It’s an Academic Question: Why Progressive Intellectuals Should Not Stay Out of Internal Union Battles

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Why Progressive Intellectuals Should Not Stay Out of Internal Union Battles

As an academic beginning to engage with the labor movement, if there was one point on which everyone was clear, it was this: you absolutely, positively cannot get involved in the internal politics of the labor movement.

I disagree. If we are to study and work with labor at all, we almost inevitably are involved in its internal politics. Even if it were possible to avoid doing so, I don’t think it would be desirable.

1. We all have experience with the academic who has not himself (or, more rarely, herself) done any actual organizing, but who does not hesitate to tell everyone else, most especially people in labor, all the things they’ve done wrong.

2. For those in labor education programs, or those being paid to do research for unions, staying out of internal union politics is a simple matter of survival. To take sides is to lose access to, and funding from, the side you are opposing.

3. There’s the issue of knowledge: do we know enough to be involved? For disputes within labor, there may well be good people who have done the actual organizing.

Reasons to stay out of unions’ internal politics

Before presenting my position, let’s consider some of the (quite sensible) arguments against intellectuals getting anywhere near the internal politics of unions—reasons that are usually taken as obvious:

Thanks for comments and reactions from Steve Early, Tom Juravich, Stephanie Luce, Ruth Milkman, Eve Weinbaum, and Ferd Wulkan. Several of these people strongly disagreed with one or another part of my argument, and definitely aren’t responsible for what’s written here.
and good arguments on both sides; not being in the thick of things, we may have a hard time judging what is really happening, how the workers feel, and the unstated consequences of particular positions. With the best of intentions, even if we think we are fully informed, we can operate in ignorance and make serious mistakes. In such a situation, it is better to stay out of the conflict.

4. There is a good chance that we will be manipulated for factional purposes—union leaders schooled in rough-and-tumble politics will take advantage of naïve academics who don't understand what they are getting into.

5. Battles within labor will become the focus of outside attention, and our involvement increases that likelihood. A thousand good things that labor does will be ignored, and all the focus will be on the one problem we address.

**RESPONSES TO THESE OBJECTIONS**

1. I totally agree that academia is filled with people who feel free to give (self-satisfied) advice from afar. This isn't about academics and internal union politics—it's about people and behavior that is pretty insufferable at any time.

2. One of the most important reasons that people stay out of internal labor battles is that a non-trivial proportion of labor-engaged academics are working in labor education programs or receive funding from unions for research projects. For those people, taking a stance on internal union politics runs a very real risk of being cut off from some of their constituencies or risking a multi-year research project. That's a risk that someone like me—who's not based in a labor center, who (at worst) would have to switch to a new research topic—doesn't run.

   The risk to labor-funded faculty is real and should be considered in any decision to get involved; but, in many ways, it is a bad faith argument. In just about every organizing campaign, leaders of the campaign are subjected to serious psychological pressures, risk their relationships with co-workers, and run the non-trivial risk of being fired or discriminated against at work. We constantly ask workers to run those risks. If workers don't take risks, there is no labor movement. How could a labor-oriented intellectual, in good conscience, operate on the basis of: “it’s important that workers take risks, but I’m not willing to do so”? If you are encouraging others to do that which you are unwilling to do, you should get out of labor education, since your own example undercuts your message. At an absolute minimum, labor centers should be sponsoring debates on these disputes; many are unwilling to do even that.

3. I think the same basic point applies to a lack of knowledge: if the issue is important, we should learn about it. We never have “all” the facts, but we still need to engage with ongoing struggles. Not knowing enough may be an opening position, but only on the basis of: “I need to learn about this, and soon, so I will know enough to take action.” Our ignorance is not a long-term reason to stay uninvolved; it’s a demand that we learn.

4. It is absolutely true that we may be manipulated by internal factions; I myself have been burned by this. We should be hyper-aware of this reality. Many internal union disputes are primarily factional struggles about which group will hold office; those we want to avoid. But other internal union struggles raise important issues about values that matter to us; they bring to the fore precisely the reasons we care about labor and want to engage with it. If we avoid those issues we are shirking our responsibility and are, in fact, weakening the labor movement. In the real world, important principles and personal advancement are often mixed, so we need to make decisions about the relative importance of the two, and about our ability to intervene in ways that will advance our principles rather than advance someone’s basically apolitical quest to hold office. But this
problem is inherent in most realworld politics; to avoid all such situations is to withdraw from struggle.

5. Yes, anything that makes labor look bad is going to get disproportionate media and public attention; and, yes, things that we say may be quoted (fairly or out of context) as part of the attacks on labor. We should be very careful about what we say and write, and always bear this in mind. But if we believe that we do these things for those in power but not for the opposition, or for some unions but not for others, we are definitely taking sides.

