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## Institute for Workplace Studies

A newsletter on workplace issues and research from the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University

CORNELL

## Peer Assistance Helps Flight Attendants Cope with Trauma

**T**WO PLANES CRASH into the World Trade Center towers in New York City. One dives into the Pentagon and a fourth plunges to the ground in rural Pennsylvania. Among the victims are 25 crew members, including 12 who belonged to the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA). As is the norm following this and other monumental disasters, including the Alaska Airline crash into the Pacific Ocean in February, 2000, peer volunteers are at the ready providing emotional support, trauma interventions, and information to flight attendants all over the world.

Outreach to affected family members and coworkers is a necessity in the face of such tragedy. But what of the more routine pressures flight attendants and their loved ones cope with — the family and financial stresses, the conflicts with associates, the air-rage passengers, the emergency landing, the dependence on drugs or alcohol? These issues, too, the AFA realized more than 20 years ago, demand attention. “Disasters demonstrate the capability, but don’t represent the value, of the process,” asserts Heather Healy, director of the union’s employee assistance program. “The real value of EAP lies in its responsiveness to individual crewmembers day in and day out.”

Ms. Healy was recently the featured speaker at the first session of the *Institute for Workplace Studies’* 2001-2002 Workplace Colloquium Series, where she talked about trauma in the workplace and the AFA’s commitment to risk management and reduction for its 50,000 members who work for 26 airlines in six countries. AFA’s assistance program is a confidential resource that handles the kind of non-disciplinary “job jeopardy” situations to which employers need not be party.

Indeed, the tragedy of September 11 has stretched the program to the limit. Of the four planes involved, the two belonging to United Airlines carried AFA working crews. But unlike other aviation disasters, this one had a devastating impact on all flight attendants. While United and American Airlines focused on passengers’ families, the investigation, and continued operations, as typically happens after any aviation accident, AFA’s peer assistance program mounted a response to all its members, and then some. The AFA supplemented the work of the union representing American’s flight attendants and offered its services to Delta Air Lines flight attendants, who are not represented by a union and have no access to a peer EAP. And finally, the AFA collaborated with the National Mental Health Association in setting up a telephone hotline to provide mental health referrals nationwide.

Within the first three weeks after the attacks, more than 20,000 peer assistance hours had been mobilized.

Although it is too soon to assess the impact of the tragic events, some *continued on page 2*

## First MPS Class Graduates in January

Lifelong learning has become something of a buzzword in the educational and business worlds. In the face of continuous technological, economic, and strategic changes, many adults are flocking back to the classroom to expand their horizons and deepen their understanding of the workplace.

Indeed, ILR’s new Master of Professional Studies program is geared to just that type of student: a heterogeneous mix of people involved with human resources, labor relations, or general management who want to bring a theoretical backdrop and cutting-edge ideas to their daily work. “The company suggested I get a broader scope,” says Stacey Petrey, who worked as a compensation analyst for an investment banking firm when she started the two-year program. After making a few calls, she adds, “I realized I wanted in-depth graduate studies rather than a certificate.” The first MPS class, which matriculated in January 2000, is now set to graduate.

Students in the New York City-based program participate in lectures and seminars in the fields of collective bargaining, labor economics, organizational behavior, human resource management, and public policy. Students must also complete an in-depth research project under the guidance of a faculty advisor. Classes meet on Saturday and are taught by ILR professors, who travel to the city weekly. Students also spend two weeks at the Ithaca campus during the summer.

Although students value real-world learning and the dialectic that flows from the case method used in *continued on page 4*

## Peer Assistance

*continued from page 1*

trends are emerging. Ms. Healy says peer responders are hearing concerns about security and safety, caring for self and family, and balancing families' anxieties with a desire to continue flying. "It is very different from what the public is struggling with," Ms. Healy explains. The public has the option of not getting on a plane, whereas flight attendants must now cope with the fear of terrorism in their workplace. She says the layoffs and furloughs that followed the attacks compounded the stress for attendants and their families.

The AFA was one of the first unions to create an assistance program built around trained peer volunteers. Although many large companies maintain EAPs, wherein supervisors are the first line of assistance and referral for personal problems, the logistics of flight attendants' working lives do not suit the traditional intervention model. Flight attendants come and go from a different workplace every day and may not ever get to know their nominal supervisor. But they do form close bonds with their colleagues, who maintain the same type of lifestyle. Peers, then, are best positioned to recognize when their flying partners need help — and to deliver it. "There's an automatic trust factor," Ms. Healy says.

