

## **A Tribute to Gilbert Levine** **His Pioneering Role in Labour Research**

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## PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

# A Tribute to Gilbert Levine: His Pioneering Role in Labour Research

**Jane Stinson**

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO ADEQUATELY sum up the life and contributions of one of the most influential labour leaders of his time in one short article. So this tribute to Gilbert Levine (February 3, 1924–November 16, 2009) provides a thin slice into his rich life, focusing on Gil's early years, his unique and innovative approach to labour research, and some of his legacies.

An imaginative left-wing labour researcher, Gil left a legacy of activism and commitment to a variety of social justice causes. Well known in Canadian labour circles, Gilbert Levine was the first Research Director of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Under Gil's leadership, CUPE's Research services became the envy of other Canadian labour organizations.

This was the important public face of a man who was also much more. Gil was a mentor to many, a historian, peace activist, socialist, folk music advocate and, above all, an amazing organizer. He was also dedicated to his family: as the caring and steadfast husband to Helen Zivian Levine for 62 years; as the adored and proud father to daughters Ruthie (Tamara) and Karen; as the engaged father-in-law with Larry Katz and Michael Enright; and as the devoted Zaide to Rachel and Daniel Levine Katz and Gabriel Enright Levine.

Up to about a month before his death, Gil enjoyed relatively good health and continued to be active in support of many progressive causes. He maintained close contact with CUPE up to the end, sending CUPE National President Paul Moist about 20 emails urging action on various causes in the few months prior to his death.<sup>1</sup> His diagnosis of acute leukemia and his subsequent rapid demise

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1. Paul Moist, *Remembering Gil Levine*, 12 December 2009, <<http://cupe.ca/about/remembering-gil-levine>>

sent shock waves through his near and extended family and vast network of friends.

A memorial for Gil in December 2009 at the CUPE headquarters in Ottawa drew hundreds to celebrate his life and many contributions and grieve his passing. The message provided by his family gives some insight into Gil's unique nature, which touched and inspired so many people during his lifetime:

Gil loved life. As the child of Jewish immigrants in Toronto and of the Depression, he fought long and hard to make the world a better place. He was a pioneer trade unionist and long-time research director of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). He was happiest when he was fighting for change, winning rights for workers, and organizing everybody.

He loved Yiddishkeit, the woods, Canada, tennis, biking, winters in San Miguel, the CBC at its best, oral history, his maple tree at the Arboretum, playing Upwords, big band music, hootenannies, and bad jokes.

He mentored and befriended many of all ages, and brought people together in remarkable ways. His work, his passion for social justice, his commitment and his caring will never be forgotten. Gil wanted to live forever. In all of us who loved him, he will live on.

As Gil's son-in-law observed at the memorial:

If we are very, very lucky, once or maybe twice in our life we will meet someone like Gilbert. These are the indelible people. It's the force of these people and the way they conduct their lives that stays with us forever.<sup>2</sup>

How did Gilbert Levine come to have such a tremendous influence, personally and politically? To answer this question it is necessary to begin with Gil's early experiences in school and in the trade union movement. These formative years saw Gil develop a consistent political vision, one that would guide him over the course of years of social movement activism. It was not always smooth sailing. Not only did Gil have to battle the usual suspects. He often fought on more than one front.

Gil's relationship with his union, for instance, changed from having the first CUPE president try to drive him out of the labour movement, using the RCMP to gather evidence he was a communist<sup>3</sup>, to being praised by the current CUPE national president and secretary-treasurer as "truly the heart and soul of our union and its predecessor for over 50 years."<sup>4</sup>

Gil's contributions to labour research are the focus of this tribute. He had a unique vision of the role of labour research and made key, lasting contributions in this area. He demonstrated that the role of a labour researcher should

2. Michael Enright, *Remembering Gil Levine*, 12 December 2009, <<http://cupe.ca/about/remembering-gil-levine>>

3. Janet Toole. Gil Levine Interview, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, MC2195, MS5B, 1-3, 19 and 20 May 1993, 20 May 1993, 6 [hereafter Toole, date, page].

