

# REPORTS and CORRESPONDENCE

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## **Humanities Education at the Union Hall: The Threads Project of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union and the National Endowment for the Humanities**

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Threads, the Humanities Project of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union, was a three year program of cultural enrichment, special events and discussion seminars for union members, their families and their communities. Based in the union's Social Service Department, which is headed by International Vice President Joyce Miller, the Threads Project drew on service and education activities that have long been part of ACTWU's organizing strategy: the union has excellent retirees' programs, a more than fifty year tradition of membership education, an award-winning national newspaper, organizational archives, a film library and a book distribution service.

Sites where Threads was active over three years (1978-1981) included New York City, coordinated by Victoria Ortiz; Fall River/New Bedford, Massachusetts, coordinated by Susan Porter Benson; Erwin, North Carolina, where Linda Frankel developed programs; Detroit where Miriam Frank, then Enid Eckstein worked; San Antonio, where Toni Hernandez was active; and Knoxville, where Brenda Bell coordinated the program. In addition, Humanities programs went on in up-state New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and at national meetings of union staff and/or delegates. Marvin Ciporen and Victoria Lebovicz-Williams administered the project from New York City, publishing a regular newsletter that reported the progress of the project to a mailing list of about 300 union staff, labor education

institutes, and program advisers. They are currently putting together a formal guide to humanities education to be used by union educators and organizers in planning programs, and this guide contains a distillation of the best and most workable Threads experiments and experiences.

The way the program functioned varied from site to site, depending on the resources of the community, the local union's situation in that community, the type of industry that had the most active locals in the area, the kind of support that was available from local union staff and officers, and what were the special interests and talents of the on-site coordinator/discussion leader. In Detroit, Threads especially attracted retirees who had worked in the city's retail stores, mattress factories, tailoring establishments, and laundry and dry cleaning shops, who still resided in the inner city and wanted a weekly daytime activity that would involve them—always on Wednesdays. A Thursday evening program for active union members brought in a few people from several of the retail, service, and manufacturing locals of the regional joint board. They lived and worked in different Detroit locations, but got used to seeing each other as a core group and participating in educational discussions on a weekly basis. Susan Benson traveled around the New England area with four to eight week-long history workshops, touching different locals and retirees' groups with materials that she continually tested and adjusted, depending on the locals' needs and history. In New York, Victoria Ortiz worked in Spanish with Latino/Hispanic groups, and Vicky Lebovicz-Williams worked in French with Haitian union members. In all cases, Threads was an education-for-its-own-sake opportunity for working people whom school had for the most part passed by, who were looking not to upgrade their work skills, but rather for something that would be an entertaining challenge that they could perhaps bring their spouses to, and that they could share with other workers.

A critical factor in the success of the Threads program at any particular site had to do with how the union was able to make use of us. In Erwin, there were very few on-site resources. Most guest speakers traveled to this mill town from Durham, a nearby university center, and borrowing a film projector or printing up a meeting notice or developing a labor bookshelf at the union hall were not automatically accomplished. In a metropolitan center like Detroit, where there were many innovative labor education and community cultural resources available—such as the Detroit Labor History Bus Tour (“Labor Routes”)—Threads acted as a conduit to bring union members into contact with these existing resources.

One of the settings where Threads was successful in interfacing with ongoing union work was the program of the Summer Leadership Training Schools that the union conducts throughout the country to train local officials and rank and file members in stewardship skills, contract negotiations, and labor movement philosophy and strategies. Organized regionally for delegates from all locals served by the regional joint boards, these week-long basic and advanced workshops are an unusual break for union members from the everyday stresses of work and family

life. The student-delegates participate seriously in all the meetings and classes, so we were very pleased to help education staffs plan and teach labor history, public speaking, and labor and the humanities sessions. We got some very exciting responses at these schools from members, by developing mini-research projects, selecting readings and media, preparing rhetorical exercises, and getting involved in after-dinner sing-alongs, where labor history lessons are right there in the choruses of many traditional songs—"Soup," "The Erie Canal," "The Preacher and the Slave," etc.

Special events, often planned and developed in conjunction with other unions and community organizations, schools, museums, or churches, got Threads programs known throughout the area and developed the union's community relations. Knoxville's plans to have a big energy exhibition, "Expo 82," were examined by ACTWU members in terms of the city's history at an evening panel that involved other neighborhood and labor groups in debates with city planners, community activists and union leaders. A Lawrence, Massachusetts History Day, co-sponsored by Threads, included artifact exhibitions, media, speeches by veterans of the 1912 and 1931 strikes, as well as workshops on current industry/community problems. In Erwin, a union fair drew 300 union members and their families to booths featuring union literature and poetry handouts used in Threads seminars, slide shows and films, as well as on-the-spot health services such as Brown Lung information and hypertension screening. In Detroit, an exhibition of historical paintings at the Detroit Historical Museum called "The Working American"—it had originated in New York with the Bread and Roses program, The Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199—was the occasion for a Threads-sponsored community concert in the exhibition hall, featuring traditional labor songs sung by the local group Finland Station.

Both the union and the National Endowment for the Humanities (the granting agency) wanted to know, could the humanities be used to enrich the lives of working people? To do this the Threads Project used some fairly original methods to make the humanities accessible to working people. When we did history workshops, or poetry discussions, or analyses of films or literature, we did it with an eye to how it would work into what the union was about and what people who were on the job all day and attending our sessions in the evening needed in terms of making their own lives more meaningful. Many of our programs were first of all, a lot of fun—exciting, often, for us and for the participants. To the extent that we gave humanities education a broad and varied popular adult interpretation, using numerous cultural media and maintaining an openness about appropriate methods, we did keep people interested in discussing the large philosophical questions that the humanities address. Thus, I think we were very successful in discovering some important concepts about working people's history and culture and how to best preserve that heritage so that it remains available to union members.

