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The Role of Labor Education in Transforming a Union Toward Organizing Immigrants: a Case Study

Bruce Nissen

Abstract

This article looks at a series of educational programs on attitudes toward immigrants conducted for the South Florida Regional Council of the Carpenters Union by the author. It details the content and nature of the programs, the key players, the relationships of the programs to change within the union, internal union sensitivities, and the end results. The case is analyzed to indicate key issues surrounding education of this type: its sensitive nature, the centrality of surfacing normally hidden feelings and opinions, the need for decisive backing from key power centers within the union, the blurring of the difference between “education” and “consulting” in this type of labor education, and several necessities/cautions for this type of labor education to work.

The official rhetoric of the U.S. labor movement stresses the central importance of organizing the unorganized. Top leadership of the AFL-CIO since the 1995 changeover states that organizing is the number one priority. Despite the rhetoric, at best only about a dozen national unions are seriously undertaking the task of organizing on a major scale (Bernstein, 2000; Greenhouse, 2001). Federation leaders have recognized that a major part of the problem is that unions need to “transform” themselves internally before they will effectively undertake organizing. Thus, the AFL-CIO notes that “changing to organize” must accompany or precede organizing for change. And some of the most interesting recent writing on the future of the labor movement has concerned itself with the internal transformations that would be required to organize successfully and grow

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(Fletcher and Hurd, 1998; Eisenscher, 1999a; Eisenscher, 1999b; Brecher and Costello, 1999; Fletcher and Hurd, 1999; Fletcher and Hurd, 2000, Robinson, 2000; Johnston, 2000).

One of the ways many unions need to change internally concerns relationships with non-traditional workers such as immigrants. In many segments of the labor market, immigrants have become a significant factor. Unions in these sectors unable or unwilling to incorporate immigrants or to develop leadership from their ranks will inevitably fail to grow in the coming years. Yet, very little scholarly work has been done on current union attitudes toward immigrants, recent union experiences in attempting to organize immigrant workers, or internal factors making a union more or less amenable to immigrants within their ranks. (For exceptions, see Delgado, 1993; Haus, 1995; Milkman, 2000; Delgado, 2000; and Nissen and Grenier, 2001).

The U.S. labor movement has long had a vacillating and problematic history in relation to immigrant workers. Early immigrants to the country, primarily German, Irish, and English, brought to their new country traditions of socialist and union activism that gave them a natural inclination toward fraternity with their fellow workers abroad. Kinship was especially felt with northern and western European immigrants because of cultural similarities. U.S. labor organizations in the mid- to late-19th century favored unlimited European immigration (Lane, 1987: 9-32).

The opposite tendency revealed itself in attitudes toward Chinese immigrants, especially in California. There, the labor movement led vicious and violent attacks on Chinese immigrants and supported a complete halt to further immigration (Saxton, 1971). Later, Japanese immigrants were viewed similarly. The immigration question merged with the race question. Who would be defined as a legitimate part of the nation (who is "us" and who is "them") shifted across lines of racial and nationality classification. In the final years of the 19th century, national and racial solidarities often undercut class-based solidarity with either immigrants or racial minorities.

The transition from worker solidarity and republican egalitarianism to exclusionism and nativism was a slow and protracted affair. When technological change and a shift in European immigration from northern and western countries to those in the south and the east began to undermine established craft unions, the union members reluctantly and slowly abandoned worker solidarity to defend their existing union structures. By 1900 the American Federation of Labor was anti-immigration, and it strongly supported the 1917 literacy test for immigrants, as well as the

draconian 1921 and 1924 laws freezing future immigration to existing levels under formulas favoring northern and western European immigrants (Lane, 1987; Parmet, 1981).

Between 1924 and the 1970s, immigration played next to no role in the thinking or activities of most U.S. unions, simply because immigration levels were so low. Some unions, such as the garment unions, had large numbers of immigrants in their ranks throughout this period. But, most U.S. unions represented workers operating in a workforce with few immigrants. From the 1970s to the present, however, immigration has again become a major issue in this country because the number of immigrants has risen sharply. Continuing its basic exclusionary stance, in 1986 the AFL-CIO supported the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which aimed to curb immigration by penalizing employers for knowingly employing undocumented workers inside the country illegally. In fact, employers almost never faced penalties under this act, while undocumented workers were routinely deported if they dared to assert their rights or to attempt to unionize.

