

WORKING CLASS ORGANIZATION AND POWER

THE BIENNIAL CONFERENCE OF THE WORKING CLASS STUDIES ASSOCIATION

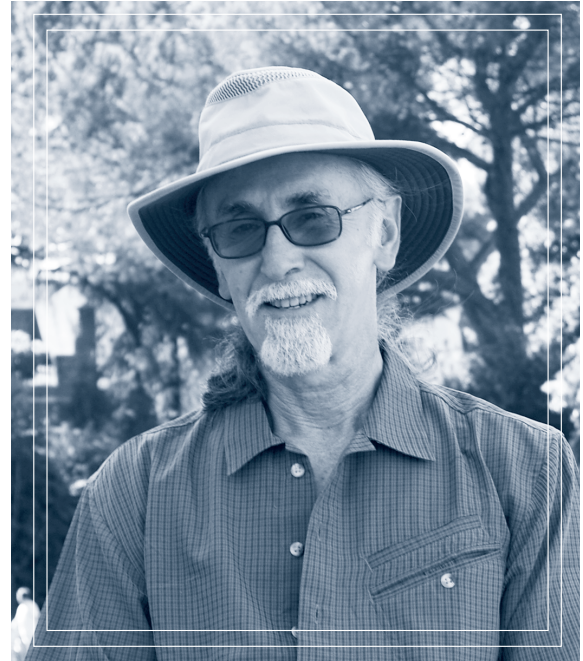
By Robert Perrone

The biennial conference of the Working Class Studies Association (WCSA) took place at the University of Illinois, Chicago campus from June 22nd to June 25th. The WCSA strives to develop and promote multiple forms of scholarship, teaching, and activism related to working class life and cultures. The WCSA conference alternates each year with a conference on “How class works,” sponsored by the Center for Study of Working Class Life at Stony Brook University. This year’s WCSA conference theme was “Working-class organization and power.”

Attendees and presenters came from around the country and the world to participate and lead the 70 panels and workshops. Some of the goals of the WCSA, particularly that of creating partnerships that link scholarship with activism in labor, community, and other working-class organizations, were reflected in the workshops.

In the past few months much has been made of “class.” Unfortunately, it seems like the only time we hear or read about “class” is when the term is hurled as an accusation. “[This] is a class war on the people,” Moore says. [Democracy Now! interview with Michael Moore, March 10, 2011] “It’s class warfare, and it’s the kind of language that you would expect from the leader of a third world country, not the President of the United States” [Florida Senator Marco Rubio’s July 1 response to President Obama’s talk on the budget]. “This isn’t class warfare,” says President Obama in his recent address about jobs to a joint session of Congress. Despite all attempts to gloss over the concept of class or to make it a boogey man to be avoided, there is no getting around the fact that the United States is, indeed, a very stratified society. This is evident in statistics that show the divide between rich and poor in this country is wider than in any other industrialized society. [“23 Things They Don’t Tell You About Capitalism,” Ha-Joon Chang, p. 108] Class is a fact of life in America; ignoring it won’t make it go away. Thus, the importance of the WCSA conference.

The days were divided into two morning and two afternoon sessions, with a plenary session in between after lunch. The sheer number of workshops in each session made it difficult to decide which one to attend. Here’s just a small sample of some of the workshops: “Chicana/o Studies—Counter Hegemonic and Working-Class Political Voices in the Academy”; “The Professionalization of Social Change”;



Craven Images: Anti-Working Class Depictions in American Film, Television and Crime Stories”; “The Working Class in the Food Chain”; “Higher Education and the Digital Divide: Helping Working-Class Students Navigate New Media and Online Learning.” Since it was not possible to attend all of them, here is a summary of the more interesting of those I did attend.

“Politics, Schooling and Reform”

The first presenters addressed the topic of “Attitudes about teacher labor unions and collective bargaining.” The popular critique, usually put forth by opponents of public education, has public education failing to adequately educate students and targeting teacher collective bargaining agreements for putting public school managers in strait jackets. To counter this, the presenters pointed to evidence of improvement of educational outcomes in public schools. Underscoring this, an article in the August 18 Los Angeles Times reported that the Los Angeles school district has not only held its own in improving math and English test scores, but in most cases outpaced schools run by outside organizations that benefited from additional funding.

The presenters continued to undermine that popular critique, arguing that the limitations on school managers are overstated because collective bargaining is a mutual process. In fact, in many states, collective bargaining laws favor management, with no

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strike clauses, the ability of management to impose its last, best and final offer.

“Unions in Food”

The title of this session had more to do with the area of study of the moderators than the actual presenters, who were three non-academics involved with food in very different ways.

