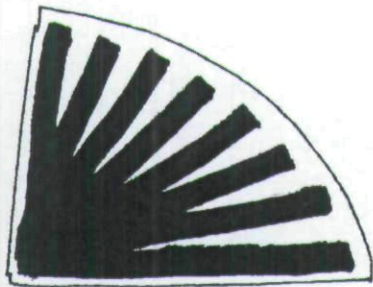


WORK AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE – CONNECTIONS WITH SOCIAL WORK

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This narrative explores the author's interest and activism in the arena of economic justice and how she integrates this into teaching and scholarship. Issues of work and the workplace, forms of economic justice activism, and analysis of economic issues that are relevant to social work have been incorporated into courses offered in the M.S.W. program with which the author is affiliated, and she has helped to make field placements available for students at local economic justice organizations. The author chronicles her involvement in a number of labor-community coalitions over a 25-year period and how these experiences have contributed to her approach to social work education.



Sometime early in my activist life, it became absolutely clear to me that so many problems for individuals, families, and communities stem from lack of income and/or means of support, in particular some connection to work and the workplace. Not every problem stems from this, but plenty of them do. Perhaps this stems from my own childhood, when my family went through a period of time where my father was unemployed: his small dry goods went out of business as suburban malls began to spread across the landscape, and the income from my mother's job in a university office along with some support from relatives kept us afloat. The lack of income (or greatly diminished income) has always struck me as an incredibly scary thing for families, as it was for my family, and thus underpins my affinity for economic justice struggles. So in thinking about what constitutes social justice, economic justice is surely close to the top of the list: to have a just society—in the U.S. or elsewhere—economic deprivation and

economic inequality must be eliminated or at least dramatically reduced from current levels. Economic inequality is also a substantial feature of both racial and gender inequality and thus addressing economic disparities is critical in addressing the structural inequalities within U.S. society. However, translating such worthy goals into reality requires the development of purposeful organizations that employ effective, viable methods of confronting economic power. This is why organization and organizing are so indispensable to social change. Organizing harnesses the capacity of everyday people to forge change. Getting them to recognize and realize their potential is the inherent challenge of economic justice organizing, and really any type of social justice effort. The movements that do this work are involved in some of the most urgent issues we face in U.S. society. Rights in the workplace, access to work, and decent wages and benefits constitute an enormously important agenda, an agenda to which I have devoted considerable time and effort.

A very significant factor that continually shapes my work on economic justice is that, since moving to Connecticut in 1971 after attending the University of Wisconsin in Madison, I have been surrounded by union organizers and activists. Since the early 1970s, some of my closest friends were union builders: first in Connecticut, then many of them

fanned out across the country to take leadership roles in the labor movement and a variety of unions.

One of my closest friends, the late Merrilee Milstein, went to work for the health care workers' union—now a large regional union, the New England Health Care Employees Union-District 1199 SEIU. The union was quite small in the early 1970s and a dedicated team of organizers spent hours in the apartment I shared with her and her husband strategizing on various campaigns and strikes. In the early 1980s, a strike at a local nursing home prompted many of us attending a support rally to do a sit-in in protest; that is when I had my first arrest for civil disobedience. There were close to 40 people involved in that action and it was invigorating, although a little scary. Since that time, I spent (and continue to spend) time on countless picket lines, at support rallies, in planning meetings, in small meetings with community leaders, and in several cases, doing other civil disobedience actions on behalf of striking or laid off workers. My own forte developed into helping create community support for labor issues. I've worked for some time in higher education, and it might have been redundant if I joined my friends and became a labor organizer. Yet being involved in community issues from my early years during the 1970s in Hartford doing anti-war, women's issues, and anti-racism work, the people and organizations I came to know through these issues made me a useful ally for the labor movement.

Coming into young adulthood during the late 1960s, having grown up in Madison, Wisconsin, and attended the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and—as I came to understand much later—growing up in a Jewish family in the decade after the Holocaust in a very genteel environment, I was pre-programmed to connect to “The Movement.” That's how many of us defined our politics: being part of “The Movement.” During my college years, it was ubiquitous in Madison. You didn't even have to join any organization—politics were part of the air you breathed, tear gas and all.