In the latter half of the 1990s the U.S. labor movement began to reevaluate its support for exclusionary policies. Following a 1995 turnover in top leadership, the AFL-CIO took a more progressive, internationalist, and pro-immigrant direction than had been evident earlier. In late 1999 and early 2000, it called for the repeal of employer sanctions, demanded amnesty for all undocumented workers, and pledged itself to a massive program to educate immigrant workers about their legal rights in this country (Bacon, 2000a; 2000b; 2001). In June 2000 the AFL-CIO cosponsored a massive rally of 15,000 people in Los Angeles calling for amnesty for undocumented workers (Candaele and Dreier, 2000).

Nevertheless, change has been slow and only partial. In most cases statements have not been matched by equivalent changes in policies and attitudes at the local level. The "change to organize" referred to in the AFL-CIO slogan requires that unions transform themselves internally into immigrant-friendly organizations if they are to survive and prosper in many industries and work forces. But such change has been exceedingly difficult. (For an analysis of the factors that influence a local union's likelihood of making this change, see Sherman and Voss, [2000]; and Nissen and Grenier, [2001]).

This essay addresses the narrower question of what role labor education can play in union transformation to immigrant-friendly status. In particular, it examines a series of classes conducted by the author for the United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC) in the heavily immigrant

workforce of South Florida. The UBC Regional Council was attempting to transform itself internally into an "immigrant friendly" institution capable of organizing all area workers in the carpentry trade. The UBC wished to regain sufficient market share to become a powerful organization. Because the Carpenters are the only union in South Florida to use extensive education in its attempt to open itself up to immigrants, this experience is not indicative of a general change in culture or approach of most Florida unions. But it is instructive about how education can play a role in internal union change for those unions that choose to use it for this purpose.

Background

The population and the labor force in South Florida have become increasingly immigrant in the past half-century. In 1940, less than 10 percent of the population in the Miami area was foreign born; by 1998 the figure had grown to 59 percent (Nissen and Grenier, 2001: 77). The construction industry workforce underwent an even more extreme change: from 1980 to 1998, the percentage of construction workers who were immigrants grew from 39.4 percent to 74.6 percent (Nissen and Grenier, 2001: 78). Most of these immigrants came from Cuba (54 percent), followed by South American nations (14 percent), Central American nations (12 percent), and Caribbean nations such as Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica (12.9 percent) (Current Population Survey, 1999).

But the UBC did not incorporate the new workers into its ranks at a pace that kept up with the workforce changes. By the year 2000, only 33 percent of the Regional Council's membership was Hispanic (Nissen and Grenier, 2001: 82), and the immigrant percentage was undoubtedly much smaller given the large number of second generation Hispanics within its ranks. The union had accepted some Cuban immigrants into its ranks earlier than some other building trades unions in the 1970s, and great progress was made in the late 1970s because of the influence of an exceptionally talented local immigrant union leader: Pepe Collado. But the changes were not institutionalized, and after Collado moved up in the union's hierarchy out of the local scene in the mid-1980s, it regressed in its practices: Contracts ceased being translated into Spanish, Anglo union stewards were unable to communicate with non-English speaking members, the apprenticeship program reverted to English only, etc.

Meanwhile, the union's exclusion of immigrant workers did it a great deal of damage. The "country club" style of exclusionary unionism meant that the union rapidly lost market share and economic power as the labor

force became increasingly immigrant and therefore non-union. In the 1960s, the union contained close to 12,000 members and controlled 95 percent of the market; by 2000 it was down to about 3,800 members and approximately 5 percent market share. A non-union Latin Builders Association, which had earlier attempted to go union but was rebuffed, was the dominant contractor's group locally, and by now it was virulently anti-union.

Internally, attitudes of both leaders and members throughout the 1980s and 1990s were less than friendly to immigrants working in the trade. The general attitude was that they were diluting the trade, that most of them were not good enough to be in the union, and that the union's best strategy was to hold on to the "good" end of the market while it slowly made contract concessions and whittled its membership down to its ever-shrinking contractor base. As a result of such a losing strategy, the union's master contract by the late 1990s had wage levels that had dropped close to 40 percent in real terms compared to historic highs. And even these greatly reduced wage levels were not paid by all union contractors, while the union looked the other way because rigid adherence to stipulated wage levels would have resulted in even greater loss of jobs.