4. Paul Moist and Claude G  n  reux, "To all National Executive Board members, CUPE Staff and Retirees, Notice of Death- Brother Gil Levine," 17 November 2009.

be to provide information to members so that this data can be understood and used to advance the cause of working people. Gil felt strongly that a labour researcher should not be the expert who solves problems for union members. He believed instead in democratizing research and information and building others' capacities to understand and use research effectively. Over his years in the union movement, Gil found many ways to apply this democratic, activist approach of making information accessible and understandable, educating many activists and CUPE staff in this approach.

Committed to workers gaining power through their collective strength in labour organization, Gil recognized the importance of an informed union membership. And he developed lasting strategies and structures to bring the fragmented union locals in CUPE together, into more powerful, centralized vehicles of collective bargaining under democratic, membership control. From the outset Gil saw an important role for labour research in analyzing collective agreements and providing members with comparative data on contract provisions, laying the groundwork for coordinated and provincial bargaining.<sup>5</sup> This was Gil's way of applying age-old labour movement principles that "An Injury to One is An Injury to All" and "In Unity There is Strength."

## Early Years

GIL'S EASTERN EUROPEAN immigrant parents had been involved in Jewish socialist organizations and Gil was sent to a Yiddish school in Toronto where, in his words, "gently, Socialism was introduced to us." This early education and the devastating effect of the Depression on his family caused Gil to feel, even as a child, that "there was something wrong with the way the country was put together."<sup>6</sup>

By the time he embarked on his high school years, Gil was challenging authority and becoming politically active. For example, during World War II, when Gil was in grade 10 or 11, his principal was raising money for the British war effort by having students contribute paper and other materials to be sold for cash. Gil was one of the collection organizers, but was kicked out of the principal's office when he questioned why some of the money didn't go to Russia as well.<sup>7</sup> Rather than being cowed, Gil continued to challenge the principal's authority. Along with his lifelong friend, Jack Shapiro, Gil organized a student council at Oakville Collegiate High School, the first in the City of Toronto. Shapiro recounted this pioneering initiative:

Having no luck finding information on any other experience with setting up student government in Toronto high schools, we did the 1939 counterpart of "googling" and found there was a student council at Glebe High School in Ottawa. We got information on it and

5. Toole, 20 May 1993, 8.

6. Toole, 20 May 1993, 2.

7. Toole, 20 May 1993, 2–3.

spread it around to the students at Oakville Collegiate. We organized a couple of rallies – the term we used – since a few dozen people showed up. It was effective and the principal, Gus, called us to his office to reprimand us. In reminiscing later about the event, Gil said, I should have said, ‘What’s the fuss, Gus’.<sup>8</sup>

After graduating from high school Gil entered university to study engineering. Fortunately for the labour movement, he wasn’t cut out for it. After a year, in his words, he “flunked out – the best thing that ever happened to me.”<sup>9</sup> Since the war was going on, he was required to join the army; he served for two and a half years in Canada, but was not called overseas. Even in the army he “tended to congregate among other left-wingers that I found in the services,” meeting Communist Frank Park, who awed him with his intellect.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the war Gil returned to university, this time to study sociology at the University of Toronto. He was approached to join a Communist club. “It made sense to me because of the role that the Soviet Union had played during the war,” Gil later recalled, adding that, “I was attracted to communist speakers when I heard them. It sounded right to me.”<sup>11</sup> It was in these left-wing university circles that Gil met and, in 1947, married Helen Zivian. A forceful and vibrant woman, Helen was studying social work at the University of Toronto, and she would be a formidable influence on Gil for the remainder of his life, a loving wife and intellectual and political equal.