When I moved to Hartford, my friends and I defined ourselves as being in “The

Movement.” In Hartford, as opposed to Madison, if you were an activist, you interacted with a variety of people, not just middle-class white students for the most part as in a campus setting. In Hartford, if you were involved in the movement during those years, political work overlapped among the peace movement: our own grassroots Women's Liberation organization, anti-racism and political prisoner defense work with the Committee to Free Angela Davis and its successor, international work on the Chile Solidarity Committee, the Puerto Rican independence movement, and the various labor struggles that were going on.

The activist community shared a systemic critique of capitalism and American society: its domestic and foreign policy. So if you were a labor organizer or if you focused more on the peace movement, it all originated from the same critique. We were constantly learning and evolving. We learned from experienced people in the old left, the new left, the faith community, the African American community, the Puerto Rican community, the then-nascent gay and lesbian activist community, women's groups, socialists, communists, progressive lawyers and doctors, academics, Black liberation activists, and everyone whose cause aligned with the general critique of the system that was widely accepted by many in my generation and certainly by friends and activists in Hartford.

My thinking evolved into an overall critique of American society with its vast inequalities and injustices stemming from the economic system, but also overlaid by the systems of racial and gender oppression that are so much a part of the fabric of social relations. I concluded that class, race, and gender were all woven together into a fabric that produces injustice, and I wanted to find effective ways to always be involved in social justice movements. As I continued in the movement, it became clearer and clearer to me that one's place in the economy, and the means that one has to address one's own economic well-being, are some of the most powerful factors that shape people's lives. The labor movement and unions are the best means to achieve some control and economic stability in the labor market, especially for low wage workers.

In 1980, I was hired by the University of Connecticut School of Social Work to direct an undergraduate urban internship program (now falling within the rubric of service learning). I had received a Masters in Education, but worked at the School of Social Work where this non-B.S.W. program is housed within the university. In seminars that accompany service oriented internships, I brought in speakers to talk about race, class, and gender. When the topic was about class differences, I often brought in friends of mine from the labor movement to speak. I discovered how little my undergraduate students knew about labor or even how class differences manifest in society. As I decided that I liked working in higher education and college teaching, it was time to pursue a Ph.D. so that I could have a true career in academia.

I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Urban and Regional Studies while maintaining my job as Director of the Urban Semester Program at UConn. My courses and research focused mainly on issues of urban economic dislocation and restructuring. When I finished my coursework and was more available for political work, I worked with an evolving coalition of community and labor forces that developed a third local political party: People for Change. I finished my dissertation, then ran for and served a term on the Hartford City Council as a member of that party, and began teaching within the M.S.W. program, in addition to the undergraduate teaching. That is when I began to really use some of my knowledge and experience from my doctoral studies and my own involvement to contribute to the curriculum at the School of Social Work.

Economic Justice within the Curriculum

At UConn, our school has a methods-oriented curriculum. When students apply, they select one of five major method concentrations in the application they complete: casework, group work, community organization, policy practice, or administration. Most faculty members are associated with one of these concentrations as their academic home within the school (we are a non-departmentalized school). We also usually teach in other areas: specialty areas of practice, foundation and

research courses. I have been affiliated with the Community Organization Concentration since the mid 1990's. After I assumed responsibility for several elective courses that were "on the books" but taught periodically, I was able to substantially revise their content. Full disclosure: since I do not have an M.S.W., I obtained a waiver from the Council on Social Work Education that allows me to teach Community Organization courses and non-practice courses, including electives.

I have tried to use to the advantage of my students and my school both the graduate work that I did and how I participate in social movements, particularly around urban issues and economic justice. I am fortunate to have supportive colleagues who are helpful in this regard, and who also share these sentiments so that economic justice organizing is within most of our Community Organizing courses, to one degree or another. We have been able to blend the concepts of labor organizing or labor-community coalition building as important contemporary forms of organizing. Thus, it is not only in my electives, but also with the CO methods courses that these topics are raised and reflected by the speakers who come into class or assigned readings.

