

Larry Rogin and Brendan Sexton: Labor Educators

Russell Allen and Lois Gray

This volume came about because their friends and work mates in labor education wanted to do something to pay their respects to two giants in their field—Brendan Sexton and Larry Rogin, who died within a few weeks of each other in the Fall of 1987.

Although impressive memorial services were held for Brendan in New York City and for Larry in Washington, D.C. at the AFL-CIO Building, we felt that they should be remembered to a wider audience. Hence, this volume.

At first we solicited scholarly papers and received several excellent ones, some of which have appeared or will appear in *Labor's Heritage*, the labor history publication of the George Meany Archives and elsewhere. While they were all written by fine labor historians, none touched the lives of Sexton and Rogin after 1943, leaving out the last forty-some years of their careers.

We decided to approach the problem differently, requesting shorter, less formal contributions from persons in universities and unions who had known one or both of them intimately. These are the articles presented here.

Some of the contributors had distinguished careers at universities after stints in the labor movement—Jack Barbash, Alice Cook, Pat Sexton, and Bill Goode. Nick Salvatore was associated with Larry as a faculty colleague. Two former union presidents, Doug Fraser and Sol Stettin, wrote of the impact the two had on their unions. And Joe Glazer and Barbara Rahke told what it was like to work under their tutelage.

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The specific idea for this kind of volume came from Richard Dwyer, now assistant director, education and training, for the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, Health and Safety Fund. It was immediately supported by the University and College Labor Education Association in the person of former *Labor Studies Journal* editor, Richard Humphreys, his successor, Higdon Roberts, and Jim Wallihan, editorial board chairman of the *Journal*. Robert Pleasure, executive director of the George Meany Center for Labor Studies, encouraged the project from its inception and supported it in more ways than he knows.

Acknowledgement must also be made to Hilda Rogin, first wife of Brendan Sexton and second wife of Larry Rogin, for her unfailing advice and cooperation; and to Jacqueline Brophy, first editor of the *Labor Studies Journal*, for her editorial assistance.

Comparison and Contrasts

Larry and Brendan, as Jack Barbash points out, were both products and leaders in the same period of time and the same sector of the movement. While their life stories have many points in common, each had a distinctive style and philosophy, leaving an individual imprint on the labor history of our century.

Commonalities

Both Larry and Brendan began early in life to align with radical and activist movements, joining the Socialist Party during the depression. They played important roles in the formative years of CIO unions, serving both in education and organizing. In later years they served on university faculties and helped to shape the evolution of the George Meany Center for Labor Studies. Thus, their careers have many parallels in terms of functions and roles performed.

Their influence was felt not only by the countless individuals inside the union whom they inspired as mentors and role models but by the many officials in universities and other institutions in which they played an advocacy and watchdog role, pressing for responsiveness to the needs of the labor movement. They shared a strong commitment to unionism and a fierce loyalty to the unions with which they were affiliated as well as a lifelong commitment to progressive change. While skeptical about academics, they were at home in the world of ideas and played significant roles in influencing the development of university sponsored labor edu-

cation. Both were outstanding teachers, dedicated to democratic participation in the classroom. They saw education as a means of worker empowerment (before that was a popular phrase) and building a labor movement. Their influence extended to rank and file workers through contacts in labor education and organizing but also reached top level policy formulation through their close relationships with national union presidents.

Differences

Although they shared many common characteristics, Rogin and Sexton also had some important differences in their approach to unions and labor education. Brendan, as education director for a large union very much in the public eye, sought opportunities through large-scale conferences to influence public policy in economic and social areas. Big conferences were held featuring big names—cabinet officers, university presidents, and congressional big-wigs. One in Washington, D.C., on public educational policy, drew several hundred union delegates and got widespread media (and therefore congressional) attention. This, of course, was in addition to an aggressive educational programs within the union for both local unions and staff.

Larry worked on a more modest scale, consistent with the size of the unions with which he was associated but also consistent with his style. The Washington workshops on legislative issues of the Textile Workers (with legislative director John Edelman) were an example. Only when he was education director for the AFL-CIO did Larry get heavily into public educational policy issues where he did excellent work on technical and vocational education.

Brendan and Larry also differed sharply on public criticism of the labor movement. Larry felt that open, public criticism from within the labor movement itself was essential to a healthy, democratic organization. Brendan held similar beliefs, but his voice was more muted when it came to voicing public criticism of unions. Perhaps this derived in part from the fact that he had been a local union president in the UAW and had probably taken his share of criticism from “outside.”

As the Cook article pointed out, Larry emphasized process over content in labor education. Pat Sexton and Bill Goode stressed how important democratic participation was in Brendan’s philosophy. Our experience with Brendan, however, was that issue-oriented content was always important to him in his educational endeavors.

