New Project to Bring Education on Workplace Rights to More Iowans

What should every worker understand about pay, work hours, and benefits? What should workers do if an injury occurs at work? When and how can workers take time off for medical reasons or pregnancy? What workplace rights apply to veterans, disabled workers, youth, or other populations?

Because workplace laws include a complex patchwork of dozens of varied state and federal statutes, it’s often difficult for individual workers or employers to navigate available information, or even to know which agency to contact for answers to a specific question.

Recognizing that few workers have easy access to accurate, comprehensive answers to these and other common questions, the Labor Center’s new Iowa Worker Rights Project will deliver accessible information—including copies of the Iowa Worker Rights Manual—to help more Iowans learn their rights at work, via interactive workshops using real-world scenarios and hands-on practice in applying new knowledge to everyday situations.

The project—a collaboration of the Labor Center and Iowa labor organization sponsors—will partner with nonprofit, school, faith-based, and community organizations working with students, first-time job-seekers, unemployed workers, formerly incarcerated Iowans, immigrants, refugees, and other populations seeking to boost job preparation and success.

By the Numbers: Statewide Labor Education in 2016-17

From Council Bluffs to Burlington and dozens of places between, Labor Center education programs in 2016-17 reached Iowans from all corners of the state. Programs included on-campus courses on subjects like collective bargaining and contract enforcement; off-campus classes tailored to the interests of local union stewards and officers; community workshops hosted by labor councils; guest lectures and presentations for a wide range of organizations; and public events open to campus and community members.

A few of the year’s totals:

- 2,064 participants attended 68 different continuing education classes
- 1,835 people participated in 58 off-campus classes
- 20 off-campus classes were hosted by multi-union labor federations in 10 different communities
- 15 emerging local leaders graduated from the week-long 66th annual Labor Short Course
- 14 public events sponsored or co-sponsored by the Labor Center reached hundreds of additional campus and community members
Iowa Labor History on the Road: Mobile Museum Exhibit, Bus Tour Traverse Iowa

Voices from Iowa’s labor history are on tour across the state in 2017 as part of the UI Mobile Museum exhibit “Speaking of Work.” Created by the UI Labor Center, the exhibit introduces the state’s rich labor history as documented through the Iowa Labor History Oral Project (ILHOP) - one of the largest, longest-running worker oral history projects in the country—which has collected over 1,200 interviews with Iowans who tell labor’s story in their own words.

Through photos, articles, quotes, and audio clips, the exhibit features historic voices of nineteenth-century immigrant coal miners in Southern Iowa, factory workers in Newton, hosiery workers in Des Moines, meatpacking workers in Waterloo, teachers in Keokuk, and building trades workers in Davenport. The exhibit also highlights the global origins of the state’s workers today, with examples of new interviews collected with foreign-born Iowans of African, Asian, and Latin American descent.

An August, 2016, Iowa Labor History Bus Tour also engaged over 50 people in an in-depth, day-long exploration of turning points from Iowa labor history while criss-crossing the state—starting with an introduction to the State Historical Society’s Labor Collections in Iowa City, and travelling to sites of dramatic 1930s struggles to organize Maytag and other factories in Newton, the John L. Lewis Mining-Labor Museum in Lucas, and former southeast Iowa mining towns like Albia and Buxton.

“Workers’ Rights in Crisis” Workshops Spark Community Discussions about Iowa’s Future

The prospect of dramatic changes to Iowa’s labor and employment law landscape raised a host of questions and drew crowds to a series of community workshops sponsored by Iowa labor councils. Labor Center instructors facilitated discussion of the origins and impact of key Iowa labor and employment laws, introduced comparative case studies and trends from others states, and helped labor, community, and local government leaders review and analyze proposed changes to existing laws in Iowa.

An initial evening workshop in Des Moines kicked off the series, with subsequent workshops taking place in Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, Bettendorf, Fort Dodge, Burlington, and Creston.

Over 70 people representing dozens of labor and community organizations attended a December “Workers’ Rights in Crisis” workshop sponsored by South Central Iowa Area Federation of Labor and hosted by UAW Local 450 in Des Moines
Conference Highlights Iowa’s Intertwined Labor and Civil Rights Struggles, Past and Present

Stretching from Iowa’s role in the underground railroad, solidarity among black workers in Iowa coal towns, interracial organizing in CIO unions of the 1930s, to the formation of powerful union civil rights committees in the 1950s, a March, 2016 conference on Labor and Civil Rights in Iowa’s Past, Present, and Future drew on dramatic but often hidden moments in state history, to create context for discussion of the present and future.