All of the courses that I teach have very macro foci that integrate a political economy perspective, particularly the two electives for which I have responsibility: Urban Policy Issues, and Economic Justice, Labor, and Social Work. In order for students to gain perspective on the environments in which people function, I believe it is crucial to have a clear sense of the socio-political and economic factors that shape people's realities, particularly in the arena of the workplace. The role of work in a person's life and issues associated with the workplace—fairness, adequate compensation, safety, discriminatory or illegal practices, exploitation, intimidation, relations with co-workers and supervisors—all impact one's sense of self and one's quality of life, as well as one's income and standard of living.

I often point out to students how much of our identity comes from the work that we do. So if one is unemployed, it can shake a person's sense of who they are, as well as

impact income. We talk about students' aspirations for a career and what kind of work they have done in the past. They don't envision themselves as ending up in the type of part-time work or entry level jobs they've held. Just attending a university is assumed to have a material benefit in terms of being able to get a "decent" job, and attending graduate school is seen as being necessary for advancement within social services. Frequently, undergraduate students discuss how frightened they are of entering the labor market. Graduate students hope that the M.S.W. they are pursuing will translate into better jobs and higher salaries. These conversations tie into developing a consciousness around work, the lack of work, and the identity issues associated with work.

In the Economic Justice, Labor, and Social Work course, one topic we concentrate on is the problem of the right to organize within the U.S. One of the exercises that students like best is when a local labor attorney walks us through a role play about an actual organizing campaign he was involved in that serves as a poignant example of what is currently wrong with U.S. labor law. There are four roles: factory owners, a group of supervisors, pro-union workers who are leaders in the unionization effort, and rank-and-file workers who are being organized. If there are students who have union experience in the class, I try to get them to play the boss so that other students can experience an iota of what organizing means. I build on this real-life story as the course develops because so few people understand this process and all of the ways in which power takes actual form in day-to-day situations at work.

At the UConn School of Social Work, we have a strong focus on international social work as well as on human rights. The larger university has several human rights initiatives; thus, many of us are conversant with human rights discourse and a number of faculty members have a great deal of expertise in this area. Within this environment, I have been able to absorb some thinking about how human rights can inform social work, social policy, and macro social work practice. Additionally, in some of my own work and professional

activities, particularly in becoming familiar with labor studies' and labor education's growing use of a human rights framework, it has become apparent to me that human rights—particularly the International Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)—is a logical and fruitful place to begin a discussion of economic justice.

Likewise, within the NASW Code of Ethics, there are several places in which issues of economic justice are mentioned, even including a provision that is permissive of social workers engaging in strikes. This is not a merely theoretical issue: I have guest speakers in the Economic Justice class who are M.S.W. level social workers and who describe the tribulations of going on strike. There have also been guest speakers who have been on strike when they spoke to the class. These were women workers from a local nursing home, some of whom were immigrants. Their courage and tenacity were inspirational to both the students and me. It never ceases to amaze me when I encounter this level of dedication and sacrifice.

It is possible to think of many ways to insert the UDHR into curriculum. In the very first session of the Economic Justice, Labor, and Social Work course, the first substantive discussion we have is on the UDHR and its economic provisions. Consider Articles 22 through 25:

Article 22

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment.

2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitations of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

2. Motherhood and childhood are, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall be entitled to special care and assistance. All children enjoy the same social protection.

Source: UN

Rarely do we in social work emphasize the economic dimensions of the UDHR, if we even discuss any of the rights enumerated in this important framework for social justice. The ways in which many of these rights (both economic and non-economic) are ignored and/or non-existent in the U.S., as well as the lack of enforcement of most existing economic rights, can serve as starting points in the conversation. There is some debate emerging within social work and labor studies as to whether human rights, particularly as enunciated in the UDHR and in other international treaties and covenants, are the appropriate standards with which to assess any nation's social progress or as a core construct within struggles for labor rights.

