

Hands-on learning at U.C. Berkley Labor Center

By Andrea Buffa

The UC Berkeley Labor Center has been offering training and education programs to labor unions and community groups in California since 1964. Although the Labor Center is based at a university, its educational philosophy is more rooted in the interactive, popular education model developed at places like the Highlander Center, than the pedagogical model typically found on university campuses.

“We did quite a few case studies and we also did exercises in modeling leadership, where everybody got a chance to be up front, either leading the exercise or reporting out,” says Blake Huntsman, a work-site organizer for SEIU Local 1021, who attended the Labor Center’s C.L. Dellums African American Union Leadership School. “It’s important that people are challenged to actually do some of the work. It was real hands-on interactive training, not just having folks come together and listen to the ‘experts.’”

Labor training programs often emphasize nuts and bolts skills like contract negotiations, arbitration, and handling grievances. While these skills are critical, the Labor Center’s programs are more focused on leadership development—helping union activists become visionary leaders who can step back from their busy daily schedules, analyze the larger political, social, and economic context in which they’re working, and create strategic and effective campaign plans.

The Labor Center’s trainings typically start with an intensive first session that’s about a week long and covers such topics as power structure analysis, strategic planning, organizing, and coalition building. After the week-long intensive, students are encouraged to attend periodic follow-up sessions throughout the next year at which they evaluate the progress they’ve made since the first training session, and rework their strategic plans. Through the follow-up sessions, the Labor Center hopes to create a network of peers for its students, who can provide each other with support and feedback as they try to implement new types of leadership in their unions.

“One important teaching technique we use is to ask students to come in with projects,” said Steven Pitts, a labor policy specialist who has been a trainer for the Labor Center’s leadership development program since 2001. “They’re able to apply the tools we teach them, to projects they’re currently working on, which many students say has helped them in their work.”

The Labor Center also uses teaching techniques that help students relate to groups of people they may feel like they can’t identify with. For example, Pitts has instituted a module on immigration that helps African Americans understand their own migration experiences. In one exercise, the students create a timeline that displays the dates of their own migration to California, as well as the dates of major African American migrations in the United States, like the migration of Blacks to California after World War II. As the students talk about their own families’ reasons for migrating—be they to escape violence and social restrictions in the South, or to seek better paying jobs in urban areas—they learn that their own experiences may not be as different from the experiences of Latino immigrants as they might have thought.

As this article goes to press, the Labor Center’s funding is under threat from Republicans in the California State Senate who object to the very idea of a training and education program for labor unions. While training business leaders at institutions like U.C. Berkeley’s Haas School of Business is considered standard academic fare, training for labor unions—especially using popular education techniques—is considered a threat to the state of California. ■

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