaped spaces and relationships that working people embraced.

Job loss meant that working-class neighborhoods lost working-class neighbors. Less money meant fewer car repairs and home improvements, and too many signs of an economic "falling down." Underfunded and failing schools, where working-class children learned the "three R's," produced working-class kids who were more likely than ever to fail to fulfill their parents' dreams of a better life. Dance halls pulled up their rugs, amusement parks padlocked the gates, workplace bars and restaurants sold to antique "junk" collectors, public pools dried up, and working-class cultural life appeared to morph into something dark and dangerous. But of course working-class culture had not disappeared or transformed into predatory behavior or even suffered from a lapse of memory.

Working-class men and women continued to live and work beside one another. Together they routinely experienced abuse and witnessed firsthand the inequities of capitalism. This was nothing new. But what was different was how they interpreted their experiences. Our teaching experiences with both union and nonunion students revealed that instead of conservative workers fully supportive of a free market economy, we were now teaching angry and informed critics of the economic system. As noted earlier, most workers lacked a historical context and political language for their hard earned

awareness, but their righteous antagonism toward the boss brought “Working-Class Struggle and the Politics of Power” into being. In other words, in defense of a working-class way of life—inside and outside of the workplace—union workers turned to the classroom for help in politically mobilizing, organizing new members, waging creative contract fights and preserving the places where they lived.

The study of political economy mattered more now than ever because corporate behavior was not only incredibly exploitive, but according to our workers, it unfolded without a decent measure of government control. Bad business and weak state regulation led workers to seek another way to understand their reality. The old ways of knowing had proven false. “Working-Class Struggle” showed that workers had assumed a heightened level of class consciousness and were ready to do something constructive with it. Being more class conscious, however, did not mean that workers were speaking in leftist tongues or envisioning alternative ways to create and distribute wealth.

In order to move workers to an understanding and acceptance that their interests are ultimately best advanced in concert with people similarly situated, we had to create a “structured space for reflection on class as it relates to their lives”<sup>2</sup> (Glass, 8, 2003). As labor educators we recognized that while workers objectively experienced their class status, it was necessary to make visible the narratives and ideas that nurture solidarity with worker issues, struggles and perspectives across race and gender differences. Here, then, was an opportunity for a course on political economy and working-class fortunes. And a structured classroom environment with a proscribed curriculum was precisely what

was needed to move the workers from “pissed off” to advocating radical changes in public policy.

“Working-Class Struggle” was necessary to expose the reactionary elements of modern neo-liberal economics and, most importantly, to re-center a worker’s class identity within the political debate. Following the 1960s’ individual rights explosion and the multifaceted postmodern identity movements, a common language of economy and class was harder for workers of all stripes to share. Politically, workers began to act with diminished regard toward their relationship to production. The Nixon-Wallace-Reagan-Clinton-Bush appeal to conservative white male blue collars had inflated the visibility of nonclass ways that workers identified themselves. In focusing on the conflict between a white, male working-class “us” and a usually female, racial minority, or even politically liberal “them”, workers stopped paying attention to the “invisible” flow of wealth that was systematically siphoned off from their daily labor and appropriated by their bosses, and well-heeled stockholders. Instead, they gave far too much weight to their consumption and lifestyle choices.

It’s not that workers had never before contested one another across racial and cultural divides, but earlier the process of producing and appropriating labor had been critically important in determining a worker’s world view. In the 1930s, the ruling class held fast the chains of oppression, but by the late 1960s other (i.e., black, immigrant, female) workers had been transformed into one another’s antagonists. As labor educators, we wanted to bring the class process back into how the workers developed their worldview. With worker identities now up for grabs between “class and its others,”

worker education focusing on the political economy of power can represent class as the principal axis of social transformation. The accompanying shift in authority can empower working men and women to understand their experiences as valid interpretations of the economic system. However, to properly situate the class process in identity development, we first had to introduce political and economic theory into the discussion.