Not only that—anytime we write to make a case for or against a policy that is disputed within labor, we are involved in the internal politics of the labor movement. If you are convinced that the national labor movement needs to support immigrant rights, or abjure protectionism, or stop demonizing China, or that construction unions need to practice aggressive affirmative action strategies, and you write a hard-hitting argument to that effect, there will be people in the labor movement who think you shouldn't be interfering in their union's internal politics. If we can't write about key policies, we lose much of our ability to help labor, but anything we write is an intervention in the internal politics of labor.

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some key union, or leader, is beginning to travel down a road that will seriously damage labor, and we say nothing, is that helping to build the labor movement? We should remember as well that even if we say nothing critical, that will not prevent union leaders from savaging each other, as the SEIU’s recent disputes make clear.

**THE CASE FOR ENGAGING IN INTERNAL UNION POLITICS**

The most important reason to engage with internal union politics is that doing so is inevitable if we are to be union-involved. In effect, the “stay out of union internal politics” adage means “always support the group in power, never support the opposition.” If there is any level of internal opposition, and the group in power asks us to write a report, do research needed for a contract campaign, help educate workers, sign a statement of support, or write an article about a recent union success, by doing so we are (probably) taking sides. If we

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**THIS ISSUE IN PRACTICE: RECENT CONFLICTS**

Most recently, these issues have forcefully arisen around disputes between the SEIU’s national leadership and other union leaders. I was significantly involved in the dispute between the national SEIU and its large California health care workers local (UHW). (The most complete coverage of these disputes can be found in chapter 8 of Steve Early’s *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor*.)

When the leadership of the 150,000-member UHW local broke with the national SEIU leadership, many of us felt that it was highly likely that the SEIU’s national leadership would trustee UHW, removing its elected officers, seizing its assets, and taking control of its operations. Bill Fletcher, Jr., one of the most perceptive analysts of labor, said that the SEIU trusteeing UHW would be like the United States invading Iraq—easy to do, profoundly damaging to both sides, and creating a quagmire that would
cause pain for years. To help prevent that from happening, I (among others) organized a letter, signed by one hundred labor-engaged intellectuals, urging President Andy Stern not to trustee UHW.

I’ve always thought that the letter was in the best interests of both the national SEIU and UHW, but it led to the sorts of problems that are pointed to by those who argue that academics should stay out of internal conflicts in labor. With any letter put together in a hurry—something like two weeks from start to dispatch—confusion reigns and disparate understandings flourish, especially since the signatures were sought by multiple people using individualized e-mails. People understood their signatures in differing ways. I intended this to be an open, within-the-house-of-labor letter. When I sent the letter to Andy Stern, the initial SEIU reaction was friendly; when the letter was sent to the UALE e-mail list of some five hundred academics no one objected. But when UHW leaders, without our advance knowledge or agreement, ran a half-page ad in the New York Times, all hell broke loose.

Many of those who signed the letter probably did so largely out of ignorance, thinking: “if [person x], whom I know and respect, asked me to sign the letter, it must be a good thing to do.” The SEIU’s initially friendly reception turned sharply negative when the ad appeared in the Times, and most of the signators received calls from someone they knew in the SEIU asking them why they signed, and/or asking them to withdraw their signatures, and/or indicating that there would be consequences. Many of the people who had signed (quite reasonably) felt burned, and let me (and others) know about it. I myself would have happily signed even had I known the letter would be reprinted by UHW, but I would have fully informed those from whom I was attempting to collect signatures, and I’m sure many people would have chosen not to sign.

**GENERAL PRINCIPLES**

**Saying that sometimes academics should be involved in internal labor politics certainly does not mean that we should do so lightly or routinely.** The more unusual our interventions are, the more likely they are to be taken seriously. The more those who take a stand have worked with labor and can point to work that has helped labor, the more attention labor leaders will pay. We should not act unless we inform ourselves about the issues. We should be aware that our actions may have consequences. Perhaps most important, for this or for any other organizing action, we should think carefully about the reasons for our actions and their likely consequences. Will our involvement in union internal politics actually promote the values and positions we believe in?

One of the lessons of the SEIU disputes is that although academics are often convinced that we don’t matter in “the real world,” union leaders feel otherwise. They are very concerned about what labor-friendly academics think and do. Labor leaders are willing to invest significant time and energy into a battle for our hearts and minds. If a sizeable number of us take a stand, labor listens, and that is perhaps the strongest reason why, when we think key values and issues are at stake, we should be involved in internal union politics.