The South Florida Regional Council of Carpenters covers a very wide geographic range. To the south, it encompasses Miami-Dade County (the greater Miami area). This county, with two million residents, contains approximately half of the council's 3,841 members in three locals. (All membership figures in this and following paragraphs are taken from council records as of March 15, 2000). Immediately to the north is Broward County, with a population of 1.5 million and one local containing almost 900 members, or a little under 1/4 of the council's membership. To the north of Broward is Palm Beach County, with a population of one million and a UBC local with approximately 675 members, or 17 percent of the council's members. An extremely small local of approximately 130 members is on the West Coast of South Florida, and a pile drivers local of almost 300 covering all counties complete the count.

There is extreme ethnic segregation of the memberships of the locals within the council. The Palm Beach local has only three percent Hispanic membership; the Broward local only five percent (for a grand total of only 66 Hispanics in these two locals, whose combined membership of 1,571 makes up 41 percent of the Council's entire membership). This is despite the fact that the adult labor forces of these two counties are 25.9 percent and 33.4 percent immigrant respectively (Current Population Survey, 1999). On the other hand, two Miami-Dade locals have

100 percent and 92 percent Hispanic membership; they alone account for 34 percent of the entire Council's Hispanic members. The two locals are an industrial (non-construction) local (283 members) and a "specialty" carpentry local (450 members). Only one local, in Miami-Dade County, could be considered fully integrated—425 (38 percent) of its 1,118 members are Hispanic. It and the two "Hispanic" locals contain 88 percent of the council's Hispanic members. (Haitian, Jamaican, or other non-Hispanic immigrant populations are not counted in these figures because their numbers in the carpentry trade are negligible).

The Regional Council was in great turmoil throughout the last half of the 1990s and the years 2000 and 2001. The executive secretary treasurer (EST), an "Anglo" who had presided ineffectively over the long descent of the union, was ousted in the late 1990s, and a good number of the staff were fired. The new EST for approximately a year-and-a-half was an "Anglo" business agent from the Broward County local. In November of 2000, he stepped down and a Cuban American who had been the organizing director became the new EST and head of the council. The classes discussed in this essay were mostly held during the tenure of the "interim" EST, while the council was attempting to transition to a more immigrant-friendly stance.

Certain personalities are central to the story that follows. Structurally, the union's organizing staff is hired by, and is directly answerable to Jose "Pepe" Collado, the southeast region representative of the national union. Collado, who rose from the ranks of this particular regional council, has long been a force for inclusion and immigrant-friendly policies, but the resistance was coming from local leadership and membership. Collado guaranteed that there would be unflinching national union support to the educational change process and provided the money needed to keep the classes going.

The council's organizing director at the time, now the EST and overall council leader, is George García, a Cuban American originally from the Boston area. He initially harbored ambivalent feelings about immigrants, but quickly gravitated toward the pro-immigrant organizing stance and he has become a staunch supporter of the changes being attempted in the union. García planned each class together with the author and made his organizing staff attend classes. He also advertised the program throughout the council structure.

One newly hired organizer and business agent, Angel Domínguez, brought to his job a long history in farmworker and labor organizing, as well as a strongly pro-immigrant, class conscious viewpoint. He was a

consistent (and often outnumbered) advocate for immigrant friendly policies. Domínguez brought large numbers of workers to the classes: his small industrial local (283 members) brought almost 40 percent of the students attending the series of classes outlined here.

Labor Education Enters the Union's Internal Life

Throughout 1999, the author and a Spanish-speaking colleague had been running a number of bilingual programs for the region's industrial carpenters local to help Domínguez rebuild a shopfloor presence through internal organizing. In early 2000, García decided that the region's organizers needed some similar training to help them organize the heavily immigrant workforce. On May 12, 2000, an initial program was held with all the region's 12 organizers present. All but two of the organizers were Hispanic, although only three or four were themselves immigrants (one from El Salvador, the others from Cuba).