### **Structure and Substance Cannot be Divided**

The educational goal of the course is for our students to move beyond a reflective understanding of the material covered in the class toward a more theoretical, analytical, and critical perspective. Toward this end, workers' personal experiences (i.e., work history, family, health, community, race and gender identities, and life expectations and dreams) become the core of the class discussion, but they are consistently considered in the context of public discourse and knowledge. In other words, we try to move the student from the personal to the broader political structure and to focus analysis on the relationship between the two. The individual is not seen simply as someone who is acted upon but also as a potential agent for change. Feminist pedagogy helped us develop strategies to challenge the students to see ideas and institutions as socially constructed. Feminist pedagogy explicitly works to build community, to empower students and to facilitate their recognition of their own ability to lead and create. It is our goal to move students beyond mere understanding to action.

In order to move workers to challenge the language and ideology of the neoliberal understanding of political economy, the course aims to deconstruct and devalue the positivist neoclassical approach to economic thinking. Students are reintroduced to the

principle tenets of mainstream economics with the express purpose of revealing how economic theory is socially constructed around class and power relations. This activity challenges students' belief that mainstream economics' reliance on the rational actor and deductive reasoning is powerful and logical. Whether espoused by Federal Board Chairman Allen Greenspan or CNBC News, modern economic analysis appears as a scholarly endeavor that objectively defines the real world. In the end conventional economic discourses, terms, and explanations lend legitimacy to the nation's discussion of social and political problems. In the current political environment, with both Republicans and Democrats touting profit margins, deregulation, low inflation, balanced budgets, lower taxes, globalization and competition, students see little intellectual space to challenge conventional economists.

The question, then, was how could we empower workers to challenge the language and premise of a neoliberal political economy? The answer was to encourage them to tell their personal stories. As a mode of learning and thinking about economic reality, storytelling can transform a seemingly "objective" course on political economy into an effective critique of class relations. Personal and collective accounts of work, home, family and community bring out alternative interpretations of how capitalism affects workers. The end result, according to Diana Strassman, is that students stop thinking that there are "heroes who, aided by superior understanding, lead the way to economic truths or laws."<sup>3</sup> Storytelling also demonstrates, as James Berlin contends, that our economic and political choices are based on "competing ideologies, competing discursive interpretations" and not "between truth and ideology"<sup>4</sup>. We aim to compel our

students to renounce Wall Street positivism and help them instead understand the economic system as a Main Street battlefield. In addition to calling specific attention to the class-constructed nature of economic rhetoric and analysis, we challenge students to develop their own understanding of the political and economic environment in which they operate.

Feminist pedagogy, especially storytelling, works because it reduces the *distance* between the worker and the “market,” it shifts *authority* back to the worker, and it *disrupts* the students’ safe modes of understanding. We want to discuss each of these elements briefly.

### **Distance**

In economics, the subject (i.e., the market) is often seen to be very distant from the worker student’s life and thus nearly impossible to impact. Outcomes simply happen; the market adjusts; no one is responsible. Economic behavior appears magically, as if the system exists naturally and no alternatives exist. This sense also erases complexities, such as how class, race, and gender shape political and economic structures and behavior. Charles Bazerman has argued that writing within all disciplines emphasizes “rhetorical perception” as a means to distance people from the everyday practice of the world’s business in order to maintain a popular dependency on “experts” to impart seemingly scientific truths.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in order to help students realize the constructed nature of economic theory, the distance between the worker’s life and the “invisible hand” must be reduced. As in the Land of Oz, we need to reveal the actor behind the curtain. But unlike in the Emerald City, the bad wizard is not actually a good man.

Workers' stories of economic destruction, discriminatory work practices, unsafe working conditions, growing inequities in the workplace and unjust dismissals make economics personal and highlight the inconsistencies between their lives and the neoliberal theory of individual merit and reward. Their stories also reveal the direct impact of broader socio political changes. Moreover, workers' stories of successful collective action both in the work site and politically point to the fact that the system is not impenetrable.

