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Academic Research on Labour:

Strengthening Union-University Links

Pradeep Kumar

THE RELEVANCE OF ACADEMIC research to labour, and the relationships between unions and universities, recently have been discussed in a number of forums.¹ Such discussion suggests a wide gulf between the academy and the labour movement. Labour leaders contend that most academic research is esoteric, irrelevant, or management-oriented. In their view, little university research is useful to labour, whether in promoting a better understanding of working-class aspirations, challenges facing labour organizations, new management agenda and emerging changes in work organizations, or in devising effective responses and strategies to meet the growing assault by capital and the state.² Academics, for their part, feel frustrated by labour's inability to appreciate either the goals of scholarly research or the multiple solitudes of the industrial relations discipline. They often complain that unions tend to be defensive and short-sighted; that they are interested only in partisan analysis rather than in basic research, have a stereotyped image of academics, and generally distrust scholarly motives.³

The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the relevance of university research or to engage in academic- or labour-bashing, but (1) to assess the nature and scope

¹See papers by Gilbert Levine, Donald Carter, and Sam Gindin to the *Colloque Léo Roback: La Restructuration du travail*, Département des relations industrielles, Université Laval, 1987; see also Levine, "Relations Between Unions and Universities in Research and Teaching: Union Expectations," *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (Spring 1988), 191-5, and Cy Gonick, "Comment," *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (Spring 1988), 197-8.

²Levine and Gindin, papers to *Colloque Léo Roback*.

³See Gonick, "Comment."

of the academic research on labour in the past five years; (2) to ask if there has been a resurgence in this area; (3) to identify the key gaps and barriers; and (4) to explore ways to strengthen academic-labour links. The paper starts with the premise that a strong labour-academic alliance is useful for building a strong, dynamic working-class movement, for articulating a coherent labour vision, and for formulating specific union policies and programs. In this context, academic research on labour issues is beneficial both in advancing knowledge and in fulfilling labour-movement needs. Analysis is based on a survey of current research in Canadian universities,⁴ an inventory of research projects financed by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), a search of leading academic journals, the proceedings of Canadian Industrial Relations Association annual meetings, the National Library's listing of graduate theses, and in telephone interviews with a group of prominent researchers in the field.⁵

I. The Nature of Academic Research

1) THE SURVEY of academics and review of SSHRC-funded research projects since 1982 suggest that academic research on labour is conducted in widely-varied social science and humanities disciplines.⁶ Although academics in schools and centres of industrial relations, business schools, departments of history, economics, and sociology are most active, faculty in political science, psychology, education, geography, public administration, law and in labour studies also are engaged in research on labour topics.

2) Most academic research is carried out by individual faculty members. There is very little team or group research, and few integrated research programs. The collaborative research projects that are underway have been fostered either by the SSHRC thematic research grant programs (for example, *Managing the Organizations*; *Human Context of Technology*; *Women and Work*), the federal labour department's Technology Impact program, or are the product of various research programs administered by senior government agencies and departments. Examples of multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary projects include research on women and work (underway in a number of universities), studies of the state and industrial relations in Canada, labour-relations approaches in the US and Canada, labour

⁴The survey was conducted by the author in February 1989 through a mailed questionnaire sent to more than 200 academics in the social sciences and humanities departments/schools of Canadian universities. The academics were asked to list the titles of their research in progress, and of projects and studies completed in the last three years; 82 academics responded. Respondents represented a wide cross-section of universities from all parts of Canada.

⁵The academics interviewed included Mark Thompson (British Columbia), Graham Lowe (Alberta), Elaine Bernard (Simon Fraser), Noah Meltz and Morley Gunderson (Toronto), Donald Wood and Brian Palmer (Queen's), Joseph Rose (McMaster), Leo Panitch (York), Greg Kealey (Memorial), Greg Murray and Carla Lipsig Mumme (Laval).

⁶For a listing of the SSHRC-financed projects and titles of research studies completed/in progress in Canadian universities, see P. Kumar, "Academic Research on Labour," *Queen's Papers in Industrial Relations*, 1989-9. Kingston, Ontario: Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University, 1989.

market and work behaviour, social impacts of technological change, railway industrial-relations history, steelworker families, and on unionization and labour regimes.