Larry was hired from outside for his labor education job. Brendan became president of a large, World War II era local union and worked up from there. Brendan dropped out of high school. Larry would have had a Ph.D. from Columbia if his union jobs hadn't intervened. Finally, the two men were studies in contrasting personal styles—Larry gentle, low-keyed, but with a powerful engine running; Brendan explosive, volcanic, leaving nothing to the imagination, and full of ideas.

Highlights of the Career of Brendan Sexton

Born 1910, New York City

- 1920s Attended parochial schools but dropped out of high school. Studied on his own, read voraciously. Worked as a messenger on Wall Street.

- 1930s Joined Socialist Party. Sent by the Unemployed League as delegate to D.C. convention of various unemployed groups. Was a founder of the Workers Alliance and served as secretary. Employed by greeting card plant in Brooklyn where he tried to organize the workers. Worked for Socialist Party as organizer in upstate New York. Hired as an international representative for the Steelworkers Organizing Committee (SWOC) at Sparrows Point, Maryland.

- 1940s Worked at Willow Run plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan, which made B24s for use in World War II. Joined Local 50 (second largest UAW local) and played part in its role of electing Walter Reuther as president of UAW. Elected president of Local 50. Appointed assistant regional director of UAW's Detroit West Side Region; later served as an administrative assistant to Walter Reuther.

- 1950s Appointed national education director of UAW, inaugurated and served as the first director of the Walter and May Reuther Family Education Center and UAW Staff Training Center at Black Lake, Michigan. Edited UAW *Ammunition* monthly magazine; director of organizing for UAW International Union; served on AFL-CIO Standing Committee on Education and on various university labor education advisory committees. Par-
- 1960s

anticipated in establishing OEO's Community Action Program in D.C. as an assistant director.

1970s Retired from UAW staff. Appointed professor of Metropolitan Studies, New York University; visiting professor, Empire State College; and professor at Rutgers University.

1980s Member of Expansion Arts Panel, National Endowment for the Arts; visiting professor, Cornell University, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations; teacher and advisory committee member at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies; taught labor education courses for various universities and unions; served as a consultant on education for unions; and conducted evaluations of educational programs.

Co-author with Patricia Sexton of *Blue Collars and Hard Hats*, a book published by Random House; author of articles published in *Nation*, *Dissent*, *New Leader*, *Progressive*, *The Federationist*, and other periodicals.

Throughout his life, Brendan Sexton was an innovator in labor education and union organizing.

Highlights of the Career of Larry Rogin

Born 1909, New York City

1920s In high school in New Brunswick, New Jersey, served as campaign manager for Progressive Party's Robert LaFollette ("Old Bob") in a mock U.S. presidential election. Joined the Socialist Party and became involved with the Rand School, education arm of the Socialist Party, and the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, under A.J. Muste. Graduated from Columbia University.

1930s Earned M.A. from Columbia University. Thesis: "New York Labor Party After World War I." Finished course work for Ph.D. but not the dissertation. Was education director, Federated Trade Council, Reading, Pennsylvania and also worked as reporter for *The Reading Times*. Active in the Newspaper

Guild and elected delegate to Guild convention in Cleveland, 1935. Became director of the Reading (PA) Labor College. Joined Local 189 of American Federation of Teachers while at Reading. Returned to Brookwood as publicity director and instructor in journalism and labor history. Also served part-time as instructor in Government at City College of New York. Was last faculty member to leave when Brookwood closed in 1937.

- 1930s and 1940s Appointed education director, American Federation of Hosiery Workers, and part-time editor of *The Hosiery Worker*. Joined Textile Workers Union of America as education director, New York, and for six years was also publicity director. Sent overseas with Education Commission set up by U.S. Department of State and U.S. Army to survey German education and recommend policies.
- 1950s Went to Ann Arbor, Michigan, as director of labor services at the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of Michigan-Wayne State University. Also as lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Michigan, created and taught course "Labor in American Politics."
- 1960s Was education director of AFL-CIO in Washington, D.C. Served on various university labor advisory committees. Worked for National Institute of Labor Education (NILE) as project director. Conducted study with Marjorie Rachlin, financed by a grant from the U.S. Office of Education and published in 1967 under title "Labor Education in the United States." Worked with AFSCME in charge of staff training; prepared paper for Jerry Wurf on "The State of the Unions." Served as professor, School of Government and Public Administration, The American University, Washington, and project coordinator, Labor Studies Center, The American University.
- 1960s and 1970s Hired as advisor and part-time staff for Fred Hoehler at the AFL-CIO Labor Studies Center (later renamed the George Meany Center for Labor Studies); worked continuously at the Meany Center until his death.

1980s Visiting professor, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University. Adjunct professor, Antioch University. Taught courses in Antioch/George Meany Center non-residential college degree program on such themes as: women, minorities, union democracy, labor ethics, and organizing.

Throughout his life, Larry Rogin worked on significant projects in labor history, organizing and labor education.