### **Authority**

Often, because of the nature of work and work relations, students enter our classes with specific expectations about how knowledge will be bestowed. However, in a classroom structured on feminist ideas, students' storytelling may not only challenge class assumptions, but may create new understanding. Such a pedagogy builds community in the classroom by engaging students in a constructive conversation and by encouraging them to challenge their own ideologies. This community or class building orientation to the instruction relies on atypical sources for legitimate "data" on politics and economics. For instance, instead of a narrow focus on supply and demand theory students examine the contradictions between democracy and capitalism, equality and poverty, their lives and notions of the American Dream. As this example shows, sharing authority with students can liberate the instructor as well as the students.

Notice how the social outcome of this teaching methodology differs from the rationalist approaches to political economy. By studying the literature, stories, and histories of work (texts that are often viewed as personal, subjective, expressive and

poetic) in conjunction with materials that are traditionally viewed as objective and transactional (as merely transferring and conferring truths, ideas, and knowledge), students can redefine the science of economics as less rational and value free.

The immediate objective here is to illustrate that economics evolved as a response to pragmatic problems and popular ideas in specific historical and linguistic contexts. When students understand that economics growing out of people's experiences, authority then shifts away from professionals, economists, bankers, and television commentators and moves toward homeowners, workers, parents and citizens. Authority is also layered by racial and "gendered modes" of identification<sup>6</sup>. In addition, while mainstream economics provides some historical perspective in which to place questions of inequality and power, considering specific social contradictions makes clear that Allen Greenspan's economy is really capital's creation. When viewed this way, authority is transferred from economics as a holy script to economics as class struggle.

### **Disruption**

In order to get students to not only envision a different world but also believe in their power to create that world, a space must be created for new ways of understanding. In order to create that space we have to intentionally draw out contradictions in workers' worldviews. By disrupting their comfortable ways of thinking, by forcing them to ask increasingly difficult questions about their own lives, we challenge the students' tendency to fall back on nonclass interpretations of economic relations.

This can be a difficult process because often people do not want to think differently. Students do not want facts to get in the way of a perfectly good myth about

the way America works. Often students will express anger and disbelief: “You must have made the statistics up!” In essence the class challenges the culture of the “American Dream.” For example, as workers tell their stories, we point to places where capitalist institutions are more powerful than the individual. To a degree the aim is to anger students and then to facilitate the focus of that anger. Too often in political economics courses, the economic evidence disheartens workers. We instead push our students to move from near depression to anger and from anger to action.

One example of how the course pierces conventional, sacred myths is the class’s review of the origins of the “new right” conservative political movement. Typically our labor union students are rightfully primed to vilify the economic politics of the Republican Party. But how should the class interpret the policy stances of the Democrats? If capitalism has not “captured” both parties, then the Democrats can potentially be proworking class in their orientation. The question, however, needs to be raised and answered. To disrupt the class’s comfort with political reality, students learn that it was, according to William Grieder, “not Ronald Reagan, for instance, who opened the floodgates of tax giveaways for business interests but Representative Dan Rostenkowski, Democratic Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee.” Further, “it was the Democrats, not the Republicans, who first proposed bringing down the top tax rate on unearned income.”<sup>7</sup> In light of labor’s battle with President George W. Bush’s 2002 tax and budget plan, this information serves as a major disruption in our students’ settled thought. Pointing to the flaws of Democratic Party politics does not absolve years of Republican hostility to organized labor,

but it does raise questions about the possibility of political independence within a capitalist system.

### **Working-Class Struggle and the Politics of Power: The Course**

To illustrate these ideas more clearly, we provide a brief description of the class sessions and readings. While we cannot provide the specifics of the entire class, the following outline summarizes the material discussed in each section and our primary interest in developing each issue. Note that a host of different written materials accompanies each session.