## Starting in the Labour Movement

IN 1948 GIL GRADUATED from the University of Toronto with a sociology degree. He was keen to work in the labour movement, utilizing his academic training in research or education. He was not able to land a job right away, since unions were not at the time large organizations with well-developed research departments. So he re-entered U of T, obtained a degree in Social Work, and found related research employment, ending up in the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto’s Child Welfare Department. By virtue of his position, he became a member of the fledgling National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). That was when a job posting for a research position with NUPE, at its national headquarters in Ottawa, caught his eye.<sup>12</sup>

Gil must have impressed the leaders of NUPE, because he got the job and moved to the national capital with his wife Helen, young daughter Ruthie

8. Jack Shapiro, *Remembering Gil Levine*, 12 December 2009, <<http://cupe.ca/about/remembering-gil-levine>>

9. Toole, 20 May 1993, 4.

10. Toole, 20 May 1993, 4.

11. Toole, 20 May 1993, 4.

12. Toole, 20 May 1993, 4.

(Tamara) and newborn Karen. On 1 December 1956 he started at NUPE as the first and only non-clerical employee of the union.<sup>13</sup>

At the time NUPE represented 23,000 workers in 110 locals in the civic, school, and hospital sectors. Its membership reached from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island. Gil's politics fused well with those of the NUPE leadership. He was able to practice his political activism and exercise an influence in the union, where staffers considered their work to be "enabling the membership to handle more of their own problems,"<sup>14</sup> rather than seeing themselves as experts called in to solve difficulties for the locals.

Gil worked very closely with his comrade and best union friend, "Lofty" McMillan, during the early days in NUPE. The two met at their first union convention in Calgary; they formed a strong bond that was cemented through 25 years of shared struggles and carried into their retirements. As Gil said, "With my background in radical politics and his background in militant trade unionism, we made a strong connection that prevailed..."<sup>15</sup> Together, Levine and McMillan convinced more and more public sector workers to join NUPE, helping it to become a dynamic and growing union. Over the first three years of its existence (1955–1958), NUPE tripled its membership from 18,000 to 37,000, while the number of locals rose from 105 to 230.<sup>16</sup>

In New Brunswick, McMillan and Levine pushed the provincial government to set up a Royal Commission to investigate public sector bargaining in the province. It resulted in the most progressive public service legislation for establishing province-wide locals by sector and the highest concentration of NUPE members in Canada. Continuing a lifelong deep connection with public sector workers in New Brunswick, Gil later worked with CUPE to revamp its provincial executive structure in the mid-1980s, providing advice on how to make the union more effective.<sup>17</sup>

## From NUPE to CUPE

THE TERRAIN CHANGED for Gil when NUPE merged with the other municipal workers' union, the National Union of Public Service Employees (NUPSE),

13. Toole, 20 May 1993, 4.

14. Gilbert Levine, ed., *Patrick Lenihan: From Irish Rebel to Founder of Canadian Public Sector Unionism* (St. John's 1998), 175; Susan Crean, *Grace Hartman: A Woman For Her Time* (Vancouver 1995), 45; Gilbert Levine, *Gil Levine and Kealey Cummings discuss the founding of CUPE*, 27–31 October 2003, <<http://cupe.ca/www/Convention2003>>

15. Gilbert Levine, *J. F. (Lofty) MacMillan, 1917–2006: A Tribute*, 1 August 2006, <[http://www.lhtnb.ca/02/en\\_blogs.cfm?ID\\_BLGTHEME=1](http://www.lhtnb.ca/02/en_blogs.cfm?ID_BLGTHEME=1)>

16. Library and Archives of Canada (hereafter LAC), Canadian Union of Public Employees fonds. Administrative History/Biographical Sketch, <<http://www.archivescanada.ca/english/search/ItemDisplay>>

17. Toole, 19 May 1993, 7–8; Levine, *Lofty Macmillan: A Tribute*.

**Gil and his family in their early years in Ottawa, Helen, Ruthie (Tamara), Gil and Karen Levine**

Credit: Canadian Union of Public Employees, provided by the Levine Family



forming the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in September 1963. In the talks leading up to the merger agreement, the president of NUPSE, Stan Little, openly opposed having Levine assume the position of research director in the new, merged union. According to Gil, CUPE President Little felt he was a “raving communist...and it wouldn’t look good to have someone of my ilk in such a prominent position.”<sup>18</sup> NUPE nonetheless held out for Levine and the merger agreement struck a balance in providing leadership positions between the two former unions, with Gil confirmed as research director. That didn’t stop the problems for the young left winger. President Little, influenced by the anti-communist McCarthy period, supported the RCMP’s surveillance of Levine to gather evidence of his “communist activities.” Fortunately for Gil, another top officer, Bob Rintoul from NUPE, was not swayed by this information and refused to have Levine expelled from the union.<sup>19</sup>