3) Academic research covers a wide range of labour issues which reflects particular faculty interests and disciplinary orientations. For example, in economics departments, research interests relate to theoretical and empirical aspects of labour market behaviour, collective bargaining outcomes, wage indexation, union wage and nonwage impacts, strike activity, income distribution, and economic history. In history departments, research focuses on working-class history, biographies of union leaders, organizers and institutions, labour resource materials, industrial folk songs, historical studies of class and gender, and on histories of workplace conflicts. Although prior labour-history research has concentrated largely on the 19th-century and early 20th-century periods, current research in a number of universities, particularly in the Maritimes and Quebec, has shifted to the contemporary period.

Research in sociology departments currently focuses on union responses to (and worker attitudes toward) technological change, gender and work issues, industrial communities, and on transition from school to work. Other research projects in sociology include the history of lumber and sawmill workers, the organization of labour markets in the food-processing and aerospace industries, career aspirations of selected professionals, unions and industrial conflict, public support of unions, and the reporting of industrial relations news in Canada.

The research orientation in psychology departments is toward patterns of union and company commitments, and job stress. The role of the New Democratic Party (NDP) and its relationship with labour is explored in political science research. Political scientists also are studying the politics of high-profile strikes (for example, the Gainers' Strike in Alberta), the international labour movement and apartheid, democracy in trade unions, as well as politics and law in the constitution of labour regimes with reference to divergence between Canadian and US unionism. Public sector unions, collective bargaining, and the attitudes and concerns of public service employees are being researched by public administration faculty. Academics in the law faculty are assessing various facets of the legal regulation of unions and collective bargaining, employment relations law, and the implications of the Charter of Rights.

Academic research in schools of industrial relations and faculties of management lacks disciplinary focus, and covers widely-varied issues. Faculty in these two areas bring to their studies varied academic backgrounds, ideological convictions and interests. While only a handful of academics have inter-disciplinary training in industrial relations, an increasing number specialize in organizational behaviour and industrial relations, and some have degrees in economics, sociology and psychology. Theirs generally is an applied-research orientation, concerned with behavioural and institutional factors, and involves a combination of methodologies including econometric testing, survey research, case studies, and historical analysis.

Research by faculty in schools of industrial relations and management covers a wide range of topics: management policies and practices; new forms of human resource management techniques and approaches, such as quality of worklife, employee involvement, and various types of work organization; employee compensation and reward systems; labour-relations climate and company performance; determinants of employee voice behaviour; certification and decertification analysis; the role of information sharing; job and union commitment of workers; worker attitudes and behaviour toward various managerial control systems; organizational culture, development and change; wage and nonwage outcomes of collective bargaining; various dispute-resolution methods including the analysis of strikes, grievance procedures and grievance adjudication; technological change and its organizational impacts; the unions (organizational base, strength, and leadership), their strategies, policy approaches and practices. Popular areas of industrial relations research by academics include divergence in union density between Canada and the United States; women in unions; strategies and policy responses of Canadian unions, and values of union leaders; labour-relations; case studies of various industries and firms; retirement and pension issues; technological change and its impacts; new management systems, and (to a limited extent) occupational health and safety issues.

II. *Is There A Resurgence In Academic Research On Labour?*

JUDGING BY THE NUMBER of articles in leading Canadian and American journals, survey responses of the faculty, and papers presented at Canadian Industrial Relations Association annual meetings, academic interest in labour issues appears to be growing. This resurgence is most visible in management faculties, schools of industrial relations, in sociology, law, and in history. The level of labour-research activity appears relatively low in such academic disciplines as economics, political science, and psychology. Areas of burgeoning research include women and work, the labour process and deskilling, social and organizational impacts of technology, and contemporary unionism and labour-management relations. Ironically, although faculty output has increased significantly, the number of masters and doctoral dissertations in the labour field has declined. The National Library listing shows only 48 PhD and MA theses on labour topics during the period 1981-86. This sharply contrasts with the 723 (289 PhD and 434 MA) theses written during the period 1967-78, and 1,551 (325 PhD and 1,236 MA) for 1950-66 period.⁷ The decline could be attributed to a number of developments: the shift in graduate enrolment in the labour area away from economics, political science and history to business administration, where there is no requirement for the MA thesis in most schools; the relatively few PhD programs in industrial relations; and changing MA

⁷ See Elizabeth Perry, *Bibliography of Master's and Doctoral Theses on Canadian Industrial Relations from 1967 to 1978*, (Toronto 1981); W.D. Wood, L.A. Kelly, and P. Kumar, *Canadian Graduate Theses, 1919-1967*, (Kingston, Ontario 1970).

program requirements which place greater emphasis on essays and coursework than on a thesis.