#### **Session I. Class Structure and American Values**

At the beginning of the session, students debate the definition of the/or a “working class.” To assist them in this task, we rely upon Michael Zweig’s informative *The Working Class Majority* (2000) to present a reasonable national picture of working-class demographics. Following the discussion students discuss a commonly agreed upon list of basic American values (i.e., individualism, freedom, equality, sanctity of contracts and law, property rights, and hard work). While nominally these values have broad generic public support, their meaning is typically contested. In this session, students explore the various ways “conservatives,” “liberals,” “radicals,” and others understand these values. The class then considers what a working-class perspective on these values would require and begin deconstructing the way that they talk about the economy and politics. Unlike the AFL-CIO’s “Common Sense Economics” curriculum, we consider and discuss “the left” and the Marxist critique of capitalism and government.

## **Session II. Two Sides of the Same Coin**

This session begins by acknowledging that while Democrats and Republicans disagree about how capitalism should be administered, most are in full ideological agreement that capitalism is the best system, thus little if any public discourse takes place concerning alternative political economic systems or theories. From this opening vantage point, we introduce a brief history of economic thought. In a discussion that moves through Adam Smith, Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes, Thorston Veblen and a variety of more contemporary theorists, we give special attention to the socio-political times in which they were writing. This connection between theory and context draws attention to the created nature of understanding and interpretation.

At this point, the stories shared by workers earlier in the class are exposed to separate economic theoretical analysis. For example, issues of “free trade” touch the lives of many of the workers in class, so we encourage the students to analyze trade from a variety of perspectives. First, we examine the role of trade with its focus on comparative advantage and efficient use of resources. Students identify this approach as a “conservative” one, which is often referred to in the media as a neoliberal or neoclassical analysis. Students then consider a more “center” or “liberal” analysis of trade with its emphasis on maximizing efficiency, while acknowledging that laws may be needed to protect those hurt by global exchange. Finally, a “left” or “radical” prospective that trade can and often does hurt both those workers in the developed and developing countries, and that trade policy serves primarily to support corporate profits and not workers’ needs is discussed. Throughout the discussion, we pose the following questions: “Which

analysis makes the most sense to you? What are the strengths and weakness of each? Which analysis do you most often hear played out in the media?” The goal is to help the student to see how a given issue can be analyzed in a variety of ways and that all facts are indeed theory laden.

### **Session III. Gays, Guns, Government and God: The Rise of the New Right**

American politics has been dominated by two political theories: liberalism and conservatism. Since the dawn of the twentieth century conservative thought has been a mixture of different intellectual elements. However, beginning in the late 1960s the growth of right wing beliefs and movements within conservatism has come to strongly define the American political landscape. This session focuses on how diverse groups and uncommon values and trends were brought together around a common conservative currency producing the “New Right.” In brief, students examine the diverse ways that class conflict has been waged by capital against working people.

This session often angers students as we touch on politically sensitive social issues like crime, affirmative action, gun control, prayer in school, family values, and abortion. The degree of anger expressed here and the level of disruption created becomes a powerful teaching tool in the later sessions. In no case, however, do we take a stand, other than to demonstrate how these issues have been used to divide and confuse the working class. In order to provide a context and history of why these “wedge” issues have become dominant in modern political discourse, students read and discuss E.J. Dionne’s *They Only Look Dead* (1995), which provides a very concise and readable description of the forces that have created an “anxious” working-class voting public.

This section concludes with a more focused examination of the beginnings of “backlash” politics as best sculptured and practiced by Georgia Governor and two time presidential candidate George Wallace. Wallace’s political career and political strategy as described by Dan Carter’s *The Politics of Rage* (1995) establishes the importance of the southern segregationist as the father of post 1970s conservative populist movements. In essence, the lesson argues that contrary to conservative defamation of government activism, to be right-wing has meant to support the state in its capacity as enforcer of order and to oppose the state as distributor of wealth and power downward and more equitably in society.