The program was a simple exercise in determining what were the problems encountered and an initial exploration of what could be done to overcome them. The problems that were raised spontaneously by most organizers were variations on a "blame the worker" theme. Immigrant workers were said to be too afraid (especially if undocumented), too happy with their low wages because they were better than could be had in the old country, too uneducated, too unwilling to meet and mix with others, too unskilled, and too willing to tolerate illegal conditions and forms of payment. Domínguez and the Salvadoran immigrant (who had a long history as a community and labor activist, as well as a personal past as an undocumented worker) raised a few problems internal to the union, but the overall viewpoint was that immigrants were largely unorganizable.

Undocumented workers were referred to as "illegal aliens." The over-riding strategy was to turn in contractors who hired undocumented workers, and who evaded workers compensation and other social wage payments, thus gaining an unfair advantage. One organizer, of Puerto Rican ancestry, referred to undocumented immigrant workers as "stupid, really dumb": lacking in even basic education or a knowledge of their rights. His entire organizing strategy consisted of getting government compliance officers to "bust" contractors hiring immigrants, and thus to force them out of the workforce (and out of the country?).

When Domínguez suggested that the union lead a local movement for amnesty for undocumented workers, coupled with aggressive community-based attempts to organize them, an "Anglo" organizer objected because "illegals" would bring in tuberculosis and other "foreign" diseases.

The session ended with little agreement about what were the real obstacles to organizing immigrant workers, but the instructor had a much clearer understanding of how pervasive anti-immigrant and defeatist attitudes were within the union.

García decided that a much longer-term set of educational programs was needed. The council had tried "Construction Organizing Membership Education Training" (COMET) to jump start organizing work, but he found the union so divided in cultural beliefs and attitudes that it was unable to function or begin organizing in a unified manner. Thus, he requested a series of programs, one Saturday per month, to address internal disunity and to develop a common understanding necessary for organizing. Classes would be bilingual, and would be held for all organizing staff and members of the non-functioning union local volunteer organizing committees (VOCs). We dubbed the classes "Super Sábado" ("Super Saturday") programs.

From the beginning, the EST was not enthusiastic about the programs. He felt defensive, because as an "Anglo" he was being criticized (sometimes fairly and sometimes unfairly) by Hispanics within the organization for not doing enough to incorporate and develop Hispanic members and leaders. But, he was powerless to interfere with the classes, since they were funded from the organizing budget, which came from the national union, not the council. After the first class, Collado became aware of the classes and threw his wholehearted support behind them. At this point, the classes became an almost-monthly event.

In the summer and fall of 2000 four "Super Sábado" classes were held. The strategy was to move class topics from the general problem of being unable to organize effectively to the specific issue of native/immigrant and Anglo/Hispanic relations. The overall goal was a change in the union's internal culture, so that it became an inviting place for all types of carpenters in the South Florida area and to change attitudes toward immigrant workers. This was seen as a prerequisite for effective organizing in the South Florida environment. All classes were carefully planned and customized after extensive consultation with García; the sequence of classes emerged from this process.

The following is a listing of the classes chronologically along with class titles and main topics/activities:

Saturday, June 17: Why Can't The Union Organize More Effectively? The instructors bilingually put on flip charts the problems/obstacles raised by participants. Obstacles were categorized into

those dealing with the (a) workers, (b) legal and political environment, and (c) internal union processes and attitudes. The class was broken into four groups to address obstacles surfaced in (c) above. Groups reported back to the entire class on their discussion and proposed solutions.

Saturday, July 29: How Can The Union Forge A Common Purpose? The instructors summarized the suggestions given from the previous program and noted the lack of a unified vision for the union and how it should proceed with organizing. Break out groups dealt with five scenarios entitled "A Carpenter Looks at His Union. . .". Each scenario related the situation of a different member - Frank, Julio, Bob, Jose, and Gonzalo - who brought a different background and set of experiences with the union to his present interactions with the Carpenters. The five members were drawn up as "composites" of different types of members of the south Florida Carpenters. Breakout group members were to pretend they were this member and to answer five questions: (1) What makes you identify with the union?; (2) What, from your point of view, is the purpose of the union?; (3) What would make you identify more closely and to volunteer to help?; (4) What makes you uncomfortable at the union hall, at the job site, or at union meetings; and (5) What could be done to make you feel more that the union belongs to you?