Given Gil’s active involvement in the internal politics of the newly formed CUPE, and Little’s earlier efforts to have him fired, Gil was concerned about holding onto his job. Against President Little’s objections, Gil created a union for the technical staff at the CUPE head office and he became the first president of that Administrative and Technical Staff Union (ATSU).<sup>20</sup> Gil also worked actively against Little, organizing to have “someone else elected as President” at the 1967 national convention, the first opportunity CUPE delegates had to

18. Toole, 19 May 1993, 2; Toole, 20 May 1993, 6.

19. Crean, *Grace Hartman*, 100.

20. Toole, 19 May 1993, 8.

elect a new union leadership.<sup>21</sup> Little nevertheless managed to secure the presidency by a slim margin and Gil found “that life for me in the union after ’67 was even worse than it was prior.”<sup>22</sup> Rather than toss in the towel, he created a role for labour research within CUPE that was unparalleled in Canadian trade unionism at the time.

Given Gil’s hostile relationship with CUPE President Little and the decentralized nature of collective bargaining in the public sector, Gil focused his efforts on the union’s base – the membership in locals and the staff representatives who worked with it– rather than channeling information to the president as was typical in other labor organizations. “In the early years of CUPE, the collective agreements that we had were pretty inferior quality in terms of wages and benefits,” Gil later remembered, “so I saw my role in feeding this information as a way of stimulating locals into raising their sights in the kinds of demands and proposals that they put forward. And in that way, I considered myself kind of an activist researcher, trying to involve the staff and the membership in the use of this material.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Pioneering Labour Research in the 1960s & 1970s**

THIS TENSION, BETWEEN Gil pushing in various ways for the union to advance, and resistance from conservative corners within CUPE, created turbulence throughout much of his early union career. Gil’s views were not always popular.

Over the next twenty years, as Gil pursued his vision for trade union research – understandable facts, cogent and critical analysis, arguments for social justice, helping local union activists to understand research and how to use it effectively – he built the largest, most impressive, Research Department among the expanding unions in Canada. At CUPE, the Levine-led Research Department led the way within trade union circles in producing highly relevant, understandable, left-wing analysis that pushed for improvements in material conditions for workers, progressive public policy, and greater internal democracy.

### **The CUPE Standard Agreement**

ONE OF THE THINGS THAT Gil felt most proud of was the development of the CUPE Standard Agreement.<sup>24</sup> CUPE local unions had started sending Gil their collective agreements, asking him to evaluate them “for strengths and

21. Toole, 19 May 1993, 2.

22. Toole, 19 May 1993, 3.

23. Toole, 19 May 1993, 3–4.

24. Toole, 20 May 1993, 9.



shortcomings.” He thought he needed to “establish a standard to measure them against that was above the average for each provision in that particular industry, in that region.” In closely analyzing the collective agreements for this purpose he noticed a wide variation in the contract language and weaknesses that would make it hard for a union to win a grievance. (For example, “weasel words” like “may” rather than “shall” let the boss squirm out of commitments.) In Gil’s words, it was necessary to have “language in a collective agreement that would truly protect the membership...[I]t was necessary to have material written in clear, understandable language, and slanted in a way that would favour the union if ever a grievance came up.”<sup>25</sup>

Gil began to develop and circulate The Standard Agreement to CUPE locals in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Not only did it encourage CUPE locals to improve their collective agreements, it also made a huge contribution by providing common contract language for the dispersed, decentralized and growing union. Standardizing contract language was particularly important because aside from a few large municipal and hydro locals, most of CUPE’s bargaining took place on an individual, local-by-local basis across the country. In those early years it was the union membership that did the bargaining, not a staff representative. To Gil, the CUPE Standard Agreement “was important to give the membership the tools and the arguments that they needed to do their job.”<sup>26</sup> At a later stage in the union’s development, some staff representatives cut and pasted articles from The Standard Agreement to develop bargaining demands or to table as the first agreement for a newly organized local. Today, the influence of the contract language from The Standard Agreement can be seen in most CUPE collective agreements, which now number over 2000.