For example, in a session at the Council on Social Work Education's Annual Program Conference in 2008 in Philadelphia, a presentation by Garvin, Reed, Reisch, and Yoshihama (2008) mentioned how developing

countries do not necessarily find the UDHR to be the most useful set of standards for development and that we have to look at the most appropriate standards in international contexts. Additionally, in a prominent labor journal, *New Labor Forum*, a provocative debate was published in 2009 about whether human rights or solidarity should be the basis of labor's claim for justice (Compa, 2009; Youngdahl, 2009a, 2009b). However, as a tool to use in comparing the U.S. to other developed nations in terms of economic rights and workers' rights, I have found the UDHR extremely useful.

The National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics is another source of support for economic justice and labor issues. Consider these excerpts from several sections:

Ethical Principles Section: Social Justice

Ethical Principle: *Social workers challenge social injustice.*

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity...

Ethical Standards Section:

Section 3. Social Workers Ethical Responsibilities in Practice Settings

3.10 Labor-Management Disputes:

(a) Social workers may engage in organized action, including the formation of and participation in labor unions, to improve services to clients and working conditions.

(b) The actions of social workers who are involved in labor-management disputes, job actions, or labor strikes should be guided by the profession's values, ethical principles, and ethical standards. Reasonable differences of opinion exist among social workers concerning their primary obligation as professionals during an actual or threatened labor strike or job action. Social workers should carefully examine relevant issues and their possible

impact on clients before deciding on a course of action.

Section 6. Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society

6.01 Social Welfare

...Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.

6.04 Social and Political Action

(a) Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers ...should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.

Source: National Association of Social Workers "Code of Ethics."

These two important documents—one, indeed, for the world and the other for the profession of social work—offer ample areas of discussion and application within social work education. Using these documents to highlight how economic rights are elevated on an international scale and how economic justice has a place within the social work profession provides whatever entrée one needs to include this type of curriculum. I use them quite freely.

For example, in the Economic Justice, Labor, and Social Work course, I always have the Executive Director of the Connecticut Chapter of NASW discuss guidelines the chapter issued with regard to social workers' involvement in strikes. These guidelines are respectful of social workers who participate in strikes, and also urge social workers to observe ethical principles when dealing with strikes. He also points out that NASW is in a difficult position since both managers and line staff are NASW members, so the organization

cannot appear to be favoring one side or the other in any particular strike.

Economic Justice and Community Organizing

Within the realm of community organization, economic issues are more and more assuming center stage. An array of organizations from both the labor arena and the community organizing world are now organizing around economic issues such as living wages, responsible development, immigrant rights and other low wage worker issues. The labor movement's work on these issues brings it into contact with constituencies with whom social work has historically been involved. My colleague Scott Harding and I have noted elsewhere (Simmons & Harding, 2009):

"...union-led innovations hinge on community organizing strategies in terms of developing shared agendas and reciprocal relationships with local community forces. This provides community social workers multiple opportunities for collaboration with organized labor to challenge workplace and community concerns. In addition, many of the organizing tactics used in organized labor's current efforts—door-to-door canvassing and mobilization, petitions, rallies, lobbying, public protest, and other displays of power—are central to community organizing and thus familiar to many community social work practitioners, particularly in urban areas."

In its early development, particularly through its involvement in settlement houses, social work did embrace economic issues very directly. As Harding and I note, previous generations of social workers identified as workers, pursuing unionization for themselves and supporting other workers seeking to join labor unions (Selmi & Hunter, 2001; Walkowitz, 1999).

Yet social workers en masse have not been as active as one might hope in the economic justice struggles of recent decades. Within community organizing, however, economic issues are currently at the forefront of the agenda in terms of the housing crisis, employment, and support for those at the margins of the economy. Both established community organizing networks and newly formed networks are finding common cause with labor and economic rights organizations to develop and pursue economic justice goals. At UConn, we have been offering CO students various opportunities to be involved in these issues firsthand in terms of field placements and class assignments.