Saturday, September 23: How Can The Union Build Unity In Such A Diverse Workforce? The instructors led with a presentation on why the union has to be diverse, showing labor force trends in the area, and the inescapable necessity of organizing all types of carpenters. The class then reviewed the previous class's findings on the outlooks of different types of members, and was asked to break into groups to develop things the union should do: (a) on the job; (b) at the union hall; (c) educationally; (d) socially (through common recreational activities); and (e) in the apprenticeship program to build unity out of diversity. A final part of the program, exploring how immigrants look from the viewpoint of longer term members and what immigrants need to do or learn to be full participants in the union, didn't happen because time ran out.

Saturday, October 28: How Can The Union Improve Its Struc-

ture, To Operate More Effectively? Here the focus turned to needed changes to make the union more structurally flexible. Using the suggestions developed in the previous program on changes needed in areas (a) through (e) in the previous paragraph, participants were asked to evaluate first the regional council, and then the union locals in how they functioned to carry out the union's work. The council was evaluated on four fronts: apprenticeship program, political action committee, new membership committee, and volunteer organizing committee. Locals were evaluated on four different fronts: steward system, internal communications, running of meetings, and dealings with new members. This class highlighted issues of "immigrant friendliness" but also served as a bridge away from strictly "immigrant" issues into the union's overall operations. It built on the outcomes from the classes on immigrants and diversity, but began to apply to structural and operational issues.

The dynamics of these four classes were intense. Attendance ranged from 12 to 35 persons; ethnically the background of class participants varied from 25 percent to 80 percent Hispanic. At certain points the disagreements became heated; on a few occasions instructors had to intervene to prevent shouting and verbally abusive behavior.

The first (June 17) class was opened in a manner intended to encourage openness. All obstacles to organizing that participants raised were put on flip charts, and participants were encouraged to state anything they felt. Consequently, sharply diverging views of what was wrong were offered. Volunteers and paid organizers from predominantly "Anglo" locals cited deficiencies in the workers themselves ("fearful," "unable to speak our language," "lacking in education") and in the legal and political environment ("lack of legal residency for some," "hostile legal climate," "right-to-work state,"). Domínguez and immigrant members of his 100 percent Hispanic industrial local, as well as some from the "specialty" local which was 92 percent Hispanic, raised internal union deficiencies ("prejudices, stereotypes and racism," "lack of effort," "lack of vision," "rigid standards, lack of a flexible structure," "lack of a plan," "past practices").

Breakout groups also came up with sharply divergent solutions to address the problems/obstacles. Group 1 suggested measures such as "training staff on immigration laws situations," "implementing internal education to better understand the workforce," "setting up community center outreach programs," and "adjusting the apprenticeship programs to the

workforce"—all attempts to reorient the union toward the new workforce. Group 2 came up with similar suggestions: "make key personnel bilingual," "verbally promote immigrant rights," "promote English and literacy, but do not make it a prerequisite." But Group 3, led/dominated by "Anglos," refused to address such issues; suggestions were things like "union t-shirts," "national ad campaign," "political involvement." And, Group 4 suggested primarily ways to change the workers being organized: "educate new members," "education about the concept of (carpenters and joiners) unions."

"Anglos" at times felt that they were being bashed, or worse yet being accused of racism, for simply upholding standards that would preserve the craft and the union. One related a story of how he had been trying to organize about 10 Hispanic immigrant workers. He had offered them the free English language classes in the evening at the local high school. Only two of the 10 had been willing to take the classes. He had "given them a chance to improve themselves," and most had not wanted to do it. The conclusion he drew was that most were not of the caliber needed to be union carpenters.

On the other side, the immigrant workers in the class felt attacked and denigrated by such attitudes. They vehemently replied that willingness to take English classes could not be a prerequisite for acceptability, and that such attitudes were chauvinist and demeaning. The "temperature" of the discussion rose and fell throughout the class period; the instructors had to surface all these attitudes while simultaneously directing the class toward constructively dealing with its many internal differences, rather than abusing each other.

The following (July 29) class brought many of the tensions to a head. Through consultation with García, the instructors developed brief descriptions of five "typical" types of South Florida carpenters union members. One was an "Anglo" who has seen the union decline; he primarily blames immigrants and believes they mostly are not good enough to be in the union. He also thinks that speaking a language other than English is disrespectful to this country.

