

More Thoughts on the Worker-Student Alliance: A Reply to Steve Early

Lance Compa

When Kim Moody called me a “veteran labor activist” in the 1980s, I protested that I was still a young Turk.¹ When my Cornell colleague and labor historian Jefferson Cowie started teaching a course titled “Labor in the 70’s” a couple of years ago, I complained, “That’s not history, Jeff, it’s current events.” But when my contemporary Steve Early writes an account of his 1970s entry into the union movement that makes *Labor History*,² I guess the game is up. We are veterans, though not yet old-timers, please.

Early’s vignette about his Miners for Democracy experience sets the stage for an essay faulting some unions’ rush to hire new university graduates as organizers and researchers. He says that student recruitment “perpetuates the technocratic myth that deploying more professional staff is the key” to union success. “Any strategy for rebuilding union strength that relies so heavily on an infusion of paid help is deeply flawed,” he contends. Early contrasts this “staffing up” with the Communication Workers of America’s membership-based organizing network using up-from-the-ranks union leaders and activists.

Most of Early’s essay is right on, if that sixties phrase is still apposite. He gives a correct caution about the dangers of too much reliance on university-trained staffers compared with indigenous staffers and volunteer-member organizers. He warns that fast-tracking recruits from the AFL-CIO’s organizing institute and union summer programs into leadership posts can turn unions into technocratic, top-down organizations disconnected from a membership base.

1. See Sarah Fritz, “Young-Turk Network: New Force in Unions,” *U.S. News and World Report*, March 19, 1979, 79, characterizing the UAW’s Don Stillman, OCAW’s Steve Wodka, Bakery Workers’ Carolyn Jacobson, ACTWU’s Ray Rogers and me with the UE as recent university graduates involved in “a young people’s network in the labor movement.”

2. See Steve Early, “Thoughts on the ‘Worker-Student Alliance’—Then and Now,” *Labor History* 44 (2003): 5.

My comments here reflect ten degrees of difference. While I mostly agree with him, I think Early takes a valid critique a step too far with jibes about red carpet treatment, Mormon missionaries, the best and the brightest, mobile organizers, self-sacrificing souls, and the like, suggesting that any reliance on graduates is a mistake, and only indigenous staffers should build the labor movement. His only exception, it appears, is for graduates going into workplaces where Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU)—style dissident groups take on their national union leadership, replicating the “colonizing” of the late 1960s worker-student alliance. As Early says, students’ entry into trade union work then was mostly “in opposition to the labor establishment of that era.” I take him to argue that students now aspiring to trade union work should follow the same dissident path rather than seek union staff positions.

Early is right that a university education by itself, even one concentrated on labor studies or labor law, is not the best preparation for real-world trade union work. In my first campaign as a United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) organizer in 1973, I was passing out leaflets from a public sidewalk at 6:30 a.m. to workers entering a wire extrusion plant in Plymouth, Massachusetts. I had my law degree in one pocket and a copy of the Constitution in the other. The plant manager chased me away with a Doberman pinscher straining on a leash and gnashing at my ankles. “You can’t do this,” I said. “I have a constitutional right to be here.”

“Fuck you and your constitutional rights, too,” he said, giving the dog more slack to lunge at me.

Young, university-trained union staffers need seasoning, but they bring important skills that rank and filers don’t always have: fast and effective writing, research and computer abilities, knowledge of economics and legalities, and the like. The sheer matter of time for evening and weekend work over long periods should not be discounted, either.

This does not mean that these are more important skills, or higher-order skills, than the ones that indigenous staffers or volunteer-member organizers bring to a drive—familiarity with the company or the industry and with the specific demands of the jobs and the psychology of the workplace; an ability to convey personally what the union has accomplished for them; how a grievance procedure works; how the union functions democratically; the ability to blunt employer charges about union “outsiders,” etc.

Nor is there a bright line between these two skill sets and the people who hold them. Many indigenous union staffers and rank-and-file volunteers also went to college. And many university grads have ample workplace experience. Some unions require “salting” as a prelude to staff work. Sometimes students aspiring to union staff jobs figure out for themselves that going to work in a shop, office, care center, warehouse, construction site, or other workplace is good preparation for going on staff.

