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HUFF
POST POLITICS

Labor Pains at UCLA

Our society is so dominated by corporate culture that we hardly notice it. Every daily newspaper has a "business section," but not a single paper has a "labor" section. Politicians and pundits talk incessantly about what government should do to promote a healthy "business climate," but few discuss how to improve the "labor climate." Most economics courses treat businesses as the engines of the economy, workers as a "cost of production," and unions as an impediment. Most universities in the country have a large, well-endowed "business school," but only a handful of them have even a small "labor studies" program.

Among the small number of labor studies programs, the one at the University of California-Los Angeles is one of the best, and now it has been targeted for extinction by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the UCLA administration. Allies of the UCLA Labor Center have mounted a letter-writing campaign to persuade Chancellor Gene Block to reverse this decision and restore funding for this cutting-edge program. Block can be reached at: chancellor@conet.ucla.edu.

Each year for the past five years, Schwarzenegger -- egged on by the state's corporate powerbrokers and right-wing Republicans -- has tried to kill the University of California's labor research and education programs at UCLA and Berkeley, but has been thwarted by resistance from its supporters and its allies in the state legislature.

This year, with the worst state budget crisis in memory, anti-labor forces think they can prevail. UC labor studies, a minuscule part of the state budget, is the only UC program that the Governor specifically targeted for elimination. The combined budgets for these programs is only \$5.4 million a year. The UCLA Labor Center has 20 staff members involved in research, teaching, and community outreach.

UCLA Labor Center director Kent Wong learned about the administration's plan to eliminate the Center from a July 11 article in the *New York Times*.

The administration's decision to eliminate the Labor Center -- a valuable, nationally-recognized center of research, teaching, and community service -- is clearly a political maneuver, not a budget necessity. The Labor Center receives a small fraction in state funding compared to UCLA's giant business school (which has over 100 faculty and many other staff), but the administration has not sought to eliminate the campus' training program for future corporate executives.

Since 1946, the University of California's two flagship campuses -- in Los Angeles and Berkeley -- have had programs dealing with labor issues. Originally, this was called "industrial relations," but both the name and the mission have evolved over the years. Like its counterpart in Berkeley, UCLA's Center for Labor Research and Education has been a pioneer in conducting research, teaching courses, coordinating student internships, and providing workers and their unions with information and access to university resources.

The UCLA Labor Center provides a popular undergraduate minor in Labor and Workplace Studies, and internship opportunities for hundreds of UCLA students each year. Upon graduation, many UCLA students have found careers with unions, community organizations, and other social justice groups through their work as interns at the Labor Center. (One labor studies student was elected UCLA student body president for the upcoming academic year).

The Labor Center has conducted innovative and important research on green jobs, labor law, collective bargaining, family leave, immigrant workers, undocumented students, the underground economy, health and safety, construction careers, and other policy issues that have been used by U.S. Labor Secretary Hilda Solis, the mayor of Los Angeles, Los Angeles city council, and members of the California state legislature.

For example, the Center's staff conducted the research that recently led to the City of Los Angeles creating the first-in-the-nation Construction Careers Policy, a bold initiative that is changing the face of Los Angeles construction industry and providing new pathways for Americans to join the middle class. The new policy, linked to major development projects with city subsidies, provides young people with job training in the construction trades, requires developers to hire local residents for construction jobs, and guarantees certain standards for workers on the job, such as access to quality health care and middle-class wages.

Its faculty and staff helped produce *The State of California Labor*, an invaluable resource for researchers and activists, and *Voices From the Front Lines: Organizing Immigrant Workers in Los Angeles*. Ruth Milkman and Victor Narro have edited a book on new models of organizing low-wage workers that will be released early next year.

The Center has also published two highly-regarded books written and edited by UCLA undergraduate students -- *Sweatshop Slaves* (about the Los Angeles garment industry) and *Underground Undergrads* (about UCLA undocumented immigrant students). Both publications have received national media attention, have been used as models for similar student publications throughout the country, and are currently being used as textbooks on many college campuses.

The Center has three more books scheduled to be published this year, including a bilingual English-Spanish book on the life of Miguel Contreras, one of the most significant labor leaders of our generation, who died in 2005. The second book is about Los Angeles home care workers and their successful campaign to organize 74,000 workers, the largest union victory in the country over the past fifty years. A third book will compare the labor movements in the U.S. and Vietnam, published in both languages.

As part of the university, the Labor Center serves as an important link between LA's academics, policy practitioners, unions, and community activists. It is a source of information about unions and workers to many scholars and students. Many rank-and-file workers, UCLA students, and community residents have relied on the education and research offered by the Labor Center over the years. It is the only UC program that serves the needs of unions and workers in Southern California.

In addition to its office on the main UCLA campus, the Labor Center also has a seven-year old downtown office amid the majority of L.A.'s union halls and worker centers and in the heart of a diverse immigrant community. Its staff and students work closely with local unions and with local community groups, especially the low-income, immigrant neighborhoods around MacArthur Park, Pico Union, the Westlake neighborhoods.

The UCLA Labor Center has been an important part of LA's labor movement, which is without doubt the most vibrant and exciting in the country. While unions have lost members in most cities around the country, they have been growing in LA for more than a decade, in large part due to a remarkable new generation of leaders, many of them immigrants and children of immigrants, who defied conventional wisdom and successfully organized LA's low-wage immigrant and African-American workers.

LA's unions have reached out beyond their membership to forge coalitions with community-based organizations, environmental groups, clergy, housing activists, and immigrants' rights activists. They have forged some of the most innovative and effective grassroots campaigns -- for living wages, to clean up the LA port (the area's largest source of pollution), to improve housing conditions, and to improve working conditions for the city's low-wage workforce, including security guards, janitors, car washers, truck drivers, nurses, hotel workers, and others.

The hard work of the LA labor movement pays dividends for everyone. A recent study by the LA Economic Roundtable documented that union jobs play an important role in boosting the region's economy. There are over 800,000 union members in LA County, accounting for roughly 15% of the private and public workforce. These include janitors, school teachers, security guards, truck drivers, longshore workers, retail clerks, construction workers, technicians and actors in the film industry, secretaries, social workers, garment workers, home care aids, nurses and other hospital workers, waiters, hotel housekeepers, police officers and firefighters, flight attendants and airline pilots, and many others in different industries. The average earning of area union members in 2007 was \$41,682. This is 27 percent more than non-union workers in the same occupation and typically with the same skills.

The wages earned by LA's union workers, spent in the local economy, accounted for \$51 billion in total sales, which created 307,100 jobs. This is 64,800 more jobs than would be created if these workers did not earn union wages. Contrary to conventional wisdom, unions are good for the local economy.

All California taxpayers and concerned residents have a stake in our public universities and their mission. The blatant political attack on the UCLA Labor Center is an assault on working people and their unions. Don't let Gov. Schwarzenegger and the UCLA administration do the dirty work for California's influential corporations.

To join the campaign to save UCLA's Labor Center, people can contact Chancellor Block and encourage him to take immediate steps to restore its funding. Letters can be sent to Chancellor Gene Block, UCLA, 2147 Murphy Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90095. His FAX number is (310) 206-6030. His email address is: chancellor@conet.ucla.edu

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