A second one is a recent Mexican immigrant who received at best an ambivalent welcome when he joined the union. He sees "Anglos" getting the best union jobs and referrals, which he resents. He does not participate actively in the union.

A third is an "Anglo" who moves to South Florida from a stronger carpenter's local in the Northeast. He is dismayed at the weakness of the carpenters locally, and feels out of place among so many Spanish-speaking members.

A fourth is a Cuban immigrant in the country for 17 years. He had a very hard time getting in to the union, which he values for its wage and benefit levels, but not for its treatment of people like himself. He is not active in the union.

The final member is a recent Nicaraguan immigrant who works in a union cabinet factory. He believes in unions and worker unity, but sees chaotic union meetings and a pretty weak union at his workplace.

In break-out groups, class participants were asked to take the role of these members, and see what binds them to the union, what they see a union's purpose as being, what would increase their union identification, and what made them uncomfortable about the union. This was a very crucial and "growing" experience for many in the class. The "Anglos" were forced to try to see the union through immigrant eyes, while immigrants had to try to understand, and empathize with, the viewpoint of a long term "Anglo" member seeing his union decline. Suggestions for union measures to make the union more comfortable for each kind of member (detailed later in this article) were developed by most of the breakout groups.

There were still resentments and resistance from some class participants. Some "Anglos," including the EST, adopted an extremely defensive posture, constantly pointing out how much they were doing rather than open-mindedly trying to explore new modes of union operation. And a few Hispanics continued to engage in behind-the-back sniping and complaining, rather than surfacing openly in the classes some of the problem areas. Despite these caveats, the overall effect of the classes was to bring to the surface hidden tensions and to open participants to the point of view of those with an opposite understanding of how the union can best function. By the fall the attitude of staff organizers was markedly different than it had been in May. The message, "Get on the program, and develop ways to organize this immigrant labor force; don't blame them for your failure to organize them," had clearly sunk in.

The September class built on the previous two classes. A presentation showing the labor force of the three county area opened the class: Immigrants were between 1/4 and 3/4 of the construction labor force in the respective counties, and no construction union could grow and prosper without organizing them. Following that, the class worked on changes the union needed to make to improve organizing success in six areas: on the job, at the union hall, at union meetings, educationally, socially (through common recreational activities), and in the apprenticeship program.

The suggestions coming out of these discussions were overwhelmingly constructive and relevant. Space constraints preclude a full listing of these suggestions/guidelines for union leadership, but an abbreviated listing gives a general sense of their scope. On the job, participants suggested an improved steward structure (including bilingual capabilities), highly visible union activities and symbols to create a sense of "movement," supervisor training, and a genuine internal communication network. Suggestions for improving union meetings included getting people to come through greater visibility at the job site to an improved quality of meeting (educational component, open freedom of speech, simultaneous translation, interesting reports from rank-and-file committees, new member education about meetings, etc. It was suggested that the union hall needed personnel who were friendly, flexible (e.g., in hours), open and inviting, and compatible with the varied membership.

Socially, family picnics and Christmas parties and the like were suggested, as well as ways to honor the different heritages found within the union. Educationally, COMET, cross-cultural education, and mandatory new member orientation were suggested. In the apprenticeship program, bilingual programming and practical "hands-on" testing were suggested.

The October class used the suggestions from the previous class as a background to an assessment of how the union was operating, both regionally and at the local level. Regional Council leaders did a self-assessment of the Council, followed by an assessment from local leaders. Then local leaders did a self-assessment of their organizations, followed by an assessment from council leaders. Because this class was held in the Palm Beach local office (classes had been rotated between different union halls), few immigrants or Hispanics attended this meeting. Almost half the class came from the Palm Beach local, which had resolutely resisted much of the "organize or die" message coming from the national union. Consequently, the dynamics of the class were less clearly focused on change and more dominated by defensive claims that everything was being done that could be done. But, even this class indicated that the regional council was moving toward some fairly major changes geared toward making the organization more flexible and open to nontraditional workers such as immigrants.