Most labour academics are not convinced that there has been a general resurgence in academic research on labour. The high level of research activity and increased output, they point out, simply might reflect the growth in faculty teaching labour and related courses, a product of increased enrolment in industrial relations courses. Some even argue that compared to the 1950s and early 1960s, a period of intense labour-research activity, interest in working-class and union issues has waned. They also comment that although the nature of research varies from school to school, current research (particularly in business schools) tends to be narrowly focused, lacks methodological rigour, is highly descriptive and *ad hoc*, and appears to be more publication-oriented than geared toward new ideas and broader policy issues. Some academics in humanities and labour studies perceive, too, that industrial relations research in business schools has a managerial bias. Labour researchers in management and industrial relations schools, however, strongly refute this view, and argue that the perception of "bias" is ideologically-driven and unfounded. In their opinion, there is a "healthy approach" to workers and unions in industrial relations research and testing.

Notwithstanding academic opinions, there are many reasons why scholarly interest in labour research may be growing. Labour issues today are at the forefront of public policy discussions of strategic response to an increasingly complex economic, social, and political environment.⁸ The many challenges facing Canada, the restructuring of society and the economy as a result of changes in the international economic order, in political economy, demography, technology and the process of production and distribution, have significant implications and consequences for the working class, unions, and labour-management relations. There is heightened interest in the impacts of these changes, and in labour strategies, responses, and approaches to the process of change. For example, the resilience of the Canadian labour movement in the face of a neoconservative resurgence, and the growing Canada-US divergence in union responses, have sparked interest in comparative studies.⁹ Accelerated technological change has stimulated research

⁸See, for example, the Report of the Advisory Council on Adjustment, *Adjusting to Win* (Ottawa 1989); Economic Council of Canada, *Back to Basics: Twenty-fifth Annual Review, 1988* (Ottawa 1988); *Report on the Business/Labour Taskforce on Adjustment* (Ottawa January 1989); *Focus 2000: Report of the Taskforce on Harnessing Change* (Toronto August 1988); *The Aggressive Economy: Daring to Compete* (Toronto June 1989), and Employment and Immigration Canada, *Success in the Works: A Profile of Canada's Emerging Workforce* (Ottawa April 1989). The central theme of these reports is that labour, management, and governments must work together to implement new, coordinated policies to make the Canadian economy simultaneously more adaptable and more equitable.

⁹See for example Richard Freeman, "On the Divergence of Unionism Among Developed Countries," Working Paper No. 2817, National Bureau of Economic Research (Cambridge, Mass. January 1989). Freeman argues that "another likely cause for diverging union densities is cross-country differences in union responses to economic change." Countries where union density has declined are those where unions have been slow to adapt. Similar conclusions are reached by Elimane Kane and David Marden,

on the labour process and new forms of work organizations. The growing research on gender and work issues can be attributed to the changing role and status of women in society and the economy, persistent inequities in the labour market, and the rise of the feminist movement.

Growing academic interest in labour is further reflected in the rise of labour studies programs in Canadian universities. Labour studies programs are offered at the University of Manitoba, McMaster, Saskatchewan, Simon Fraser, Toronto, the University of Quebec at Montreal and at Laval; the Universities of Manitoba, McMaster and Toronto even award undergraduate degrees in labour studies. The emergence of a new generation of highly-educated labour leaders, with their close academic links, and their frequent participation in academic gatherings, further contributes to increased faculty interest in labour research.