I take Early to argue first that unions should not hire former students as

staffers, and further, that if they do, those staffers should never cross the line to an elected leadership track. If they do, their elite background will inevitably feed an “I’m smart, I know best” top-down leadership style that depreciates the role of indigenous union members.

It depends. University graduates who become elected labor leaders can just as well infuse a bottom-up, democratic spirit in their unions. Indigenous, up-from-the-ranks leaders can be autocrats. What counts is a healthy dose of modesty that puts the union and the members first, not personal advancement or aggrandizement. This does not mean that union leaders should be shy. Leadership usually requires a strong personality and a measure of charisma. Will they be used for self-promotion or for union advancement, and does the leader know the difference?

I was lucky to watch Vinnie Sirabella and John Wilhelm work in the Yale strikes and organizing campaigns of the 1970s. Sirabella was a trade union classic, a high-school dropout and a bartender who taught himself psychology, politics, and economics. He helped build vibrant, democratic local Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) unions around southern New England in the midst of an otherwise moribund, and in some cities corrupt, international union. Wilhelm was a 1960s Yale graduate who became Sirabella’s mentee and led the historic clerical and technical workers’ organizing drive at Yale. Wilhelm then brought the militancy, energy, and democracy taught by Sirabella to make Las Vegas, of all places, the strongest union town in the United States.

The insider-outsider combination epitomized by Sirabella and Wilhelm, and replicated in many of the most successful union-organizing campaigns around the country, is a model for the labor movement, not something to be scorned because former students are involved in key roles. Many of my top students at Cornell’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations want careers in the labor movement. The labor movement should have the advantages of precisely their “commitment, zeal, dedication and intelligence” that Early mocks in the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) and HERE recruitment pitches. HERE members in Los Angeles certainly appreciate the work that Kurt Petersen, a 1992 Yale law school graduate, has done in his ten years in the trenches with them. Like him, young people going on staff with HERE work their butts off to build the union. The union is right to welcome them and nurture them.

University graduates’ move into trade union work has a leavening effect for the labor movement as a whole. Many students entering the labor movement will go on to careers in academia, business, politics, and other social movements. That’s normal. People change and move on. One hopes that their labor experience will not be so disillusioning that they fail to bring understanding of and sympathy for trade unions’ goals to the rest of their lives’ work.

Just the fact that unions are reaching out to campuses through Union Summer programs and antisweatshop movements creates consciousness among new generations of students that the labor movement is alive and active, even if most of them never consider working for a union. It helps sustain a union-friendlier envi-

ronment in the wider society. If the labor movement does not open its doors to students eager to join it, unions risk worsening their image as an out-of-mainstream sect, not an integral part of American life.

Early arches an eyebrow, too, at unions' recruitment of new cadres of researchers to back up organizing, bargaining, and corporate campaigns. But union research jobs clearly require skills that university-trained and Internet-savvy young people bring to the labor movement. Kate Bronfenbrenner at Cornell University and Tom Juravich at the University of Massachusetts are funneling dozens of young researchers into the labor movement. We should welcome them, not discourage them because they don't come from the rank and file or did not spend years in a shop with a dissident TDU caucus.

Holding a university degree does not inevitably mean that new union staffers bring an elitist attitude to their work. And coming up from the ranks is no guarantee of a continued rank-and-file attitude. Unfortunately, the reverse is often true. A healthy mix of outsiders and insiders is the best way to staff a union.

The UE's long history of balancing staff recruitment and leadership development between idealistic university graduates and workplace-hardened indigenous leaders is a good model. Compared with the hostile reception to Early's trade union work thirty years ago that he recounts in his essay, I got at least a warm welcome, if not the red carpet treatment (the UE does not do red carpets for new staff).

When I went on staff in 1973, the UE's organizing director was Hugh Harley. He was legendary in the union for sleeping in his VW bug to save money while he led and won organizing drives throughout the New England machine tool industry in the 1950s and 1960s. Harley's new organizing helped keep the UE alive while it suffered massive membership losses from red-baiting raids by Walter Reuther's United Automobile Workers and James Carey's International Union of Electrical Workers. Only later did I learn that Harley was a graduate of Dartmouth's Amos Tuck School of Business Administration who worked for the International Labor Organization in Geneva before plunging into organizing for the UE in the 1940s.