#### **Session IV. The Who Gets What, When and How**

A political system can be best understood as the interaction of several related dynamic elements designed to determine how authoritative decisions are made about “who gets what, when and how.” Classic political works from Karl Marx, Max Weber, Robert Dahl, Charles Lindbloom, Benjamin Barber, David Held and David Eaton present the students with different ways of understanding basic principles about American political behavior and the functional attributes, which sustain the political system. This engages the workers in a discussion about their belief in or commitment to notions of American political pluralism.

This session, along with the following one, also provides an opportunity to address the “outcomes” of the political system in gender and race based terms. Exploring how gender, ethnic and racial identification has structured layers of opportunity and advantage for American workers helps our students to take seriously a meaningful class

political and economic analysis. Labor education students are typically a very diverse population (though the racial and gender mix varies by workforce). Union sponsored classrooms provide an ideal environment for an inclusionary discussion of the merits of a “who gets what” approach to politics and the labor movement. In this respect, Robin Kelley’s *Race Rebels* (1994) and Georgakas and Surkin’s *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* (1998) provide a number of interesting departures for a discussion of black workers and their inclusion in a broader working-class political movement. For similar reasons, Dennis Deslippe’s *Rights Not Roses* (2000) and Jacqueline Ellis’s *Silent Witnesses* (1998) are helpful in talking about the juncture of politics and working class feminism. Another powerful resource that provides a wide variety of short readings on class, race, gender and sexual orientation is *Reading for Social Justice and Diversity*, edited by Adams et., al. (2000).

### **Session V. A Working-Class Economic Analysis**

What has happened over the last twenty years to wages, taxes, corporate investments, corporate profits, pension plans, stock values, job security, foreign trade, union density, and government spending? Donald Barlett’s and James Steel’s Pulitzer Prize winning work *America: What Went Wrong?* (1992) is an excellent “reader” on the economic destruction of the 1980s. The AFL-CIO’s “Common Sense Economics” has served as a good resource, but the Economic Policy Institute’s annual, *The State of Working America* provides the majority of data used in this section. (By the way, many of our students point out that we are using data from a liberal think tank! We plead guilty, but point to the primary sources of the data.) Students examine how economic changes

and trends have created class winners and class losers. This session also addresses the ways that gender and race handicap resource distribution. Special attention is given to the effects of globalization as a joint corporate-state trade, investment and currency speculation strategy. On the spread of international capital, resource material from the AFL-CIO and from industrial unions like the United Steelworkers of America also emphasizes the disparate class economic effects of national trade policy.

### **Session VI. Politics as an Act of Will**

This final session has two principle objectives: to recommend a strategic plan for creating a working-class/union derived issue agenda and to establish a set of rules for class-based political action. The session begins with the question, “So what is to be done?” We ask students to create a political action plan around a set of issues. Before they generate their plans, they engage in a brief discussion designed to answer two underlying fundamental questions. First, how can a movement of class informed union leaders engage a political system dominated by two capitalist parties? Second, what political message is required to mobilize rank-and-file workers around class issues? Before attempting to answer these questions, the class reads sections of Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers’s (2000) analysis of national voting trends and issue polls, in *Why the White Working Class Still Matters*. Teixeira and Rogers put forward the idea of an issue agenda around which progressive class based political action can be successfully built.

In the interplay of student comments a number of principles and activities emerge. Students discuss the importance of exposing and denouncing excessive corporate political power and the corporate political agenda. They grapple with the need and difficulty of

educating, organizing and mobilizing all workers now outside of the labor movement and the political system. Students typically agree that it is paramount to construct and endorse an independent labor agenda and not simply a labor light Democratic Party defined agenda. Students also argue for basing a political and social vision upon the issues of class fairness and class equality. We remind students of the need to preserve a strong and independent labor movement as a condition of a free, democratic, egalitarian and prosperous society. Finally, we ask union workers to develop their political strategies, tactics and goals democratically with other rank-and-file members.

In this session, we provide both historical and contemporary examples of workers exerting themselves and winning, sometimes with government protections and sometimes without. The message is that legislation is one way to protect workers, but the most important protection workers have is in organizing “as a class” with a consciousness of class struggle.