III. Key Gaps In Academic Research

ACADEMICS AND LABOUR LEADERS alike widely recognize that scholarly research lacks breadth and depth, particularly given the many challenges labour faces today.¹⁰ First, there appears to be little understanding of the profound changes in the economy, society, demography, labour markets, technology, and in political ideologies — their nature, form, dimension, and the implications for workers and their organizations. Nor has there been much research on how workers and unions in other countries have coped with economic change, and what kind of lessons can be derived from this experience. Similarly, in-depth research is deficient with regard to the new orientation of public policy toward market production and the delivery of goods and services, the consequences of asserting individual over collective rights through the Charter of Rights, and concerning the changing quality of jobs, the new managerial control systems, and the new human resources management strategies and approaches to work organization and employee rewards. There also are significant gaps in our knowledge of worker attitudes and expectations about their jobs and their unions, and of the dynamics of workplace relations.

Despite considerable academic interest in contemporary unionism, the political and collective-bargaining goals and performance of unions is insufficiently assessed. Clearly, the Canadian labour movement has done well in the 1980s, at least compared to experience in the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Unions have maintained their organizational strength; a few in central Canada even have prospered. Unions successfully have resisted "concession bargaining", have been pro-active, aggressive and innovative on the political and collective-bargaining fronts, and have forged alliances with community groups. But they remain weak, divided, and defensive institutions that contend with a poor public image

¹⁰"The future of trade unionism in industrial market economies," and by Thomas A. Kichan, "The future of worker representation: An American perspective," in *Labour and Society*, 13-2 (1988).

¹⁰For an excellent analysis of these challenges and possible labour strategies, see Leo Panitch, "Labour Strategies in the Economic Crisis," paper to *Colloque Léo Roback*, 5-16.

and a large reservoir of unorganized workers. Objective research is required to explore strategies for organizing the unorganized and foster participation and internal democracy, to improve unions' public image, to understand and appreciate why more workers do not unionize, and to elevate the labour movement as a progressive social force. Although there has been much research on women and work, and on the relationship between the NDP and the unions, rigorous studies are lacking on women and unions, on the effectiveness of organized labour's strategy for political action and influence, and on the role of bureaucracy in the labour movement. Industrial relations academics, like some labour leaders, call for more industry case-studies of labour-management experiences of "what happens when QWL programs, new job classifications, or new team work concepts are introduced," and of the consequences of labour "working together" with management.

IV. *Barriers To Labour Research*

IF LABOUR RESEARCH is crucial to a better understanding of the challenges Canada faces, and to devise appropriate strategies for change, why is there so little academic research on labour in Canadian universities? Why are academics not devoting more time and resources to analyze the implications of Canada's changing economy, labour markets, and social and political institutions? Why is there no closer link between academics and labour, at a time when labour so desperately needs strategic thinking and debate about challenges facing the working class?

There are many reasons why academic research on labour has not flourished. Foremost is the nature of academic discipline itself. Labour research requires multidisciplinary orientation and training in industrial relations, defined as "a broad, interdisciplinary field of study and practice that encompasses all aspects of the employment relationship," and "includes that study of individual workers, groups of workers and their unions and associations, employers and their organizations, and the environment in which these parties interact."¹¹ There are few centres for research and teaching in industrial relations in Canada, and therefore the academic cadre of labour researchers is indeed small.¹² The study of labour in Canada is conducted within "multiple solitudes" by academics of varied disciplinary orientations and ideologies in departments of economics, law, sociology, psychology, history, political science, and management.¹³ There is little interaction

¹¹Thomas Kochan and Harry Katz, *Collective Bargaining and Industrial Relations* (Homewood, Ill. 1988), 1.

¹²See Noah Meltz, "Why Are There Few Academic Industrial Relations Departments," Centre of Industrial Relations, University of Toronto, Paper to the IIRA Congress, Brussels, September 1989. Meltz suggests that the advancement of research in the industrial field is only possible by increasing the number of industrial relations departments in Canadian universities. Currently, only four independent schools of industrial relations in Canada (Queen's, Toronto, Montreal and Laval) offer degree programs in industrial relations.

¹³For an assessment of major contributions of various disciplines to the knowledge and understanding of industrial relations see *The State of the Art in Industrial Relations*, Gérard Hébert, Hem C. Jain, and Noah Meltz, eds., Kingston, Ontario: Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University, 1988.

among them. The lack of multidisciplinary dialogue is a major barrier to effective academic research on labour issues.

