

LESSONS IN LABOR EDUCATION

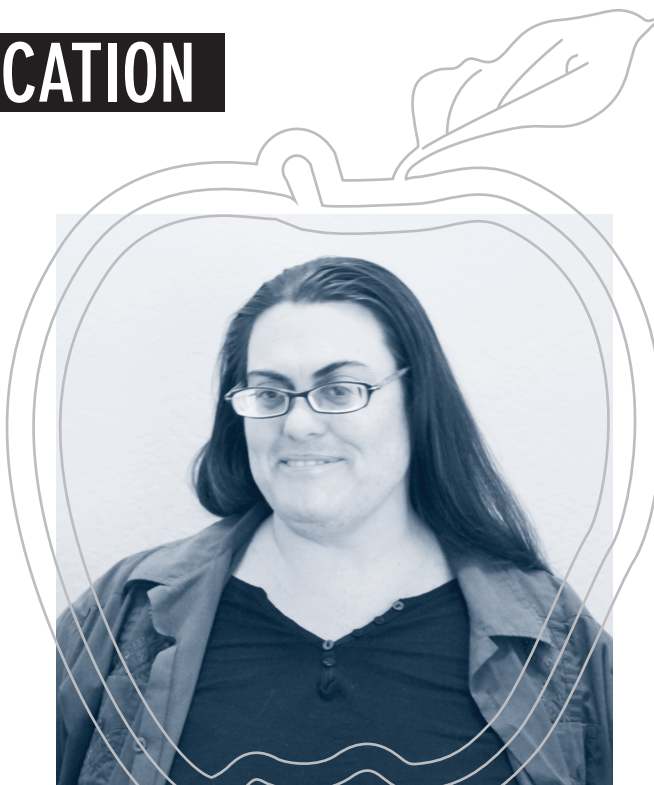
By Linda Sneed

As a long-time supporter of labor rights and the labor movement who is relatively ignorant about labor history and the field of labor studies, I recently seized the opportunity to attend this year's conference of UALE – the United Association of Labor Educators. An organization with many projects and goals, a large part of UALE's work is “to promote education as an essential tool in the process of union transformation, to develop new leadership, and to strengthen the field of labor education in order to meet the ever-changing needs of unions and workers.” UALE works both inside and outside of unions and includes as members many union staff educators and college- and university-based academic educators.

Conference organizers chose New Orleans as the site of this annual meeting, whose theme was “Unfinished Business: Workers' Rights for the Next Generation,” and integrated the location into its proceedings in a number of ways. Through plenary events and workshops, participants learned about the struggles of the workers of Avondale Shipyard to save their job site from its parent company's plan to shut it down. (The company is reputed to have had viable offers to buy but refuses in order to avoid creating competition with its other regional facility.) We also learned of the exciting increase in worker solidarity between pre-Katrina residents and post-Katrina migrants, most recruited to provide cheap labor in the reconstruction of the city. Indeed, locals told of new residents brought from South America as workers to supplant the remaining resident workforce. Newly emerging worker centers have helped bridge the socio-cultural gaps and forge greater understanding and recognition of shared interests between communities and language groups, a heartening shift from the animosity many felt toward those they viewed as outsiders taking their jobs. (One can certainly still find this attitude among New Orleans residents, attested to by some conference attendees who had casual conversations with hotel and restaurant workers and with cab drivers during our short stay in their city; at the same time, several of us encountered diverse staffs who seemed harmonious and supportive toward each other. Some of these workers were definitely union members; others may not have been.)

Looking at regional, national, and international labor education sites, the conference offered a nearly overwhelming range of opportunities to listen, talk, and learn. My most memorable experiences included:

–Learning about and from the various UALE Working Groups, voluntary assemblages of people who work through the year on a number of projects and then present their findings in multiple media. These include the Popular Education, Worker-Writers, and Immigration/Globalization groups;



–Discovering the work done by an international delegation to Cananea, Mexico, to document the struggles of copper mine workers to achieve safe and sustainable working conditions;

–Participating in discussions devoted to labor struggles throughout Canada;

–Gaining new skills in popular education workshops on such topics as openly confronting racism within unionism and understanding individual unionists' motivations in order to better build and sustain labor movements;

–Collecting dynamic pieces of curriculum within various areas of labor education and labor studies appropriate for use within both locals and formal academic settings;

–Leafleting and demonstrating outside a popular restaurant on Bourbon Street on a busy Friday night to publicize pending lawsuits against the restaurant for systematic wage theft and violation of labor law;

–Making new friends from near and far, people driven by the dream of universally honored human rights—including the right to work, with dignity and respect, for fair wages and in safe conditions—and an end to exploitation of the most desperate among us.

For the complete program and more information about the organization, please visit www.ualc.org. Maybe you'll end up becoming a member!

Meanwhile, back in Sacramento, here are some ways I am working to implement some of what I learned:

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1. Planning an efficient way of cataloguing the existing collection of our LRCFT library, housed in the LRCFT building on K Street, and turning it into an easy-to-use, trackable lending library. Also, I'd like to work on bolstering it through whatever creative means we can find so that it contains not only resources on negotiations, collective bargaining, and grievances but also on labor history, labor education, and contemporary unionism. (I, for one, could be convinced to donate my recently purchased books by contemporary labor historian Steve Early, one of the panelists I heard speak about labor's civil wars of recent years, particularly the UHW-SEIU split. They are great books! If I knew that others wanted to read them, I would continue resisting my impulse to annotate them thoroughly.)

2. Launching a (still in its nascent stages) labor studies reading group. Currently made up of two CRC instructors, one full-time and one part-time, the group craves new participants. If interested, please contact Sandra Carter at carters@crc.losrios.edu and indicate your availability and your reading/discussion interests.

These are just a few of the projects I have in mind. As a new member of UALE and a continuing member of LRCFT, I look forward to sharing my growing knowledge with you and continuing to learn about opportunities to help strengthen organized labor not just in our immediate area but nationally and internationally. If you'd like to work with me on any of these projects, please contact me at sneedlc@crc.losrios.edu or LindaSneed@lrcft.org. ■