



Commentary/Op-Ed - March 2003

Learning from Labor

Unions operate a number of New York City's most successful job training programs. But the publicly run workforce system has met these labor successes with indifference, or worse.

by David Jason Fischer

For years critics have sniped that the only employment job-training providers guarantee is their own. But in New York, at least one group of providers has been offering high-quality training and successfully moving workers up career ladders for decades. You probably don't think of them this way, but when it comes to training workers, nobody in New York does it better than labor unions.

Labor unions are so good at training, in fact, that policymakers should learn from them--and those nonunion providers who can't beat them should look for ways to work with them.

What do unions have that the others don't? To start with, union-based training has an explicit connection to real jobs and is geared directly to the needs of employers. Labor's programs have parlayed these strengths (among others), into solid success in helping people prepare for better careers.

The city's health care workforce offers perhaps the best example of both the reach and effectiveness of union-led training. Last year, Local 1199/SEIU provided training and education to nearly 20,000 health care workers in the city through direct instruction or financial support for workers taking classes. Some workers pursued high-school equivalency diplomas or ESL credentials; others sought skills training in an effort to find higher pay and more challenging work--thereby creating openings for new employees with fewer skills and less experience. Other unions offer similar training opportunities in fields ranging from building maintenance to baking, expending roughly a half-billion dollars per year to train tens of thousands of workers in public- and private-sector jobs.

Local 1199 has approximately 200,000 members in New York State, and the union offers the majority of them the opportunity to gain skills and advance to better compensation. It's not uncommon for workers in entry-level jobs to first sign up for foundational training such as GED or computer classes, and then move on to specialized health care training such as X-ray machine operation or pharmacology.

"We train anybody and everybody who's a member of the 'family' of 1199," says Francine Boren Gilkenson, director of

strategic planning and grants at the Employment, Training & Job Security Program, a joint project of Local 1199 and the League of Voluntary Hospitals. She estimates that the program serves up to 20,000 New York City health care workers per year. The program pays almost all costs, and the training leads to well-paying jobs for many immigrants and low-income New Yorkers.

The link to high-quality jobs is one of labor's greatest strengths. Where other training providers often design and operate programs with only sporadic input from employers in the field, and have no guarantee of placing trainees, unions commonly develop their training programs in explicit partnership with the same employers who pay members' wages. Such partnerships work because they serve all parties, explains Boren Gilkenson. "It's beneficial to the worker, to management and to the union," she says.

In addition to offering a broad range of learning opportunities and a pipeline to employers, labor unions also provide high-quality instruction. It has been said that those who can't do, teach, but in union-affiliated training, the instructors are usually union members with years of on-the-job experience. "We have seven teachers whom I've hired as tradespeople to be instructors for Construction Skills 2000. Six are union and they do this after work, still in their work clothes," explains Rebecca Lurie, who helps run the pre-apprenticeship program. "The students are sitting with someone who can act as mentor as much as teacher," she adds.

To retain top instructors, unions pay top dollar. "We're paying instructors union wages, not \$15 an hour--which is all some of these smaller groups can afford because their grants are small," says Elly Spicer, a field representative for the NYC and Vicinity Carpenters Labor-Management Cooperation Trust Fund. "I'm a trainer, not just a carpenter; I know how to teach."

She cites a program for minority youth funded by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences through a federal grant: "The students who go into the training program get trade-related experience through shop classes and on-site work...[plus] math instruction and GED preparation, career guidance instruction and presentations given by people from the different trades."

Eighty percent of participants complete the training successfully, according to Spicer's estimates; of these graduates, about 80 percent are placed into apprenticeships that offer starting pay between \$13 and \$25 per hour. Median income for the class of 2002 was \$16.77 per hour, not including benefits. But these outcomes are a direct result of an up-front investment that one staffer estimates at nearly \$25,000 per participant--more than five times what city-funded programs typically spend. "The program that we run with NIEHS isn't cheap," Spicer says. "Welfare-to-work isn't going to pay for that kind of program."

Indeed, money--specifically the fact that unions have more of it--is the first of many good reasons why government and nonprofits can't simply analyze and replicate labor's success. The second is that the employer partnerships and hands-on expertise so vital to the success of union-backed training have evolved organically, through many years of often-contentious labor-management relations, trial and error in workforce-development practices, and changing political climates. It would be impossible for other training providers to synthesize these characteristics--and absurd and wasteful for them to try.

In addition, union training is mostly geared toward helping employed workers bolster their skills. That's a far cry from the mostly unskilled, unemployed individuals--many of them trying to overcome personal barriers like a lack of education or ill health--typically served by non-labor training providers.

But if the answer isn't to replicate, it may be to collaborate.