Academic training in industrial relations, at least in North America, also is such that it does not generate sympathetic appreciation of working-class issues. Most industrial relations researchers are trained in economics, social psychology, or organizational behaviour, and are little exposed to history, sociology, or political science — the disciplines that foster greater appreciation of working-class behaviour.

Not only is labour research multidisciplinary, but it also is applied, qualitative, and policy-oriented, and lacks, at times, "theoretical and methodological rigour." Such research is not regarded highly by academic institutions, nor by "scholarly" journals and publishing houses. The number of journals for the dissemination of applied and policy-oriented research is limited. There is a tendency, too, among academics in such basic disciplines as economics, political science and history, to look down upon the work of industrial relations faculty, on ideological or methodological grounds.

Second, the academic research in Canadian universities is highly individualized, involving little collaborative research — another reflection of the inadequate number of industrial relations schools. This lack of team work is not only a barrier to multi-disciplinary work, but also deters rigorous, integrated research programs.

Third, from the perspective of academics, funding for labour research is seriously lacking. In the past, a great deal of labour research was encouraged by the Labour Canada/University Research Program, which the federal government discontinued in the late 1970s despite serious protests by labour and academics. The major source of funding today is either the SSHRC or "contract research" solicited by senior government agencies. SSHRC research-grants awards are extremely competitive and require an enormous amount of paperwork. In recent years, the total SSHRC research-funding in constant dollars has declined and there is no integrated research program on working-class and union issues similar to the thematic grant programs on managing the organizations, human context of technology, and women and work. As the SSHRC president noted in his 1987-88 *Annual Report*: "A heavier demand for research funds from a budget that has scarcely altered since 1978 (when adjusted for inflation) has meant that scholars are now in intense competition with one another for the available money. As a consequence, an increasing number of high-quality research projects are not funded each year."

Another barrier to serious labour research is the lack of public databases and information systems. Despite significantly improved information from the expansion of Statistics Canada surveys and the labour department's Collective Bargaining Information System, many gaps still remain.¹⁴ A more serious problem is the

¹⁴See Andrew Sharp, *Gaps, Limitations and Recent Changes in Economic Statistics Used by Trade Union Researchers*, Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre (May 1989).

accessibility of information due to the decline in published data, and the Statistics Canada "cost recovery" pricing policy. In qualitative and policy-oriented research, where information on policies and practices of unions and employers is needed, academics face major hurdles, either due to the lack of appropriate human-resource information systems, or to employer or union resistance. Most employers and unions tend to be averse to academic surveys, particularly when the surveys are administered to workers for their response to specific policies and programs or for assessing their behaviour and attitudes.

Finally, there are the barriers to academic research that arise from the uneasy relationship between academics and the labour movement. Unlike the US and Western European case, academics and academic research are not highly valued by Canadian unions. Many labour leaders consider academic research to be variously too esoteric, not very practical, or management-oriented. There is a perception among academics that labour unions are highly defensive (especially in relation to scholarly critical assessment of union policies and programs), short-sighted in their research needs (more oriented toward immediate issues), and that unions generally undervalue long-term research.

At times, academics and labour have conflicting priorities in their research agendas and research goals. Some academics distinguish between working-class and union-related issues. They think that unions are less interested in research on broader working-class issues, reflecting short-term orientation toward immediate problems at the expense of long-term strategic issues. A few academics also suspect that, although union leaders emphasize that "they do not want academics to tell them what they want to hear, but the truth," they are generally more sympathetic to partisan research and wary of critical research. Academics also cite as a barrier the lack of a strong cadre of research staff within unions. Labour leaders themselves admit that the research function is not a high priority. In large labour organizations, with sizeable research departments, the researchers are drowned by short-term issues, and have little time for strategic thinking about long-term problems.

An increasing number of academics believe that the climate of distrust between their institution and labour has improved in recent years through greater dialogue and communication, the emergence of university-trained labour leaders, and the increase in large unions' professional research staff. The greater participation of union leaders in academic conferences, the many research projects currently underway on union strategies and approaches, and the success of labour-academic exchange programs in Quebec, are believed to exemplify growing cooperation between universities and the labour movement.