By the fall, the official stance of the UBC regional council toward immigrant workers was almost 180 degrees away from its position in the spring. In October the union sponsored, and took the lead in organizing, a rally calling for unconditional amnesty for all undocumented immigrant workers in the Miami area. Domínguez and Salvadoran immigrant Car-

penters organizer German Martínez were the emcees of the event. An “Anglo” organizer who earlier had warned of tuberculosis from the immigrant influx, now wandered through the crowd trying to sign up undocumented workers to join the union’s apprenticeship program. Many underlying attitudes had not changed as much as the official stance suggested, but nevertheless, the contrast was stark. Great progress had been made toward an attitude change within the union.

All of this change cannot be attributed to the classes described in this essay, of course. But, García believes that the union could not have undergone nearly as extensive changes in attitudes without the classes. In this instance, labor education definitely played a role in helping a union “change to organize.” Further educational classes continue to be held. More recent classes focus on the union’s mostly dysfunctional committee structure and how to make it work, as well as how to conduct an organizing campaign from start to finish.

Analysis and Conclusions

The relationship of various South Florida unions with immigrants has been compared and analyzed elsewhere (Nissen and Grenier, 2001). That research demonstrated that a union’s relationship with immigrants depended on traditional member and employer characteristics, union structure, and union leadership and internal cultural factors. Building trades unions were at a disadvantage in virtually all of these respects. Traditional membership was overwhelmingly white and male, and union contractors did not incorporate new immigrants as readily as their non-union counterparts. Structurally, the building trades craft unions had been built around exclusionary boundaries, with racial and nationality (and familial) boundaries coinciding with those of the union. All these factors made unions such as the UBC traditionally quite backwards in their attitudes toward, and integration of, immigrants.

In addition, the leadership had developed a “country club” mentality that hindered, rather than helped, the union make a transition toward the new workforce. Finally, the internal culture of most building trades unions, including the Carpenters, had not been conducive to a welcoming attitude, or one inviting participation on the part of immigrant workers. An insular, white, male culture focused on excluding outsiders from a monetarily-oriented club run in a top-down businesslike manner with strong bureaucratic leadership prevailed.

All of these factors made it extremely difficult for construction craft unions like the UBC to reorient their external outlook and internal prac-

tices. Yet, they were forced to change. The extreme “shock” of massive loss of market share (such as the South Florida Carpenters drop from 95 percent to 5 percent of the market) forced the organization to recognize that it faced extinction if it did not change. This is one “push” that created the turmoil and progressive change in the south Florida regional council in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Another external “push” adding legitimacy to calls for change was the changing attitude and rhetoric coming from top levels of the union’s leadership. Perhaps the corresponding changes in the orientation of the AFL-CIO on the immigrant question had an influence, although the Carpenters’ subsequent withdrawal from the AFL-CIO might indicate that the actual influence of AFL-CIO policy on the Carpenters’ practices was quite small. There is no way of knowing, absent access to internal deliberations.

An additional necessary factor was the presence of internal “change agents” willing to force the union to confront and address in practice the obstacles to internal transformation. As previously noted, such change agents existed in this particular regional council.

Thus, the necessary factors to make the UBC willing to undertake wrenching internal change were in place by the time the classes described in this article were held. The choice of union leaders to use education from a university-based labor educator to create the educational arm of the change effort is rather unusual, however. It is rare for an outside labor educator to be invited so deeply into the internal functioning of a union, or for a union to be so willing to “air its dirty laundry” to an outsider. The author’s personal friendship and relationship with Domínguez was close enough to start the process, and a growing relationship of trust with García based on continuing close collaboration made this possible. However, development of this degree of trust is a long-term project in many instances with most unions.

It is also uncommon for labor education to be so closely tailored to a specific circumstance, and for a labor educator to work so closely with segments of union leadership to create/force change. The number of hours devoted to consultation about the union’s programs and its overall situation, as well as conceptualizing the particular class to offer, is very large. Likewise, this type of programming frequently requires a screening of all materials prior to class by the union’s internal change agent/leader, to make sure that the curriculum really is suitable.