James Carey had been the UE's first president in 1936 when he was just twenty-five. In terms of Steve Early's analysis, Carey was the indigenous rank and filer who rose to union leadership, the way it's supposed to be. Carey was the boy wonder of the labor movement, but he never grew up. Fed up with his preening, egotistical style, compared with the modest Julius Emspak and James Matles, the other top national officers in UE's collective leadership model, convention delegates tossed him out in 1941.

Emspak was a skilled craftsman at General Electric's main plant in Schenectady, New York, with a master's degree from Brown University. Matles could have gotten a PhD in any field he chose, but he chose trade union work in the 1930s in the thriving manufacturing sector in Brooklyn and Queens. Like those of many

other UE founding leaders, their politics and trade union philosophies took shape in heat-seeking communist and socialist movements of the 1930s. They were “Reds” in the 1940s and 1950s, the ultimate outsider intellectuals whether or not they had university education (some did, some didn’t). Yet by dint of honesty, courage, and commitment, they built, then saved, a left-wing union in the teeth of the cold war. They did it by going to the rank and file and working with indigenous UE local leaders who wanted to keep a democratic union.

The UE is a special case, the only independent union that survived the CIO’s cold war purge of left-wing affiliates. Actually, sometimes the UE’s background was an asset. In 1974 I was assigned to work with forty Spanish-speaking workers at the one-hundred-employee Continental Aluminum factory in North Adams, Massachusetts. Belying its grandiose name, the plant was just another low-tech extrusion shop making aluminum ski poles. Somehow a community of Hondurans had made their way from Central America to the Berkshires long before the massive immigration we see now took place.

About a week before the election, we knew the company’s hired antiunion consultant would start a red-baiting attack on the UE. We had a standard preemptive line that I explained to the Honduran workers. “Now, the plant manager is going to tell you that the UE is a communist union that got kicked out of the CIO in 1949. It’s *pura porquería*. The UE left the CIO to preserve our union’s democracy. Besides, it’s all ancient history. I was hardly born when all this happened.”

The workers were quiet for a moment. Then Rodrigo, the key organizing committee member, spoke up. “Look, *compañero*, we’re all communists. We had to leave Honduras because of the political repression. It’s OK with us if it’s a communist union.”

My moment of silence masked consternation. “Well, it’s *kind* of a communist union,” I finally managed. “I mean it’s not anticommunist. *Chuta*, we’re open to everybody—communist, socialist, capitalist, whatever people believe.” We won the election 60–40, with the Hondurans voting as a bloc in favor of the union, and got a good contract that held up for several years until competition from a ski pole shop in Central America put the plant under.

Before discussing the problem of the egotistical insider who moves to union leadership, I want to first say more about Hugh Harley’s leadership cohort that followed the union’s founders. My own mentor in Massachusetts, the best anyone could have had, was Doug Perry. He was a Bates College graduate who joined the UE staff in the 1950s. Perry’s organizing and bargaining style put listening ahead of talking. When he spoke up it was to make suggestions, not to dictate answers. I learned as much from Frank Rosen, who did graduate studies in physics at the University of Chicago and was the UE’s Midwest vice president in the 1970s and 1980s.

People like Harley, Perry, and Rosen held a socialist analysis of society, economics, and trade unionism. They were always balanced in UE leadership and

internal union affairs by non- (or at least less) ideological leaders who followed the traditional union path, from getting a job to becoming a steward, then a committee member, then a local union president, before moving on to staff jobs and regional or national leadership.

Saying that UE's indigenous leaders were less ideologically formed does not mean they were less smart or skilled. They brought different, complementary smarts and skills to the union's work that generated a healthy steadiness in the leadership and life of the union. Perhaps the greatest genius of Matles and his cohort and of Harley and his cohort was to recognize the importance of this balance and to nurture it with a distinctive UE leadership style marked by modesty. Their operative pronoun was "we," and their operative noun was "the members"—not "I" and "my members."