V. Closing The Gap: Strengthening Academic-Labour Links

THIS PAPER HAS OUTLINED the many gaps that exist in the understanding of working-class issues, and of the role and future direction of the labour movement. There is growing recognition that a critical mass of research is lacking with regard to the many economic and political challenges facing labour today, and to effective

strategies to cope with them. It is necessary, therefore, to strengthen labour-academic links to close this knowledge gap, and to provide a proper climate for strategic thinking and discussions. There are many ways this can be done:

1) It is important to expand opportunities to share information, exchange research goals and priorities, and for effective communication. At present, there are few forums where labour and academics meet for serious discussion. One mechanism has been the annual meetings of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association, whose members include academics, labour leaders, and researchers. However, these meetings have been poorly attended by labour and by academics from such disciplines as history and political science. Moreover, no sessions are planned in which labour and academics can discuss seriously their needs and priorities. A few universities have also been active in facilitating this exchange. The recent Léo Roback Colloquium at Laval University is an example.

A more effective mechanism to facilitate exchange of ideas would be an annual meeting of labour researchers and scholars at the national and regional levels. As Leo Panitch pointed out at the Léo Roback Colloquium, such meetings provide "an opportunity to reflect and debate collectively ... not an exercise in mutual commiseration regarding a litany of woes, but rather an exercise that will contribute to strategic renewal and advancement for working-class organizations."¹⁵

2) Another way to build academic-labour links is a formal exchange program along the lines of *Le Protocole* in Quebec, where academics take time from teaching duties to work on specific research and education projects for a central federation. This experiment has been a success, providing significant benefits to both academics and labour.¹⁶ The arrangement is the envy of foreign labour movements, and recently has been adopted in Australia. *Le Protocole* is a good model for other provinces to emulate, although it entails a limited, one-sided exchange. A more mutually-preferred arrangement is one where academics are seconded to work for a labour central, and a union leader or researcher undertakes teaching and research at a university. This type of mutual exchange may be especially feasible between a labour central like the Canadian Labour Congress, or a major private and public sector union, and a school of industrial relations.

3) In addition to developing a mechanism for exchange and discussion, labour and universities should work together to lobby governments for increased research funding for labour research, and for improved access to public databases and information systems.

4) There is a need for an integrated program of research on challenges facing labour (for example, on the potential impacts of privatization and industrial restructuring), and on general working-class and union issues from a multidisciplinary perspective involving researchers from various disciplines in the social

¹⁵Panitch, "Labour Strategies."

¹⁶For the history, development, and administration of this program and its benefits to labour and academics, see Carla L. Mumme, *A Trade Union-Based Secondment Scheme for Academic Researchers: The Quebec Experience* (Sydney, Australia 1988).

sciences and humanities. Labour should press the SSHRC for such strategic/thematic grants programs, and lobby federal and provincial governments to increase social sciences research funding. Further, as Gil Levine has suggested, "the labour movement ought to be escalating demands on the universities for researching, teaching, and many other forms of assistance."¹⁷ These pressures might be particularly necessary to expand labour studies and industrial relations degree programs.

5) Labour and academics have difficulty keeping track of academic research underway in the universities and elsewhere. This was less of a problem when the labour department published its annual research inventory, *Industrial Relations Research in Canada*. Unfortunately, publication was discontinued in 1983. The department should be asked to resume publication, or alternatively, one of the university industrial relations centres should be encouraged to undertake this project with labour and government support.

6) Finally, it is important to expand the cadre of professionals within the labour movement who, with the scholars who are sympathetic to the working class and its organizations' struggles, could be engaged in long-term strategic thinking about labour's social and political goals, and about specific union policies and programs.¹⁸

There is no reason for academics and labour to distrust each other; rather, they should work closely. Together they can help create a vision and a strategy for enhancing the role of labour, and for building a dynamic and progressive working-class movement in Canada.

¹⁷ Levine, "Relations."

¹⁸ For the need for an integrated strategy see Don Wells, "Team work and Industrial Relations," and Sam Gindin, "Putting Socialism on Labour's Agenda," in *Canadian Dimension*, 22 (February 1988), 33-6, 43-5.

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