During the past 10 years, 16,000 AFA members have used the assistance program. Of that number, 40% were referred by a peer. Lately, the system has responded to nearly 2,500 requests a year, a number that has grown steadily since the program's inception. Ms. Healy attributes the increase to a change in traditional support systems (e.g., extended families and neighbors), the complexities and pace of modern life, and the rise in traumatic and critical incidents. Assessment and referral for job stress and personal problems is the most frequently used EAP service, followed by calls for help after a critical incident, such as an emergency evacuation, death on board, air turbulence, or

assaults on or off the plane. The program also addresses professional standards issues involving conflict with coworkers.

The AFA maintains a pool of approximately 180 trained volunteers who deliver the EAP services. Together with the flight attendant, the peer volunteer assesses the problem and devises an action plan, which may involve referral to a professional or community service. Volunteers also meet incoming planes to provide peers with support and crisis intervention, and serve as consultants and mediators in helping flying partners resolve conflicts with colleagues. The average length of service for volunteers is seven years.

The AFA, like most unions, is concerned about its members' health and well-being. And while many company EAPs are motivated by the bottom line — quickly getting the affected employee back to work at full productivity minimizes efficiency loss and the likelihood of having to recruit, hire, and train a replacement worker — the goal of the AFA's peer assistance program is to accelerate emotional recovery, whether it is the result of a personal problem, illness, or traumatic incident. For safety professionals, such as flight attendants, peer support and intervention helps reduce the trauma load and enables them to better withstand subsequent incidents.

As work sites become increasingly decentralized due to concerns about security, traffic congestion, work-family balance, and the like, the AFA's peer assistance model may prove more appropriate. Traditional EAPs built around supervisory intervention are not well suited to reaching off-site employees. But a peer assistance program, Ms. Healy asserts, one that responds to the day-to-day incidents occurring at remote locations that impair functioning on and off the job, benefits both employers and employees. The flight attendants have learned that lesson the hard way. ■

## ILR Faculty Write About...

American unions, struggling to chart a new and more vital role in society, are turning to some tried and some untested strategies. Three new books by ILR faculty explore and evaluate the options unions face.

*Rekindling the Movement: Labor's Quest for Relevance in the Twenty-first Century* (2001. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press. 416 pgs. \$45 cloth; \$19.95 paper.) takes an analytic approach that assesses the strengths and weaknesses of new initiatives, progress to date, and near-term prospects. Edited by professors Lowell Turner, Harry Katz, and Richard Hurd, the book contains essays by 18 contributors from a variety of related disciplines who marshal and present hard data to support their divergent conclusions about the extent and nature of union revitalization.

Analysis and prescription also inform *Mutual Aid and Union Renewal: Cycles of Logics of Action* (2001. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press. 224 pgs. \$39.95 cloth; \$16.95 paper). Professors Samuel B. Bacharach, Peter A. Bamberger (Technion: Israel Institute of Technology) and William J. Sonnenstuhl contend that unions' diminished clout stems less from exogenous factors than from internal failings. Union legitimacy and member commitment could be restored, they suggest, if organized labor again embraces its 19<sup>th</sup> century roots in mutual aid and de-emphasizes the 20<sup>th</sup> century servicing model of providing ever increasing wages and benefits. The authors use data from the flight attendants, railway workers, and transit workers unions to judge the effectiveness of recently implemented peer assistance programs.

The labor movement's newly-expressed support for looser restrictions on immigration is no panacea for its ills, warns Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., in *Immigration and American Unionism* (2001. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press. 240 pgs. \$37.50 cloth; \$16.95 paper.). Briggs maintains immigration has hurt American unions, which have thrived when immigrant numbers decreased. Union revival, he asserts, ultimately depends on fewer newcomers, different admission categories, labor law reform, and tighter enforcement of protective labor laws.

## Economic Growth Reduces Poverty — or Does It?

**I**T'S HARD TO ARGUE against economic growth. Increases in a country's per capita national product would seem to be an undeniable good. After all, economic growth means a larger pie for all (potentially) to share and leads the way to economic and social development, with the promise of higher living standards, improved personal health, and the opportunity to partake of democratic and participative institutions.

But looking around the globe and assessing what economic growth has actually wrought in developing countries suggests that another story may unfold. Indeed, academic economists, development policymakers, and anti-globalization activists debate whether "a rising tide lifts all boats" or whether growth is "immiserizing" and makes the poor poorer. Gary Fields, a labor economist and chair of the Department of International and Comparative Labor at ILR, will discuss the empirical evidence underlying the dispute and governments' role in setting economic policy at the January session of the *Institute for Workplace Studies'* 2001-2002 Colloquium Series.