### **Conclusion**

The breathtaking acceleration of capital flows and “creative destruction” in the early twenty-first century makes labor educators and worker students painfully aware of the temporary and contingent nature of all capitalist arrangements. Between the contemporary configuration of political power in Washington, D.C. and global capital’s latest dismemberment of the manufacturing sector of the economy, the labor movement may seem to have little time for education. Labor has all it can handle just trying to survive. But if we have arrived at a world in which capitalism has become economically and politically unassailable, then a debunking education is more necessary than ever.

Time and resources may be stretched thin but the intellectual field is ripe for a root and branch critique of everything workers have taken as harmful but given. The power of an economic and political education centered in a theory of capitalism is linked to the real world threats against organized labor and to the fears workers carry with them from paycheck to paycheck. In principle (if not precisely), the same deteriorating material and psychological condition experienced in the 1930s inspired a radical union hall workers' education. In the formative days of industrial unionism an analytical class education went hand-in-hand with building strong unions. But for all the progressive activity of today's labor movement, it does not prominently feature the word *class* in its rhetorical arsenal.<sup>8</sup> Political and economic agendas are for "working people" or "working families," and labor is fighting for "middle-class" America. The result of this universal, middling or non-class discourse, is that class analysis has been dropped from the labor curriculum.

But the cost of speaking the language of bourgeois economics and politics has been high. Without a radical education informing the political economy of workers, the power of class identity to provide resistance not only to capitalism, but also to other entrenched structures of power (e.g., racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism) has been diminished. Still, the working class has only disappeared from the classroom. Capitalism grows into a world dominant structure of power, organizing community and work within one unifying free market. The working class as Marx described it and projected is now everywhere and because of neoliberal politics and globalized markets it is everywhere more alike. Material conditions are once again, like in an earlier era, contributing to a radical theoretical framework for understanding politics and economics. With unionization of the United

States private sector workforce under ten percent, it is now appropriate for labor education to think and act like a new movement yet to be born.

This kind of education needs to happen not only within the labor movement, but in other educational settings, and we encourage our colleagues in new working-class studies to learn from our experience as labor educators. Sadly, the vast majority of America's workers do not belong to unions, but a significant proportion of young adults go to college, and most of them work while they are in school. And despite their best hopes, very few will ever find a way to make a living that is free of the exploitation that shapes the lives of workers under capitalism. While students in college classrooms may not think of themselves primarily as workers, and their teachers may not place building a class based movement at the top of their lists of course goals, the strategies we've outlined here can bring a more critical and political perspective to discussions of class, economics, and politics in American culture. Such an approach might well spark labor, political, and community organizing activities by students. It will certainly deepen the analysis of politics and economics in the classroom.

- 
1. Dan Kalb, "Class (in Place) Without Capitalism (In Space)?" *International Labor and Working-Class History* 57 (2000) 31-39.
  2. Fred Glass, "Amplifying the Voices of Workers: An Organizing Model for Labor Communications," *Labor Studies Journal* 27 (2003): 1-16.

- 
3. Diana Strassman, "The Stories of Economics and the Power of the Storyteller," *History of Political Economy* 25 (1993): 147-165.
  4. James Berlin, "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," *College English* 50 (1988): 477-494.
  5. Charles Bazerman, "From Cultural Criticism to Disciplinary Participation: Living with Powerful Words" in *Writing, Teaching, Learning in the Disciplines*, ed. Anne Herrington and Charles Moran (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992), 61-68.
  6. Dale M. Bauer, "The Other 'F' Word," *College English* 50 (1988): 477-494.
  7. William Greider, *Who Will Tell the People: The Betrayal of American Democracy* (New York: Touchstone Book, 1992) 91.
  8. For instance, the AFL-CIO's web-site homepage is full of informative links about the labor movement and important work related issues, but not a single use of the word class or working class.