More than CUPE members benefitted from Gil’s creation of the CUPE Standard Agreement. Even he was amazed by the impact it had on others, such as the British Columbia Government Employees’ Union (BCGEU). The BCGEU had invited Gil to discuss his experiences with public sector bargaining at a union educational session to prepare for provincial collective bargaining in the early 1970s. He went through The Standard Agreement with the union leaders, explaining its purpose and the significance of the contract language. The union leadership then relied heavily on Gil’s advice and the model of the CUPE Standard Agreement to table their first bargaining proposals. Gil was pleased to see that much of this original language lived on 20 years later in the BCGEU’s collective agreement.<sup>27</sup>

Within CUPE, The Standard Agreement had its detractors. Some of the staff representatives who bargained collective agreements pejoratively dubbed it “The Wish Book” because it encouraged locals to struggle for rights and benefits beyond what the staff rep thought was achievable in collective bargaining.

25. Toole, 20 May 1993, 9.

26. Toole, 20 May 1993, 9.

27. Toole, 20 May 1993, 10.

It put pressure on the union to achieve higher goals than some preferred to set. Gil was mindful that some staff representatives “claimed that I was setting the expectations of the membership too high. Enough of them criticized me for that document.”<sup>28</sup> But he was prepared to withstand the criticism and ostracism from hostile staff in exchange for the tremendous satisfaction he gained from seeing CUPE collective agreements strengthened.

### **The System for the Analysis of Labour Agreement Data**

THE SYSTEM FOR THE ANALYSIS of Labour Agreement Data, commonly called the SALAD system, was another innovation in labour research Gil spearheaded. It encouraged CUPE’s decentralized local unions to coordinate their bargaining and build on each other’s strengths. In the 1970s the expanding staff of the CUPE Research Department harnessed emerging computer capabilities to code and produce reports that compared wages and key contract rights among the growing number of CUPE locals.

Local union leaders and staff reps used SALAD data to prepare for collective bargaining. SALAD reports aimed to be clear and understandable to those without a university education. Gil saw how SALAD reports produced for workers in a particular sector and province could advance coordinated bargaining among those locals by encouraging them to think about bargaining in relation to each other, establishing wage rates for common job titles, and extending rights, benefits, and protections.

Gil’s pioneering thinking in setting up the SALAD system is one of his legacies that continue to benefit CUPE members and staff. In recent years CUPE has revamped and enhanced the original SALAD system to provide a contemporary version, the Collective Agreement Information System (CAIS).

### **From the 1960s to the 1980s: The Rise of Canadian Nationalism, the Waffle, and Feminism**

MAJOR POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS of the time, in particular the rise of Canadian nationalism, the Vietnam anti-war movement, feminism, wage controls in the mid-1970s, and the peace movement, shaped Gil’s political activism inside and outside of CUPE.

The unequal economic trade and development relationship Canada had with the United States, coupled with the disastrous Vietnam War and the rising opposition to it, stimulated a late-1960s Canadian movement for independence from the US.

Breaking free of American-dominated, international unions became the rallying cry of an independent Canadian union movement. Many wanted union dues to stay in Canada rather having them sent to US-headquartered

28. Toole, 20 May 1993, 10.

internationals; union decisions affecting Canadian members, some thought, should be made in Canada.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Gil was drawn to the Waffle, a left-wing, nationalist offshoot of the NDP, partly because of its focus on replacing international unions with Canadian ones. In the early 1970s only about one-third of the unions in the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) were Canadian unions. The majority of CLC affiliates were international unions whose staff and financial resources were concentrated in the US and who were not providing relevant information on social and political issues in Canada.<sup>29</sup> Waffle leader, economist, and political scientist, Mel Watkins, got to know Levine in the Ottawa chapter of the Waffle, crediting Gil as a key leader in the Waffle Labour Caucus. Gil was at the heart of what Watkins called the “Pancake” activist group, which campaigned within the CLC for a sovereign Canadian labour movement.<sup>30</sup>