God’s Gang

Caroline Thomas is a leader in the organization that calls itself “God’s gang.” She says her purpose and that of the organization she works hard to build is to provide a common ground for Christian and non-Christian youth that will address the problems of inner city life. Toward that end, she has guided the organization in setting up a food pantry and urban gardening program. That food pantry is now the most successful food pantry in the city of Chicago. She coordinates a community supported agricultural program that addresses the nutritional needs of the

people. God’s Gang also supports a variety of activities that enable youth and adults to choose a life of self-help at the same time they contribute to strengthening their community. The youth are engaged in urban agricultural and landscaping activities, as well as African dance and crafts. The SSUGA, South Side Urban Gardeners Association, provides family and senior citizens opportunities and assistance to develop neighborhood/ backyard gardens.

Food Desert Action

For those wondering what a “food desert” is, Sheelah Muhammad was more than happy to explain. In Chicago it’s a problem in which entire communities have only very limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables. As a result, those communities suffer from health problems related to poor diets. As she told the audience, “How you live depends on where you live.”

Out of this desert stepped Fresh Moves (FM), an organization that has taken on the responsibility of

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bringing fresh produce to under-served communities of color. FM operates year-round on a rebuilt bus donated by the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA). It offers high quality produce at affordable prices. FM also offers cooking and nutrition classes and the food sold is local, sustainable and organic. Muhammad stressed that it is a misconception that African Americans don't want to eat healthy foods. "It's a question of access," she said. "So, get on the bus and have a shopping experience."

ROC-United

Jose Oliva was a food server at the former Windows on the World, the restaurant that was on the top of the World Trade Center. He and his former colleagues who survived the WTC destruction formed ROC-United (Restaurant Opportunities Center United). He and his colleagues set out to improve the working conditions of restaurant workers; carry out research and policy work; engage in direct action; and organize food service workers. He pointed out that less than one percent of private sector food service/restaurant workers are unionized. An immediate goal of ROC is to convince restaurant owners to offer paid sick leave to their workers for, as Oliva pointed out, two-thirds of restaurant workers in the Chicago area go to work sick. It's either that or stay home without pay. ROC helped organize the Food Chain Workers Alliance, which seeks to build cross-class unity in an effort to support the struggles of food service/restaurant workers for a better life.

Slam Poetry and Power

This was held as a plenary event. Mark Smith is a former steelworker. "The slam world is a world of equality," he said. Slam poetry broke the traditional form of poetry readings, where, instead of a dispassionate reading, we get a marriage of the art of performing with the art of writing. Slam poets have formed slam communities, where the emphasis is on democratizing and performing poetry.

Gwendolyn Brooks pointed out that slam poetry is one of the most powerful teaching tools to teach young people about poetry. "Poetry can save people," she said.

The Working Class in the Shadow of War

Those of you who watch Spanish-language television or read Spanish-language newspapers may have seen the US Army's advertising appeal to Latinos, the "Yo soy el Army" campaign, where Latinos are the targets of military recruitment. According to Irene Garza, a graduate student in American Studies at the University of Texas, the military targets Latinos out of a false belief that Latinos have a "natural predilection for violence." She explained that the military uses those "attributes identified as negative and turns them into redemptive traits to build

up young Latinos as ideal warriors." And the federal government is complicit in this conspiracy, as shown by the military service clause in the federal Dream Act.

Class and Culture in the Language Classroom

This session highlighted issues of class confronting community college composition instructors in the Midwest. For working class students, one of the more difficult barriers to overcome in learning to write is having them see themselves as college students. For the community college instructor, teaching to the diversity of students is the most difficult aspect of teaching composition.

Presenters noted that "class" is often masked as "personal problems." All of them agreed that to have collective action, you must have a collective identity. One presenter teaches composition in a tribally-controlled college, where, she said, "One sees the interaction between culture, class and composition."

Session attendees were left with this question: How can we convince students that a higher education is the path to "status improvement" when they see the majority of faculty in the same conditions as they are—broken down cars, desperate conditions, etc.?

Gendered Experiences of the Economy

Emily LaBarbera-Twarog spoke about women's political participation as exemplified in the meat boycotts of 1973, where women across the country came together in a boycott started at the kitchen table of a stay-at-home wife.

She talked about the end of the New Deal activist state and how 75% of women wanted to remain on their jobs after World War II rather than return to the traditional housewife role.

Kristi Lonius spoke of what she called the "mancesion," the current recession that hits men the hardest and shows the gendered nature of the recession. "It's a narrative of female ascendancy and male decline," she told the audience.

Jack Metzger pointed out how the new low wage economy relies on women-dominated jobs.

I left the conference with a renewed sense of urgency to do what I could to overcome the social forces arrayed against us as we try to provide students with the tools they can use to navigate the treacherous path to a modicum of success. There is no getting around the fact that you are on the front lines of a battle being waged for the hearts and minds of your students. These difficult economic times are like a crucible, where your dedication is steeled for a protracted struggle. We are, indeed, all in this together. ■