

Comment

Cy Gonick

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Comment

Cy Gonick

GILBERT LEVINE'S CRITICISM of academic research is partly misplaced. It is true that much of it is esoteric and not useful to anyone except the author and the small circle of people who will respond and thereby add publication titles to their C.V.'s. But the fact that academic research is often unused by unions may say as much about unions as about the research. I have several things in mind here.

- 1) Unions are usually short-sighted. They are interested in the next round of negotiations, for example, and not long-term trends. They will deal with the long-term when the long-term is tomorrow. This is problematic since the here-and-now is, of course, part of longer term patterns that have to be analysed.
- 2) Unions all too often want analysis only as tools of propaganda. Thus in the discussions over the courses of inflation, the monopoly argument is far too simple, or in any case is just plain wrong. But union leaders preferred it because they believed it was the argument they could sell to their members. Now it is one thing to simplify a complex argument so that it is made broadly understandable. That can be fully justified, and we do not have enough people doing that kind of popularization. It is another thing to choose an explanation merely because it is the easiest one to popularize, even if the facts do not fit. Some academic research is rejected not because it is irrelevant, but either because it is more complex and less easy to popularize than the old stand-bys, or because it gives results that union leaders are not comfortable with. For example, again dealing with inflation, there are times when unions are co-responsible for inflation. For some reason union leaders always want to picture workers as helpless victims and unions as powerless — as if nothing they do really matters.
- 3) Until recently, unions did not have a staff with the training that could sift through academic research, select the relevant from the irrelevant, and apply theories, concepts, and arguments where appropriate to their needs.

Cy Gonick, "Comment," *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (Spring 1988), 197-198.

- 4) Even now, certainly at the local level — even with very large locals — unions leaders and staff do not know how to use researchers. Our labour studies program sends five or six students a year to do free research for unions, and for the most part, I find that unless I go in and direct the research, it is a waste of time. Unionists either do not understand what research can do, or if they do, they cannot direct it.

There are other factors, of course, including very different cultural environments, and I would not quarrel with Levine's own list. But I think he underplays the lack of union capacity to digest, absorb, and utilize existing research, to develop research of its own; he implies as valid only research that bears on immediate economic issues; and he totally ignores the social democratic politics of unionism which rejects explanations and lines of reasons that do not offer solutions easily incorporated into the status quo. These problems have to be addressed along with the problem per se of academic research. And I think it is important that union leaders address them. It is too easy for academics to go after union leaders, just as it is too easy for them to rail against academics. Once that is done, it will be easier for both sides to move towards resolving the issue.

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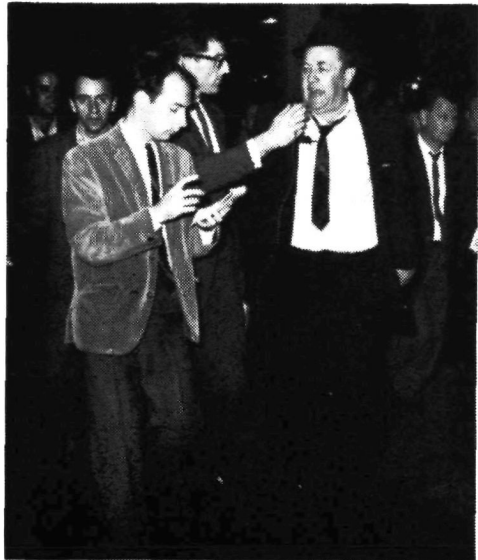
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