Gil explained that speaking out and organizing others on this issue got him “into hot water with officials of the CLC because I was putting forward a position of Canadian control of Canadian unions ... We were considered by some of the leaders of the American unions as traitors.”<sup>31</sup> Despite the opposition, Gil had the courage to stand up for an unpopular position he felt was in workers’ best interests. As a result of his and others’ tenacity around this issue, today the ratio of Canadian to international unions has been reversed, the remaining international unions have strengthened their Canadian operations and resources, and a nationally-focused labour movement has helped strengthen Canadian civil society immeasurably.

This was also a period when women’s voices were raised, demanding liberation and addressing broad issues of social justice. Feminism gained momentum, exerting a tremendous influence on society’s ideas and practices, affecting fundamentally the nature of families and trade unions.

Gil’s wife, Helen Levine, like so many women of her time, graduated, married, and had children. She worked in the home, raising a family and keeping the household going as Gil’s work engrossed him and frequently took him out of town. Feminism made a lot of sense to Helen. Committed to civil rights she embraced new approaches to feminist counseling, drawing on her own experience and struggles to provide important insights, reference points, and radical strategies.

Many of those whose lives touched the Levines felt Helen’s, his two daughters’, and the broader feminist movements’ influence through Gil’s actions and reflections. For example, former CUPE National President Judy Darcy observed Helen’s influence on Gil from the first time they met at Judy’s first CUPE national

29. Toole, 20 May 1993, 1.

30. Mel Watkins. *Canadian labour loses a great leader*, 23 November 2009, <<http://www.straightgoods.ca/>>

31. Toole, 20 May 1993, 1.



**Gil Levine opposing tripartism in "Labour's Manifesto for Canada" at 1976 CLC Convention, Quebec City**  
Credit: Canadian Union of Public Employees

convention when she was 23. Gil actively participated in the first meeting of the radical university members' caucus, providing lots of information, analysis and sage advice, but he returned the next day to the caucus somewhat chastened. He told the group that Helen "told me I spoke too much last night. She told me it was your caucus and I had dominated so I'm going to step back during this caucus and I want to offer you a very deep self-criticism."<sup>32</sup> Gil and Judy formed a strong bond from that time on. He provided her with steadfast support, encouragement and counsel throughout her years as a radical activist in CUPE, during her time as the union's national president and after.

Gil made a concerted effort to support, connect, hire and mentor left-wing women who were active in or interested in working for the union movement. He brought many women into the labour movement in different ways, helping them organize a union in their workplace, giving them the ability to participate in CUPE and other trade unions as activists and leaders. He counseled

32. Judy Darcy, *Remembering Gil Levine*, 12 December 2009, <<http://cupe.ca/about/remembering-gil-levine>>

and supported many to persevere and find their way through the minefields of union politics. He recruited and helped students and social movement activists get jobs in the labour movement.

Conducting research was always Gil's passion. He used his skills to reveal inequities for women members of CUPE. He prepared reports to CUPE national conventions on the status of women in CUPE around the time that the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was calling attention to the need for equality for women in Canadian society. This resulted in a comprehensive resolution at the CUPE 1971 national convention calling for the union to improve pensions for women, maternity leave, conditions for part-time workers, and to address low pay for women. Gil was involved in preparing a follow-up report to the national convention two years later, detailing the progress made in these areas. CUPE was the only major trade union to undertake such an extensive policy on the rights of women at the time.<sup>33</sup>

### **The CUPE Facts**

GIL HAD A DEEP UNDERSTANDING of the importance of making research accessible so that it could help workers raise their sights and achieve concrete gains. The *CUPE Facts* stood out as a prime example. CUPE research and communications staff between the mid-1970s and early 1990s produced the *CUPE Facts*. It excelled under Gil's initial stewardship, providing short articles with pithy facts to help union locals make collective bargaining gains. It disseminated the ideas of innovative bargaining developments in CUPE, promoting them across Canada and internationally. Over time *The Facts* evolved to address emerging policy issues like free trade and provide more depth on topics such as equality for women workers.