Poverty — how many poor reside in a country and how poor they are — is a key indicator of economic growth. As Prof. Fields notes, economic growth in developing countries has reduced poverty except when political leaders enriched themselves at the people's expense and otherwise prevented citizens from sharing in the economy's expansion.

But sometimes, he adds, absolute and relative gains do not accrue at the same speed. In South Korea, for example, the real standard of living has doubled every 10 years since 1970, producing an eight-fold rise over the past 30 years. Businessmen, however, are getting richer faster than are workers, who feel left behind and express their dissatisfaction through frequent strikes.

Governments play a crucial role in guiding their countries' growth, Prof. Fields asserts. He says countries that fully participate in the world economy, by being open to competition, challeng-

ing market leaders, educating the population, and eschewing corruption, excessive taxation, and threats of expropriation, stand the greatest chance of becoming world-class producers.

Workers, meanwhile, benefit from the job creation and rising wages that typically accompany increases in production and exports. Clearly, some work situations are exploitative and should be prohibited — forced child labor and locked windows and doors are just two examples. Once such jobs have been banned, however, any job is better than no job for many of the world's poor. The longer-run goal is to make these jobs more remunerative and less harsh.

Political and business leaders must be attentive to what Prof. Fields calls a

country's "dynamic comparative advantage." By way of example, he notes the initial breakthrough, upsurge, peak, and then downturn in the fortunes of East Asian countries' textile and clothing industries. Japan enjoyed the first round of success but was displaced by Hong Kong and Singapore, which ceded leadership to Korea and Taiwan, which then lost out to China, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The savviest surviving players are now reconfiguring their businesses and offering computer-aided, made-to-order items instead of mass-produced standardized garments.

Who wins and who loses as a country lurches toward a fully developed economy is more than just an academic question. It is one whose answers say a lot about the social and political priorities of a given country's leaders and its collective hopes for the future.

For more about Prof. Fields's upcoming talk, go to [www.ilr.cornell.edu/iws](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/iws), email [iwsnyc@cornell.edu](mailto:iwsnyc@cornell.edu), or call (212)340-2869.

## Smithers Foundation Celebrates

**T**HAT ALCOHOLISM IS A DISEASE was once a novel and controversial idea. But not to R. Brinkley Smithers, who used his considerable resources to promote mainstream acceptance of what he knew to be true. In 1956, Mr. Smithers transformed the mission of the Christopher D. Smithers Foundation into one devoted to education about, and understanding of, alcoholism as a disease. Today, the foundation supports a variety of prevention and treatment strategies, including outreach to schools and communities and research on the link between alcoholism and drug dependence and the workplace.

In recognition of the foundation's upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the R. Brinkley Smithers Institute for Alcohol-Related Workplace Studies at ILR is organizing a special seminar series in 2002. The program will focus on the biological, psychological, and socio-cultural aspects of alcoholism; interventions in the workplace, schools, and the community; and evaluations of treatment systems. A major public conference in 2003, sponsored by the Smithers Founda-

tion, will bring together practitioners, policymakers, workers, and community members, who will exchange views on the papers that emerged from the earlier seminar series. The goal is to generate policy statements that will form the basis of an action agenda for the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependency.

More details about the anniversary celebration will be available shortly. ■

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## MPS Program

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many business schools, they are not MBA “wannabes.” Pam Siedlecki earned an undergraduate degree in business but is now more interested in what she describes as the “people aspects” of organizations. “I’ve been a consultant,” she explains, “and ILR is giving me the framework to further explore cultures in organizations.”

The Cornell connection also opens doors for MPS students. Jaye Weisman, who already holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and an MBA, wanted to better understand the human side of organizational dynamics, such as conflict and union-management relations, and to expand the opportunities available to her. “I’m more welcome now,” she says. “I can sit on both sides of the table.”

Course work involves both theory and practice. Professors’ strength is presenting the big picture and the foundation on which practice is built. The students, with their diverse backgrounds and expe-

rience, add the lived details that make the learning so rich. This balance helps smooth the transfer of knowledge from classroom to workplace. One student is using human resource concepts learned in class to better inform decisions he makes about staffing. Another drew on change management principles gleaned from an organizational behavior class when she helped her newly merged company blend two distinct cultures.

Like youthful students, these adults also have gripes about abstruse journal articles, unclear research goals, and problem computers. But overall, they are well satisfied and convinced the investment will yield a positive return.

Go to [mpsnyc@cornell.edu](mailto:mpsnyc@cornell.edu) or call 212-340-2808 for more information. ■

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Institute for Workplace Studies events.