



Bursting UW's Glass Bubble

Long a champion of labor activism, the School for Workers is trying to recast its efforts at a time of declining union relevance

BY CHRISTIAN SCHNEIDER

In his 1988 book *America*, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard attempted to explain the intricacies of United States culture for a European audience. In one passage, Baudrillard relayed a science fiction story he had heard about a group of rich people who awoke one day to find that they had been encircled by a giant, impenetrable glass bowl. This obstacle left them separate from “the real universe from which they are cut off, which has suddenly become the ideal world.” Wrapping up his metaphor, Baudrillard noted that in America, “some of the university campuses remind me of this.”

Indeed, American universities are famous for harboring individuals with ideas that wouldn't be taken seriously outside the glass walls of campus. If you believed the events of Sept. 11 were a government-planned inside job, there may be a comfortable spot for you in the University of Wisconsin System, as there was for former instructor Kevin Barrett. Or take the English professor at Virginia Tech who urged people to stop saying "support the troops," because the phrase is "trite and tiresome."

Some argue that universities also remain comfortable nesting places for outdated ideas that border on archaic. They point to organizations like the UW School for Workers, which promotes workplace unionism and teaches students about organizing tactics — while outside the bubble, the American economy has walked away from unionization.

The numbers suggest how out-of-the-mainstream the union movement currently is. Early in 2013, the share of American workers in a union fell to 11.3 percent, a 97-year low. Just last year, the number of unionized workers dropped by 400,000, to 14.3 million, even as the U.S. workforce increased by 2.4 million. Government remains the most accommodating employer for unions, as only 6.6 percent of private sector workers are unionized, after peaking at around 35 percent in the 1950s.

Following Gov. Scott Walker's successful effort to curtail union bargaining power in 2011, the drop in union membership in Wisconsin has been even more stark. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, union membership dropped by an unusually large 13 percent in 2012. Georgia State University labor economist Barry T. Hirsch has calculated that this drop amounts to a loss of

48,000 union members in Wisconsin last year, to 139,000 from 187,000.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* has reported that the Wisconsin Education Association Council — the state's primary teachers union — has lost more than 50 percent of its 98,000 dues paying members since Walker implemented collective bargaining reform. The powerful Wisconsin State Employees Union is now down from 22,000 members to between 9,000 and 10,000 members, according to the union's president.

'Both business and worker kind of relationships are far more participatory these days, far more collaborative and less adversarial,' says Chancellor Raymond Cross.

Yet the state of Wisconsin still drops nearly \$1 million per year into the UW Extension's School for Workers, apparently to fight the natural course of the marketplace. This makes up a very small portion of the UW Extension's \$232 million annual budget, but critics wonder if the program has any relevance in the current economy.

The UW School for Workers is notable because it was the first university labor education department created in the United States. Rooted in the socialist movement and the progressivism of "Fighting Bob" LaFollette, the school was originally founded in the early 1920s to address the plight of women in the workplace. In 1927, the Wisconsin Federation of Labor began recruiting male students to the UW-Madison to take part in the program. The university saw the

school as a natural component of the “Wisconsin Idea,” which envisioned a wide mission for the university.

In the early 1930s, the department was funded with private and federal money. But as the decade moved on, organized labor began financing more of the school, causing some to worry that the faculty was too closely tied to the Socialist Party.



Consequently, at the behest of controversial UW economist John R. Commons, the School for Workers was formed in 1937 and supported with university funds. (Commons, a white supremacist and eugenicist, had been fired from his previous job at Syracuse University for being a “radical.”)

To keep up with the increase in unionization, labor programs began cropping up in universities across the nation between 1935 and 1950. At one point, more than 53 university-sponsored labor education programs were operating in the

United States. In her 1946 book, *Labor Education in Universities*, author Caroline Ware declared the purpose of labor education was “to enable workers to understand their experience, their problems and the issues of the day, and to equip them to function effectively as union members and as citizens.”

But lately, due to the combination of university budget cuts and the steep decline in union jobs in manufacturing, labor education programs have been disappearing. A 2004 study by the University of Minnesota found only 20 survivors. In 2002, even the University of Wisconsin discontinued its Industrial Relations Institute, a graduate program that prepared students “to assume important organizational roles in government, labor and the private sector.”

The UW certainly embraced that vision. But the irony is that although the School for Workers has existed for nearly 80 years, UW faculty and academic staff weren’t allowed to unionize until June 2009, when Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle signed a budget provision allowing professors to collectively bargain for wages and benefits. That enabling law was short-lived, however, as Republican Gov. Scott Walker repealed it just two years later.

But while the school’s professors themselves weren’t unionized, it didn’t keep the faculty members from injecting themselves into high-profile labor matters around the state. In 2003, faculty member Corliss Olson marched on the picket line in support of workers during a high-profile strike against Tyson Foods at the company’s Jefferson plant. At the demonstration, which included chants, sign-making and heckling of replacement workers, Olson was joined by

75 attendees of a five-day conference hosted by the school. She would later become the school's director.