Gil used *The Facts* to raise members' awareness, to raise their goals for bargaining and for social change. As it evolved, *The Facts* spread the insights and prescriptions of leading left-wing analysts throughout the labour movement and beyond. Duncan Cameron, former political science Professor at the University of Ottawa and a past President of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), said Gil "brought me into contact with the labour movement by getting to me to write up a brief for CUPE on nationalizing the banks," which led to a further collaboration on a special issue of *The Facts* on free trade. Duncan credits this collaboration with Gil for instilling a sense of activist research in him for the CCPA.<sup>34</sup>

33. Alex Beztarda, *Grace Hartman: Paving a Trail for Women in Unions*, CUPE 1975, <<http://www.cupe1975.ca/bursary/alex.html>>

34. Duncan Cameron, Personal correspondence to the Levine family, 20 November 2009.

## Creating Lasting, Democratic, & Effective Union Structures

GIL SAW THE NEED FOR CUPE members to coordinate and come together, to consolidate bargaining, and create democratic union structures to give them more bargaining clout. He recognized that the power of CUPE locals, fragmented into many separate bargaining units, lay in their solidarity to coordinate and bargain together. Perhaps because of Gil's roots in NUPE, where local autonomy was very strong, he recognized the need to convince union activists of the benefits of coming together for bargaining purposes. And he also recognized the need for democratic structures which could facilitate membership control over common bargaining goals.

A key actor in creating a more democratic, membership-controlled bargaining structure in the aftermath of the illegal Ontario hospital workers strike in 1981, Gil was one of a "gang of four" national staff that convinced President Grace Hartman to establish a Bargaining Review Committee of hospital workers. It gave hospital workers a chance to voice complaints about what happened during the strike and to make recommendations so members would be better informed and have more control over decision-making in the future.<sup>35</sup> Gil emerged quickly as a guiding force behind the creation of a new, democratic, provincial bargaining structure for Ontario hospital workers: the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU).

The leaders of OCHU continued to keep in touch with Gil after he left CUPE, inviting him to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of OCHU. Upon his death the president of OCHU, Michael Hurley, remembered Gil in this way: "courage under fierce internal attack at that time, his promotion of women and of women's issues, his active encouragement of a vibrant internal CUPE opposition movement, his tenacity and dignity and thoughtfulness and his lifelong activism made a great impression on many Ontario hospital workers."<sup>36</sup>

## A Labour of Love

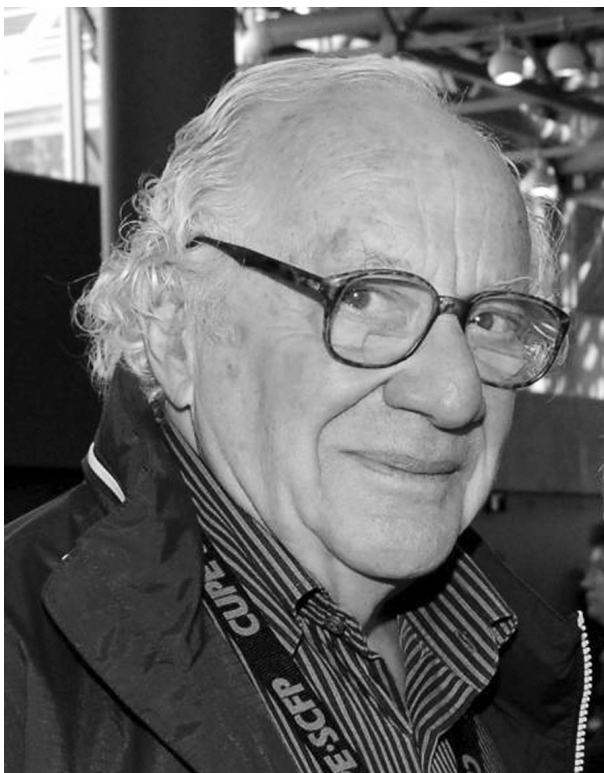
THERE IS SO MUCH MORE one could say about the contributions Gilbert Levine made to labour research, trade unionism, and Canadian politics and society. For example, he was the first President of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association (CIRA) to come from the labour movement. He considered it important to build and strengthen research connections between unions and universities, publishing an article in *Labour/Le Travail* on that subject in 1988.<sup>37</sup> He was a founding and long-time editor of *Just Labour*, an