In contrast, I saw several indigenous UE local leaders who aspired to regional and national office derail on ego trips. They were smart, savvy, and oratorically gifted, and they had proved their courage leading long strikes against tough employers. But it was all about them—my local, my committee, "I got my people a good contract," and the like. Even those smart enough not to talk that way got smelled out by UE leaders and activists devoted to the union's modest, low-key ethos, from old-timers who remembered James Carey's bombast to new members organized by Harley, Perry, and others in the UE style. Rank and filers who kept rising to UE leadership, like current president John Hovis, a former Westinghouse machinist, did so by adhering to the union's anti-cult of personality culture.

Another UE feature that should serve as a model for bringing former students into effective union staff work is the integration of organizing and servicing assignments. Steve Early is right that the "parachute drop" model of union organizing is inherently flawed. Workers' sense of community with each other and confidence in the staffers they meet are critical for organizing success, and the same relationships carry over into bargaining.

Assigning organizers like commando squads for National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election campaigns fails to treat organizing and bargaining as a single campaign requiring sustained committee-building and mobilization skills. UE organizers are service reps, too. They organize nonunion locations, but they also negotiate contracts, train leadership, and develop community-based support networks. The union brings in outside organizers for a final push in the late stage of a campaign, but the lead organizers usually stay on to negotiate a contract and build the union's workplace infrastructure.

Contrast this with the Teamsters' misuse of Vicki Saporta's skills in the late 1970s. Another talented Cornell grad like Bruce Raynor, president of UNITE, Saporta blitzed North Carolina with a string of NLRB election wins in big manufacturing plants around the state. But after each win, the Teamsters sent Saporta to the next target. Consolidating the victories and negotiating contracts fell to decent but unimaginative leaders of a truck drivers' Teamster local. The union was soon decertified in every plant. In contrast, Raynor stayed in the South for two decades,

patiently building the union at JP Stevens, Cannon Mills, and other longtime organizing targets, before moving on to national leadership.

CWA's emphasis on rank-and-file members' involvement in organizing and bargaining campaigns is an important model for union progress. Early correctly notes the extraordinary scope and efforts of CWA's rank-and-file organizing committee of US Airways's 10,000 ticket agents, one of the labor movement's biggest organizing victories of recent years. But shared credit should also go to Rick Braswell, a university-trained staffer who had earlier spent many years as a UE organizer. Braswell was CWA's key strategist who built the organizing committee network and coordinated the campaign.

CWA's "membership-based approach" was conceived and implemented by a combination of up-from-the-ranks and university-trained national CWA leaders and staffers—including Steve Early, whose behind-the-scenes role is a model of how former student staffers should operate. Without fanfare, Early has helped organize thousands of telecommunications workers into the CWA in the past twenty years (more university-trained union activists should emulate Steve's public face, too—his prolific and incisive writing about the labor movement).

In any union, when we look closely at what is touted as a purely indigenous rank-and-file initiative, we usually find in the background key roles played by university-trained strategists. This is natural, and there's nothing wrong with it. Most rank-and-file workers and indigenous union leaders are glad to have help from highly educated and skilled trade union professionals to help them fight the bosses' lawyers and consultants. This receptivity on the part of union members is what creates opportunities for idealistic students to aspire to trade union work. It should not be forsaken for a purist notion of antielitist union staff recruitment.

Again, none of this means that university-trained staffers' analysis and strategy are a higher or more valuable form of advocacy, compared with the experience and skills of rank-and-file members and leaders. They are different, complementary skills, equally critical for trade union progress. Along with Early, I would place rank and filers' experience and skills first. The heart of the UE, those who really saved and rebuilt the union, was not the left-wing intellectual staffers and leaders. It was the thousands of indigenous local union officers and shop stewards and members who knew a strong, independent, democratic union when they saw one and fought to keep it.

Steve Early ends his essay with a recommendation I totally endorse: all union staffers should read Bob Bussel's recent biography of Powers Hapgood,³ a Harvard grad who became a coal miner and mine workers' union staffer, to appreciate the tension between idealism and real life in an always-flawed labor movement. But Hapgood's tortured experience does not reflect an iron law of college-educated trade union staffers' fate. Today's labor movement is not the United Mine Workers of the

3. Robert Bussel, *From Harvard to the Ranks of Labor: Powers Hapgood and the American Working Class* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

1920s, or of Tony Boyle's Mineworkers of the 1960s, any more than today's students are those of Hapgood's time or Early's and my New Left generation.