I started to learn about the power of community and labor organizations working together back in the mid and late 1980s and have been involved in several community-labor coalitions in Connecticut since that time. In the late 1980s there was a strike of over four years (1986-1990) against Colt Firearms that had plants in Hartford and West Hartford. The workers were represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. There were approximately 1,000 strikers and their needs during the strike were immense, both material and in terms of morale.

I was part of the Community-Labor Alliance for Strike Support that planned rallies, picketed, raised funds, lobbied politicians, educated area community organizations, and even planned civil disobedience actions to support the strikers. One civil disobedience action that we organized was called the "Colt 45," in which we got 45 volunteers from unions, clergy, community, and even several elected officials to sit in at the plant gate in a show of solidarity for the striking workers. It took some cajoling, but we convinced three State Representatives—including Carrie Saxon Perry, who was soon to become Mayor of Hartford—and a City Councilwoman to take part in this and agree to be arrested.

It was during those efforts that I became interested in how local neo-Alinsky organizations and unions shared some characteristics, particularly around engaging members in direct action and leadership development. (It was when I saw younger

union activists of color and older white neighborhood residents joking with each other at a City Hall demonstration in which they shared the protest agenda that the idea came to me for my dissertation and the subsequent book based on it (Simmons, 1994).) Three local neighborhood organizing groups existed in Hartford at the time of the strike and the Community-Labor Alliance did targeted outreach to them to build support and head off efforts by the company to hire local residents as replacement workers.

The strikers needed outlets for their anger, and we planned many events/demonstrations in New York City at Colt's corporate headquarters. We also held a children's vigil at the suburban home of the President of Colt Firearms, a march through a tony part of Hartford where a member of Colt's Board of Directors lived, and major demonstrations at the plant or in downtown Hartford on various anniversaries of the strike, as well as routine picketing and staffing of the picket line. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised by other labor unions and community forces so that strikers didn't lose their homes and financial emergencies could be handled.

Various students I taught during those years in my undergraduate classes took part in Colt strike activities and most recently graduate students have been involved with projects of present-day coalitions, especially around electoral and health care reform efforts. Within each excursion or internship, the exhilaration of the students makes me know that this is real learning, real organizing. I realize that many contemporary students go through college and even graduate school never having gone to a single demonstration or rally. Even graduate students! If there is one thing that I try to get my classes to do, it is experience a rally or demonstration so that they can get a first-hand sense of the energy and the sense of purpose in these events.

For me, the strike and also the attendant issues and developments, were unbelievable eye openers. That strike taught me overwhelming lessons in terms of the courage and dedication of ordinary people and how important community support can be for

strikers so that they maintain their strike and accomplish difficult goals.

Besides the Community-Labor Alliance, the emergence of the local third party that I became active in and with whom I eventually ran and served on the Hartford City Council, the connections to other strikes and labor organizing, and the ties that started to grow between labor and community forces all trace back to that strike and our coalition work. Later iterations of community-labor alliances retained participation by some of those same actors and organizations. I have also spent considerable time analyzing some of these developments in publications and academic conference presentations in order to share and compare our local experiences with similar efforts in different locations (for the period around the strike and a comparison of labor and neighborhood organizing methodologies, see Simmons, 1994). These types of local movements provide students with incomparable educational opportunities if they truly want to be organizers. Moreover, they exemplify modes of resistance to the current neo-liberal agenda that tries to diminish expectations for public solutions to social problems and roll back or block economic progress for many segments of the working class and the disenfranchised.

The current agenda of many contemporary labor-community alliances embodies the issues mentioned earlier: the plight of low wage service-sector workers, the returns to communities for public subsidies or approvals for development, healthcare reform efforts, immigrant worker rights, and the right to organize, among other issues. However, there is also attention to building partnerships that include participation of communities of color and their local organizations. The agenda has expanded from the earlier generation of alliances to include more electoral work and the need to develop regional agendas within metropolitan areas (Dean & Reynolds, 2009; and Pastor, Benner, & Matsuoka, 2009).