35. Jerry White, *Hospital Strike: Women, Unions and Public Sector Conflict* (Toronto 1990), 106–7.

36. Michael Hurley, Personal correspondence with the author, 23 November 2009.

37. Gilbert Levine, "Relations between Unions and Universities in Research and Teaching: Union Expectations," *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (Spring 1988), 191–195.





Gil Levine at his last CUPE National Convention, Montreal, October 2009, about 6 weeks before his death. Gil was the only person to attend all 24 CUPE national conventions.  
Credit: Canadian Union of Public Employees

electronic journal that sought to bridge the academic and trade union research communities, bringing the work of leading researchers from both fields to a broad readership in popular, accessible language.<sup>38</sup>

Gil had a deep interest in labour history, particularly oral history. He contributed much to understanding Canadian workers and their history over his life as a participant in the Canadian Committee of Labour History and a member of the editorial board of *Labour/Le Travail*; he produced an oral biography of NUPE founder, Pat Lenihan, based on interviews he conducted with the public sector union leader.<sup>39</sup> Gil continued to be actively engaged in oral history, giving a presentation at the Ottawa Family Leave Project's Oral History workshop in June of 2009. Only two weeks before his death, Gil made arrangements for the Ottawa Workers' Heritage Centre to conduct an interview with him as part of their Family Leave Project.<sup>40</sup>

38. Introducing *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work and Society*. <<http://www.justlabour.yorku.ca/index.php?page=about>>

39. Levine served on the editorial board of *L/LT* from 1977–1981 and the CCLH published his Levine, ed., *Lenihan*.

40. Workers' Heritage Centre, *The WHC's Family Leave Project Update 4*, (Ottawa: 17

It is crucial to emphasize that Gilbert Levine's life was far more multi-dimensional than this narrow emphasis on his work and labour research contributions has perhaps conveyed. "He was a remarkable guy," one friend recalled, "a brilliant and tireless strategist, a really funny storyteller, an enthusiastic music lover, and a generous mentor and friend ...."<sup>41</sup> This tribute only touches on aspects of someone who "taught, befriended and inspired so many of us,"<sup>42</sup> "sharpened our vision, nurtured our passion, and gave us courage,"<sup>43</sup> a man who "combined wonderful human qualities, with incisive political analysis."<sup>44</sup> For many, Gil was something of a father figure. Past National President of CUPE, Judy Darcy, offered a fitting recollection of Gilbert Levine, words that serve well as a conclusion to this tribute: "He guided us, he loved us, he supported us, he set very high standards for us as he did for himself. And yes, he expected us to meet those standards...to build a stronger union to serve our members better, to build a movement that was not just about the interests of its members but that was about social justice and building peace and a better world."<sup>45</sup>

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November 2009).

41. Penny Bertrand, Correspondence to the Levine family, 24 November 2009.

42. Michael Lynk, Correspondence to the Levine family, 24 November 2009.

43. Morna Ballantyne quoted in Judy Rebick, *Gil Levine: The ultimate Mensch*, 11 November 2009, <<http://transformingpower.ca/en/blog/gil-levine-ultimate-mensch>>

44. Anne Lagace Dowson, Correspondence to the Levine family, 30 November 2009.

45. Judy Darcy, *Remembering Gil Levine*, 12 December 2009, <<http://cupe.ca/about/remembering-gil-levine>>





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