Throughout his life, Bussel concludes, Hapgood was a "passionate searcher, unwilling to . . . surrender his visionary dreams."⁴ That's not a bad epitaph. The flaws in our labor movement and obstacles to union growth temper idealism over time, but the best labor veterans, like Steve Early, manage to keep it. We should welcome a new generation of activists to the struggle. □

4. Ibid., 202.

Response to Lance Compa's Reply

Steve Early

Lance Compa's thoughtful response to my "Worker-Student Alliance" piece is much appreciated. It helps illuminate several of the issues I attempted to raise about the importance of rank-and-file leadership development as opposed to an organizer hiring strategy that bypasses experienced union members and focuses instead on enlisting campus activists and other nonmembers, who then become candidates for higher-level union jobs, appointed or elected. Nonmember recruitment is still being pursued, by the way; as I write, I'm looking at full-page ads that ran recently in the *Nation*, *In These Times*, and *American Prospect* urging interested readers of those publications to "join the fight for justice" by becoming a "full-time union organizer" for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Workers (AFSCME). Since AFSCME's national newspaper has a circulation six times larger than all three combined, wouldn't it be a better idea for these "help wanted" ads to appear there?

Such "jibes" aside, my "Contemporary Affairs" column was not intended to be an attack on labor-oriented students, whose efforts on campus and off have strengthened and enlivened many recent labor struggles. Nor was it an attempt to steer them in the direction of only one form of labor involvement—"going into workplaces where Teamsters for a Democratic Union-style dissident groups take on their national union leadership." Rather, its purpose was to stimulate debate, discussion, and more critical thinking among campus activists about the union structures that many of them are being encouraged to enter and serve as full-time staffers. My hope was that more young people, while accepting organizer positions, might be emboldened to reject narrow institutional loyalty in favor of a broader political commitment to labor that might include support for cross-union formations and grassroots networks like Jobs with Justice, Labor Notes, or the Association for Union Democracy (AUD).

I'm pleased to report that, in addition to Lance's comments, there was positive feedback to my essay from members of United Students against Sweatshops (USAS). Informal discussions with and among various USAS members led last

August to the scheduling of a first-ever workshop on building democratic unions at the national USAS conference in New York City. In addition to this event, which featured presentations by rank-and-file reformers from AFSCME, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the Transport Workers Union of America, delegates to the conference adopted a resolution stating “that the labor movement will be stronger when it is democratically controlled by workers.” USAS resolved “to make continuing efforts to build alliances with those organizations fighting for a more democratic labor movement” and will promote future exchanges and contact with Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), Labor Notes, and the AUD.

As the AUD’s *Union Democracy Review* reported after the conference, the “resolution reflects the dissatisfaction of some USAS members with its serving as a recruiting ground for unions with top-down, undemocratic strategies. USAS members are drawn to the labor movement because of their concern for workers rights. But, according to Charlie Hoyt, a leading USAS activist at the University of Wisconsin, upon graduation, some USAS members have taken union staff jobs and become apologists for, even participants in, such undemocratic methods.”¹

Lance suggests that it’s unfair to blame former students, in a handful of AFL-CIO affiliates, for organizational behavior that deprives many workers of a United Electrical Workers–style membership experience. Throughout American labor, he suggests, top-down organization, undemocratic practices, and personality cults are more widely perpetuated by elected leaders or staffers who emerged from the rank and file. Thus Lance and another friendly critic (who chose to remain anonymous) both contend that my article should have focused less on student recruitment per se and more on the organizational context or culture in which this is occurring—primarily in “New Unity Partnership” (NUP) unions.²

As my anonymous respondent argues, “The question is not whether union staff are recruited from the rank-and-file or from the college campus, but what kind of persons are recruited, how they are developed, and what is the relationship of the staff to the rank-and-file. If unions recruit persons based on their working class consciousness, commitment and potential for leadership, develop their abilities to the fullest extent without regard to their origin, and maintain a vital participatory democracy in the union, the relationship between rank-and-file and professional staff can be positive and creative.”