Subsequently, my own work in Connecticut has followed this trajectory by my participation in two coalitions: Citizens for Economic Opportunity (CEO), and the Connecticut Center for a New Economy (CCNE). CEO

emerged in the 1990s as the insurance industry in Connecticut was downsizing dramatically (a trend that continues to the present), and mergers and acquisitions were wreaking havoc among the local workforce. CEO tried to address the needs of the laid off, unorganized insurance workers through lobbying, testifying, and raising public awareness about the issues surrounding the downsizing and mergers. We mounted a lawsuit when Connecticut Blue Cross/Blue Shield was acquired by Anthem and went from a mutual insurance company to a for-profit company. As in similar "conversion" situations when non-profits turn into profit-making enterprises, CEO and other parties, including public entities, mounted a lawsuit demanding that the public be repaid the benefits of non-profit status. The plaintiffs were given a multi-million dollar award that was used to establish a healthcare access foundation. This foundation became the parent for the Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut (UHCF), which has funded many organizations in a campaign within the state for universal access to health care. Thus, the product of our organizing and litigation, UHCF, came to fund subsequent organizing campaigns by CEO and many other groups for the passage of statewide health care reform legislation that hopefully will lead to broad access. This legislation survived a governor's veto and is currently being implemented. Several different M.S.W. students have had field placements at CEO, and in the network of organizations involved in the statewide healthcare reform effort, as well as UHCF itself. To a person they have been enthusiastic about the learning and organizing opportunities in these field placements. The students helped organize large rallies, got individuals to testify at legislative hearings, and had their own specific contact lists to turn out for events. They also were able to be in on strategy sessions and meet with labor leaders and other coalition leaders. One student was hired by CEO to be on its very small staff after his internship.

The other organization I have worked with, CCNE, is part of a national network of organizations, the Partnership for Working Families, who all work on such issues as living

wage campaigns, community benefit agreements in urban development and other strategies that leverage rewards from economic development for local residents in cities across the country. CCNE has been in existence for over 10 years and has done intensive work in New Haven surrounding Yale University and Yale-New Haven Hospital (Rhombert & Simmons 2005; Simmons & Luce, 2009), and work in Hartford around low wage worker organizing, healthcare reform, and the local living wage ordinance. It is also one of the organizations that receives funding from UHCF for healthcare reform work. Here, again, social work interns at CCNE have found their experiences to be incredibly valuable, indeed, life-changing in some instances. In our School's Alumni magazine, *Interaction*, one student who was interviewed about her experience at the school and her emerging career, Karen D'Angelo, talked about her field placements this way (*Interaction*, 2009):

"As a community organizing student, my passion for social justice was ignited ...As a second-year student, I was placed at the Connecticut Center for a New Economy. There I was exposed to the development of a grassroots social movement and gained direct experience as a community organizer. These experiences helped me develop leadership, understand empowerment and political strategy, and clarify my social work values. These experiences have prepared me for a social work career orientated towards social change."

There is also the issue of unions themselves as places where students can learn and thrive. Since many social workers work in the public sector, which is much more unionized than the private sector (at least in the "blue" states), social workers in the public sector often find themselves to be members of unions without much of an understanding of what unions really do or how to participate in them. Here is where the course I have

worked on, Economic Justice, Labor, and Social Work, as well as field placements within unions have offered students opportunities to do some challenging organizing or work on projects of importance to union members. Last year, a student who worked at a state agency and who is a member of New England Health Care Employees Union-District 1199 SEIU, did her field placement at the union. She was involved in the negotiation process with the State of Connecticut for the next major contract for the several thousand 1199 members in a number of settings. Besides being a valuable learning experience for her in terms of the negotiation process, her work was considered invaluable to the union. She was able to draw on remarkable organizational skills she possessed to help keep track of the progress of the negotiations in incredible detail and helped the entire negotiating team be much more effective than in past negotiations.