The conference brought together nationally-recognized speakers with a diverse group of Iowans from unions, civil rights groups, and the university community.

In an opening keynote address, William P. Jones (author of The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights) shared highlights from his new research on how public sector unions came to serve as vehicles for confronting race-based exploitation in the labor market and in large public institutions, often at key times and places across the twentieth century in relation to broader racial justice movements.

Participants then examined case studies from Iowa labor and civil rights history, with a lively discussion of themes and lessons co-facilitated by Krystal Gladden of the African American Museum of Iowa and Labor Center oral historian John McKerley. The conference also highlighted the recent launch of the new Iowa Labor History Society, and the rich resources available for historical inquiry in collections held by the UI Libraries and Iowa Women’s Archives and State Historical Society of Iowa—including the Iowa Labor History Oral Project.

Afternoon sessions shifted to a focus on the present and future. Jamal Watkins, Outreach Director for the AFL-CIO, discussed national initiatives to promote deeper conversations about race within labor’s ranks. A closing panel featured Iowa students, community, and labor leaders working in Iowa schools, communities and workplaces to advance racial and economic justice.

The conference was coordinated by the Labor Center and co-sponsored by the Iowa Labor History Society, UI Chief Diversity Office, UI Department of History, UI Center for Human Rights, and UI Public Policy Center.

“There was a young lady named Anna Mae Weems who was one of the first black women to be hired directly into the plant. Mrs. Weems took the union and took this town and turned it upside down, and we don’t ever want to forget that.”

—Jimmy Porter reflects in an oral history interview on the lasting impact he and fellow union civil rights committee leader Anna Mae Weems had in combating 1950s discrimination in Waterloo, Iowa

Grant Funds Digital Preservation of Labor Oral Histories

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission has awarded a 2017 grant of $93,632 to the University of Iowa Libraries to fund digital preservation of 1,100 oral history interviews originally recorded on reel-to-reel tapes and audiocassettes by the Iowa Labor History Oral Project (ILHOP). By next year, these newly digitized interviews can be joined with the over 100 recently conducted, digital oral history interviews—ultimately making the full ILHOP collection available to the public via the Iowa Digital Library. It’s a huge step forward for Iowa labor history!
The Labor Center is a unit of The University of Iowa College of Law. Since 1951, the Center has acted as a bridge between the University and Iowa’s labor community. Our mission is to provide educational programs and resources to Iowa workers and their unions.

The Center annually conducts a series of open-enrollment, non-credit short courses and seminars on the UI campus, regularly travels to communities across Iowa to provide classes on a range of topics tailored to the needs and interests of Iowa workers, and houses multidisciplinary research projects including the Iowa Labor History Oral Project.

Our staff also provide research assistance and technical information to worker organizations, serve as a resource for UI faculty, staff, and students interested in labor studies, and disseminate information on labor issues to the public.

Quick Takes: Staff Publications and Activity Snapshots


• The Labor Center hosted the 2016 annual Midwest labor educators’ meeting and curriculum exchange, in collaboration with the United Association for Labor Education.
• Robin Clark-Bennett served as an instructor at the 2017 Midwest School for Women Workers hosted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
• Matt Glasson convened a 2017 Continuing Legal Education seminar for Iowa attorneys engaged in public sector bargaining.
• Paul Iversen received a UI Mary Jo Small Staff Fellowship Award to support attendance at the 2017 United Association for Labor Education conference in Detroit.
• John McKerley was a featured guest on Iowa Public Radio’s River to River talk show for a January, 2017 discussion of “Getting Organized: Collective Bargaining’s Past, Present, and Future in Iowa.”
• McKerley and Jennifer Sherer contributed to a roundtable discussion on labor history and community engagement at the 2017 Labor and Working Class History Association conference in Seattle.
• Jennifer Sherer taught a UI fall 2016 semester seminar for first-year students on the theme “What’s the Matter with Walmart?”

ARA National Executive Director Richiesta (second from left) and ARA Iowa President Midge Slater (fourth from left) presented Labor Center staff with the Iowa Alliance for Retired Americans 2016 George J Kourlias Service to Seniors award at the group’s annual conference and awards dinner in Des Moines.