This observer—someone obviously familiar with the internal workings of key NUP affiliates—points out that UNITE, HERE, and SEIU actually “hire

1. Andy Piascik, “Student Labor Activists Support Union Democracy,” *Union Democracy Review*, no. 148 (2003), www.uniondemocracy.com/UDR/articles48.htm.

2. See Aaron Bernstein, “Breaking Ranks with the AFL-CIO,” *Business Week*, September 15, 2003, 64–67, or Harold Meyerson, “Organize or Die,” *American Prospect*, September 2003, 39–42. The recent alliance of the “Gang of Five”—the presidents of SEIU, HERE, UNITE, LIUNA, and the Carpenters—is viewed less favorably by Joanne Wypijewski, “The New Unity Partnership—A Manifest Destiny for Labor,” *CounterPunch*, October 6, 2003.

a lot of staff out of the ranks as well as off the campus,” but that those “from the ranks are generally treated as ‘cannon fodder,’ foot soldiers to be directed by the college-educated.” The real problem within the NUP is that “these most ‘modern’ trade unions—those that have ‘changed to organize’—closely resemble a modern corporation in their internal organization and in the nature of the relationship of the professional management to the non-professional workforce.” Lance offers up the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) as an inspiring organizational alternative, both in the “old days” and now. I share his admiration and warm regards for that union, having also had some personal contact with impressive UE figures that he mentions (James Matles and Doug Perry) and one that he doesn’t (a feisty Vermonter named Jim Kane, who served as both New England district leader and national UE president). Unfortunately, their “anti-personality cult” style of leadership and the UE model of small, self-sufficient locals, with strong shop steward systems and shop floor militancy, is not much in vogue at the moment. Theorists of the NUP, for example, value “market share” above all and believe unions should achieve greater “density”—through partnerships with management, if necessary—before worrying about internal democracy in “local” unions that have more members than most AFL-CIO national affiliates.³

Their preferred model—in SEIU at least—is neatly aligned, staff-dominated, multistate megalocals that, as Dan Clawson warns, have begun to resemble staff-run “public interest” lobbying groups who relate to their “dues payers” largely through direct mail, phone solicitation, or door-to-door canvassing.⁴ In NUP eyes, the UE’s steadily dwindling manufacturing membership and lack of density within key employers—a problem shared by other General Electric unions, including IUE-CWA—makes it one of labor’s heroic losers. A mere shadow of its former self, the UE is viewed as a hopelessly “out-of-mainstream sect” struggling to survive as what Steven Lerner dismissively calls the “corner store” variety of “General Worker Unionism.”⁵ So I wish Lance well with his efforts to inject “balance” into the debate about student recruitment and the larger issues of union structure, internal democracy, and leadership development. Hopefully, his defense of the UE and what its history really represents will be of interest to the Cornell students that he, Kate Bronfenbrenner, and others are now steering toward NUP unions. (If you’re not already a union member, they are the ones, after all, who are hiring these days.) As noted above, however, these unions don’t share the organizational values of the UE. Nor is their modus operandi similar to that of the UE and other left-led unions in

3. See Stephen Lerner, “An Immodest Proposal: A New Architecture for the House of Labor,” *New Labor Forum* 12 (2003): 9–30.

4. See Dan Clawson, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 21–22.

5. See Lerner, “Immodest Proposal,” 22.

the 1930s—notwithstanding the NUP’s attempt to recast its possible breakaway from the AFL-CIO as a daring CIO-style initiative.⁶

Recent campus recruits to union staff jobs will have to decide which side they are on. They can embrace, uncritically and unquestioningly, the way NUP frames our available options: “Organize”—its way—“or Die.” Or, as in the 1930s, younger activists can join with worker allies in efforts to rebuild labor differently, from the bottom-up, in a new organizing upsurge that aims to regain lost workplace power through unions run by and for the rank and file. □

6. Aaron Bernstein, “Breaking Ranks with the AFL-CIO,” *Business Week*, September 5, 2003; Bernstein, “Pooling Our Resources for Growth,” *Business Week Online*, September 5, 2003, www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/sep2003/nf2003095_8854_dbo49.htm.