The Consortium for Worker Education (CWE) offers some insight into how collaboration between unions and nonunion training providers might work. A nonprofit closely affiliated with a number of city unions and the New York City Central Labor Council, CWE works both with unions, by helping them to design training programs, and with the general population served by non-labor providers. In its nonunion work, CWE attempts to design programs that help participants secure good jobs, benefits and, in fields with a strong labor presence, attachment to a union. "We try to focus on training where people get

union jobs or equivalent pay and benefits," one staff member explains.

CWE has worked with non-labor providers as partners and subcontractors for years, effectively sharing its resources in exchange for the neighborhood credibility and targeted expertise of smaller providers. CWE's work with both larger nonprofit partners such as Seedco and smaller organizations like Nontraditional Employment for Women is showing that labor-backed and community-based workforce providers can define common goals and help each other to reach them.

CWE has enjoyed sustained growth since its creation in 1985, and now ranks among the largest providers of training and employment services in the state of New York. With 500 employees and a yearly budget between \$80 million and \$110 million, the consortium offers a wider range of services to a more diverse set of clients than any other player in the city. Its work is supported by union monies, city contracts and funding from the state and federal governments.

CWE's big budget, high profile, wide reach and friends in high places have led smaller counterparts to accuse the organization of everything from bullying to mismanagement. "I have been at forums where some of our critics, even some of our subcontractors, looking directly at me, have said that CWE is all that stands between peace in the Middle East, national health insurance and a Red Sox World Series ring," says CWE associate executive director Saul Rosen. The exact ratio of jealousy to valid critique is tough to determine, but the irony is that in these times of budgetary belt-tightening, non-labor providers should see CWE's political clout as perhaps the strongest argument for forging closer ties with unions and union-backed training groups.

For labor, greater collaboration with community-based organizations offers an opportunity to answer long-standing criticisms and further diversify the unionized workforce. Progressive labor leaders have tried for years to integrate industries that traditionally have been all but lily-white. In fields such as construction, they've made great strides, but the goal of sustaining a foothold in communities of color has remained elusive. With the workforce aging in several of these industries, organized labor will have to redouble its outreach efforts to maintain its numbers.

The city can play a major role in fostering collaboration among union and nonunion trainers. Power in New York's workforce system lies statutorily with the Workforce Investment Board (WIB) and the mayor; real authority rests with the city's Department of Employment (DOE). Concerned primarily with playing catch-up from the malign neglect of Mayor Giuliani's tenure, DOE has yet to reach out to labor in any significant way. The WIB does include two members with labor affiliations, CWE executive director Joseph McDermott and Central Labor Council administrator Howard Van Jones. But growth sectors such as health care, construction and education--all fields in which labor has a strong presence and established training expertise--remain unrepresented on the WIB, and the city has done little to target resources for training to any of those fields.

Through either the WIB or the Department of Employment, policymakers should challenge unions, nonprofits and foundations to fund pilot partnerships between labor and community-based organizations that offer both training and support services to suitable candidates--and match their investment dollar for dollar. Additionally, stakeholders in labor and philanthropy should convene a permanent working group of city agency officials, WIB members and/or staff, and nonprofit and union training providers to facilitate cooperation and communication among the parties. One possible project could be to generate labor-market analyses, building upon such efforts as those of the Central Labor Council with WIB employer input.

For their part, community-based organizations should take a hard look at their job-training programs and determine if they're playing to their own strengths. Providers working with the lowest-skilled jobseekers, where success is measured by placements in any open position, are unlikely to find partnerships with unions worthwhile. But for groups that seek to place participants in career-track jobs at good wages, hooking up with willing unions might make more sense than trying to do it on their own.

Critics might argue that this approach could flood unionized fields with workers, raising competition for those jobs and increasing unemployment among those skilled workers. Indeed, the current economic climate--with construction in a slump

and layoffs among the city hospitals that employ 1199 members--lends itself to such concerns. But the warning misses a larger point: The skills taught by programs like these enhance participants' employability not just in the specific fields of study, but in the labor market in general. Even if a particular course of training doesn't lead directly to employment, far more often than not it improves the worker's overall readiness for a living-wage job in the city's workforce--which is the point of job training after all, isn't it?

Sometimes great progress is born of painful circumstances, and the combination of a stagnant economy and a waterlogged workforce system seems right to incubate a new era of collaboration on workforce issues. Community-based providers, struggling with both the slow economy and performance-based contracting, are desperate to connect with employers and form partnerships that will lead to job placements. Unions need opportunities to grow membership, particularly in low-income and minority communities--the very neighborhoods that should most welcome labor's promise of solidarity and common endeavor on the road to a better life. And employers still need properly skilled workers, even in times of high unemployment. The conditions are right for everyone to win; now all they have to do is figure out how to play.

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