Several individuals have developed long careers in labor after graduating with their M.S.W.s from UConn, most of whom concentrated in Community Organizing (several before I began teaching at the MSW level), and had field placements with unions or allied groups. There is no more challenging organizing, I believe, than organizing unorganized workers, but there are few things as rewarding as seeing workers win a unionization drive and secure decent working conditions. When I've gone to Victory Parties for organizing drives, the sense of accomplishment among the workers is proof to me that this work is some of the most powerful organizing that exists.

The struggle for the economic and political rights of immigrants also provides meaningful opportunities for social work students, in Community Organizing and other aspects of social work practice and education. For example, some social workers in child protective services find themselves embroiled in controversies when Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids take place in workplaces, and parents of young children are detained or deported, even when their children are U.S. citizens. Several years ago in New Bedford, Massachusetts, an ICE raid in a textile factory produced just this type of

situation; social workers had to figure out how to assist these families and find temporary placements for the children while their parents faced possible deportation.

These situations call for social justice organizing campaigns in which students should or could be involved. Even when the issues aren't as urgent as the separation of family members in mixed-status families, there are plenty of economic rights issues to take up, such as wage theft, violation of worker safety standards, and other problems. Where immigrant worker centers or immigrant rights advocacy organizations exist, social work education, social work students, and social work practitioners have much to contribute and much to learn.

At the very least, social work students, particularly in macro areas of social work, need some basic economic literacy in order to function effectively in practice. They need some basic theoretical grasp of what is shaping modern economic conditions and why social inequalities have deepened in recent decades. Why are there so many undocumented immigrants who risk so much to come to the U.S. to work? What has led to such a weakened social welfare state and such an assault on workers and their organizations? Why are whole communities criminalized, marginalized, and shut out of the economy? Some basic economic concepts within social work education which needn't be made overly complex or technical are important tools for macro practitioners and community organizers and provide some grounding as our graduates move forward in their own careers.

Concluding Thoughts

These meandering reflections are meant to illustrate the centrality of economic justice struggles to the social work enterprise. Moreover, I have attempted to show how social work educators can take their own social justice activities and weave them into challenging and meaningful educational opportunities for students and useful research or scholarship.

I was fortunate to be invited to a very stimulating small conference on work and social work at the University of Michigan in 2006, organized by Professor Larry Root,

where approximately two dozen social work faculty members from around the U.S. considered how to infuse work-related issues into social work curriculum and scholarship. This very issue of *Reflections* is an outcome of the discussions begun at the conference. Thus, I know that there are other faculty members and scholars who share these concerns. The conference itself introduced many of us to each other and generated some valuable relationships. For me, it was a validation that, although my interests are not widely shared across the breadth of social work education, there are kindred spirits with whom some meaningful work can be done.

Being involved with the labor movement and economic justice issues is not an issue of me being enamored of unions. It is the question of what means exist to achieve economic fairness for those who have very little individual power. It's exceedingly clear to me that it takes collective action, social movements and effective organization to achieve fairness for individuals. I don't romanticize unions or the labor movement and am deeply aware of the shortcomings that arise within these entities which waste resources and prevent progress. I also believe that other struggles need to be vigorously pursued, that other issues sometimes take precedence over economic issues, particularly social and political equality and matters of war and peace. Yet by and large, a society with a weak labor movement generally has many other social inequities and weaker social protections in numerous aspects of social well-being (see Rocha, 2009).

The social work profession has some of the most explicitly stated norms regarding social justice. Very few other professions present themselves so fervently and straightforwardly about justice issues. There is a space to enlarge the scope of work on economic justice within this framework. In the education of future practitioners, we need to use this space and prepare our students to deal with the agonizing economic inequalities of our time. I think this work is some of the best work we can do. It has enriched and given meaning to my life and my work and enabled me to see the courage of those everyday folks who have no choice but to struggle.

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