Education of this nature tends to be highly emotional and conflict-laden. The very nature of the organization, and the vision of those lead-

ing and participating in it are being examined or challenged. Contrasting visions are brought to the surface and are allowed to contend within a controlled environment. Therefore, fundamental values and beliefs are at stake and much of the "learning" that occurs is attitudinal rather than cognitive. At the deepest level, education about immigrants and unions can even challenge existing ethnic self-identities. In the case at hand, self-identity as an "American" (meaning native and white) was undergoing some challenge and possible transmutation to an alternate identity as a "worker" or "union carpenter" without the native and white qualifiers being essential to the identity. (Exclusionary self-identities based on gender were hardly challenged in this particular case, because most participants were male—although two women involved in a union community organizing project begun by Domínguez did attend some of the classes).

Because of the sensitive nature of the beliefs and attitudes being challenged, education like this can only succeed if it brings to the surface feelings and opinions that are usually hidden because they will arouse controversy and possible stigma. Thus, it shares certain characteristics with some black-white race training that intentionally aims to bring into the open common controversial but hidden racial attitudes and beliefs. Only when these normally hidden views are "out on the table" can they be dealt with in a forthright organizational manner. But the labor educator also has to be careful to surface clashing views in a "safe" context, where all views are accorded respect, if not acceptance.

Outside labor educators who, like this author, are connected to a university labor center need strong institutional (or institutionally powerful) support from key players in the affected union, because previously sacrosanct doctrines or institutions are being challenged. In this case, some power centers in the union would have preferred to not have the classes described above occur. In particular, the Regional Council EST felt vulnerable and attacked; had he been calling the shots, the classes would not have happened. The West Palm Beach and Broward County locals sent a few leaders to these classes primarily for defensive purposes and would have preferred they not happen. And much of the traditional "Anglo" membership was also resistant, judging from their in-class reactions.

But, as noted earlier, key individuals steadfastly supported the Super Sábado classes: Pepe Collado, national leader; George García, organizing director and later EST; and Angel Domínguez, organizer. Each brought something crucial to the classes. Collado gave the "top leadership" policy and monetary support needed to carry out such a controversial exercise.

García provided crucial information on internal union attitudes and processes needed in planning each class, and forced paid staff to attend classes. And, although at the time he lacked a similar power base, Domínguez brought large numbers of workers to the classes: his small industrial local (283 members) brought almost 40 percent of the students attending the series of classes. These three individuals were absolutely crucial to the success of the classes, not to mention their very existence.

This type of education can be effective in changing attitudes (and, to a minor degree, self-identities), but only in conjunction with ongoing changes within the local itself. While these classes happened, the national union's president and its district leader were devoting considerable resources to organizing efforts within the regional council. They were also exerting great pressure on the council leadership to break out of old "country club" attitudes and ways of doing things. At the same time, internal "change agents" were appearing within the region, either through discontented rank and file members rising through the ranks (García) or hiring of outside talented organizers (Domínguez and several of his proteges). The Super Sábado classes reinforced internal pushes for change, while the internal stresses and changes created somewhat greater receptiveness to the education's reform message. There is some kind of dialectical relationship between such "attitudinal" educational programming and changes in practice.

Educational programs like this will be less effective, and not as clearly focused, if they are not planned ahead of time with the "change agents" within the union. Such planning has to occur on a class-by-class basis, because a close fit between immediate current conditions and the class topic is needed. Education like this is so closely related to ongoing relationships with change agents that it blurs the line between education and consulting. In essence, ongoing consulting is occurring, which requires a high degree of trust between the union leader and the educator/consultant. Of course, the relationship is not a full-fledged consulting one, since only the educational aspects of the change process are being consulted about. But educational programming like this pulls the educator much further into a union's organizational affairs than is normally the case, and the educator has to be sensitive to organizational boundaries and the necessarily limited role of an external educator. The extensive consulting is also very time consuming—far beyond that of normal programming.

This type of education is most effective if it results in clear proposals for change coming out of the educational classes. Here again, caution is necessary on the part of the educator: proposals for change should be of a

type coming out of the class participants, not the pet ideas or preconceived solution of the external educator. The organization belongs to those who are its members, and they need to be the ultimate agents for change. But proposals for change, such as those enumerated in the case above, make these classes something more than "academic." The proposals deserve explicit consideration and a response from the leadership of the union.

Although it is exceptionally hard to do, this type of education probably has a greater impact than conventional labor education classes. It truly unites theory with practice, education with action. For that reason, it can be the most rewarding labor education ever undertaken by a labor educator.

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