Such pro-labor conferences were often sponsored by the department. In 1996, the School for Workers put on a two-day conference called "How to Fight Contracting Out," which taught unionized government workers how to thwart consolidation and costs savings by their local government employers.

"It is ridiculous that our tax dollars support a UW Extension program focused on obstructing innovation in how those very tax dollars are spent," Republican Margaret Farrow, then a state senator, said at the time. Farrow vowed to cut funding to the School for Workers "until it stops trying to block public-private cooperation."

But perhaps the school's most militant pro-union faculty member in recent history has been Frank Emspak, who, while a professor in the department, also worked for a radio and print news service called Workers Independent News. Emspak's employment with WIN drew the ire of state Rep. Steve Nass (R-Whitewater), who ripped the department for allowing Emspak to use his campus e-mail for WIN fundraising appeals and for also providing a link to WIN on the department's official website. In 2013, Emspak left teaching to become a professor emeritus.

The department's overt pro-union activism finally provoked legislative Republicans into action in 2007, when Nass inserted an amendment to prevent the extension from using tax dollars to fund the School for Workers in the 2007-'09 biennial budget. Nass' plan passed the GOP-led

Assembly, but was removed from the budget during final negotiations with the Democratic-led Senate.

Corliss Olson, now the school's director, objected to Nass' actions. "We have this urgent need to create jobs," she told *Isthmus* in 2011. "Our bias is that they ought to be good jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage." In 2012, the school signed on to sponsor an exhibit called "Art in Protest" that featured examples of the pro-union signs and artwork created during the anti-Walker Capitol protests in 2011.

Under pressure from legislators, the school quickly canceled its involvement in the event.

While Nass has been the School for Workers' most aggressive critic, he hasn't re-introduced his plan to eliminate the department since 2007 — this despite the fact that Republicans have had full control of the Legislature and governor's office since January 2011. Further, GOP lawmakers haven't been shy about trying to eliminate funding for UW-related organizations they deem overly liberal, including the Center for Investigative Journalism and the student-run United Council.

Nass' staff says the Capitol art show reversal was an example of UW Extension's willingness to re-examine its direct participation in such politically charged events. "We made a case for why they should understand how such an activity looks to citizens throughout the state, not just Madison," says Nass spokesperson Mike Mikalsen.

Nass believes there is a "renewed commitment" toward the school focusing on training of management and labor reps in the most current

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negotiating techniques and other workplace cooperation methods. “They would like to methodically re-position as an impartial resource for both sides,” says Mikalsen. “This will obviously take a long time.”

It is clear that UW Extension Chancellor Raymond Cross is taking steps to change perceptions of the school.

Cross, who took office in February 2011, says the School for Workers “serves a purpose,” but that it “probably has to change some as the whole workplace changes.”

“Both business and worker kind of relationships are far more participatory these days, far more collaborative and less adversarial,” notes Cross. He adds that the school will continue to be relevant as long as it can “adapt to meet the needs of the new workplace.”

Cross believes those changes are already under way, and says that he wants to help the faculty shift its focus. The school isn’t changing simply because more ardent union supporters, like Frank Emspak, have moved on, he says. He emphasizes that teaching students about issues like workers compensation and workplace safety have value, as does teaching businesses how to effectively manage their labor forces. “We try very hard to be an unbiased source of information,” says Cross.

It’s perhaps telling that two business groups — Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce and the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce — that might be expected to challenge the School for Workers had nothing to say for this story.

Mikalsen, though, points out that even with the chancellor’s top-down commitment to change,

members of the School for Workers faculty “still have a tendency to get dragged into one side of labor disputes.”

For instance, the fact that the school signed on to the “Art in Protest” exhibit at all signals the inherent biases of the department. “Obviously, legislative pressure had some impact” in the

department’s decision to pull out, concedes Cross. But he maintains that the school discontinued its sponsorship due to a “combination of several things,” including his desire to maintain the extension’s neutrality with regard to the Capitol protests.

Even more recently, School for Workers staff have spoken encouragingly in support of workers striking in high-profile work actions against their employers. Earlier this year, the National Labor Relations Board upheld a previous decision that Palermo’s Pizza had not acted inappropriately in requiring immigration status for its employees. As a result of the immigration audit, 75 workers lost their jobs; labor activists believed it was payback for attempting to unionize.

When contacted by *The Capital Times* news site, School for Workers associate professor Armando Ibarra praised the “gutsy” Palermo’s workers. “Even if they are not victorious, they can inspire people in other workplaces,” said Ibarra.

Such rhetoric prompts skeptics to wonder if the department will actually ever really change, given the activist inclination of the faculty members it attracts.

“Trust but verify is the approach we take with them,” says Mikalsen. ■

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