The basic format of the participatory discussion group was essential to this development. Except for situations where we had a large special event, we emphasized discussion and left lectures out of our plans, and even with big events, we

looked for ways to break the group down into theme/discussion groups. Excellent discussions usually involved groups of 15-30 people who knew at least a few other members of the group prior to the meeting. The discussion leader came to the meeting prepared with discussion materials (readings, a slide show, photographs, etc.), refreshments, questions that would initiate conversation, and ideas of where the discussion might go with everybody participating and contributing their unique viewpoints.

A good discussion accomplished two main goals: information would be delivered, then clarified and analyzed by the group, and people would get to know each other better by having the opportunity to debate issues, ask each other questions, relate experience. Understanding all the detail of the material was not as important a goal as having the material mean something to each group member. It was always important to these adults, most of whom did not have access to higher education, to relate the new material to something that they already knew in their lives as workers, as citizens, as family members. Because everyone was addressing the material in this way, and because the discussion leader was being attentive to the progress and development of an educational discussion that synthesized the material with participants' own experience, it was usually a very friendly, opening kind of process that went on in these seminar groups—even the arguments were friendly.

Discussion leaders were responsible for choosing suitable materials, and we communicated among ourselves about the value of everything that came in. A good pithy poem like Marge Piercy's "To Be of Use," taken with the right kinds of questions could get a wonderful set of exchanges going on worker/supervisor relations, while a carefully researched essay on labor/management history might be a total dud if the language was too academic or the questions didn't relate to everyday life in the family, community, or workplace.

Choosing good materials went hand-in-hand with being an attentive and caring discussion leader during the session. If we only worried about imparting information, we got nowhere, especially if there were people in the room who were having trouble participating because they spoke differently from others, or felt differently about the prevailing attitudes as they were being expressed, but needed encouragement to voice that difference. For the most part, the educational aspects of our seminars did get fulfilled during the discussions, because there would always be pauses or questions where discussion leaders could fill in further information directly relevant to the question at hand. The preparation for one of these sessions involved at least as much research and thinking as many classroom lectures do, and usually required quite a lot of imagination in finding provocative supplementary materials, alertness to the group's needs and goals, and making sure that everyone got a chance to say something without feeling forced.

We xeroxed a lot of readings. Some of us did give regular participants assignments, though having people read the handout during the first half hour of any session was also a workable method. The reading material had to be brief, provocative and clearly written. Sometimes this meant an excerpt of historical research, sometimes short fiction. In the case of poetry, one group member might read the

text out loud. Cramming the whole history of one industry into a discussion session was less important than having everyone understand the crucial points that made that industry significant for the historical community. It's an important value for education and research—for much labor history research has been published which is inaccessible as literature to working people.

Another successful method was the use of excellent historical documentary films coupled with discussions. We needed movies an hour or less in length, well-produced and conveying an historically accurate picture without condescending to the audience. There are a few such films, for example, *The Inheritance*, which was produced for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, ACTWU's predecessor. Its richness of pictorial detail was as important as the questions the movie thematically raises for modern unionists: how do we "pass it on"—this union heritage which is not only a knowledge of dates of strikes and mergers, but also a spirit of aiding your brothers and sisters at the workplace and in the community in the pursuit and achievement of justice? The recent series of women's labor history documentaries—*Union Maids*, *With Babies and Banners* and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* were also valuable. Each of these movies features historical documentary intercut with interviews with working class women who talk directly into the interviewers' camera about their special experiences of union organizing, participating in militant strike actions, or getting skilled work at a decent wage during the Second World War. The response to these documentaries was often astonishing: when the lights would go on, audience members who had been there during the historical period would testify as to how they remembered it, what happened to them in their lives during the time period that the movie covered, where the film was wrong about the history that they took part in, and where it was right. Once you start a discussion with a response like that, it really is not difficult to involve everyone else in the group in narrations of their own memories or questions of the witnesses. In these cases, film, an essentially passive medium, celebrates the strength and wit of working women in a way that brings an incredibly intimate, exhilarating, and active feeling to a union educational.

Democratizing working people's history means using history creatively, not being narrow about what is historical analysis, what is literature, what is aesthetics, what is document. For example, the River Rouge murals by Diego Rivera at the Detroit Institute of Arts were experienced by Threads participants as a great work of art and as a historical document. ACTWU retirees went to the museum to look at the murals, observing social history as well as art. Some of these retired workers had lived in the city all of their adult lives but had never visited the museum. In the hall where the murals are, the group discussion concerned the portrayal of the factory machinery and UAW organizing drives of the thirties and forties, as well as Rivera's techniques in painting the panels, his great elemental symbols and the fine topical details. Threads participants thus came together here to read their class history in the huge images of the muralist Rivera, remembering friends and relatives—or themselves decades earlier—working in the plant portrayed on the museum walls.

What was important about the Threads labor history program, then, was not

how much data we were able to disseminate to the union members and retirees we worked with, but that we were able, as humanists and as historians, to communicate our excitement about the meaning of history and its use for people today. That will hold fast after the information slips away. Appropriate tools for these dialogues were clearly-written scholarship as well as poetry, films, paintings, photography—all of these were necessary for developing that sense of history and culture. When we did gather oral history, it was with the thought of feeding it back to the inheritors of that history. Thus, an interview with a veteran organizer of the Detroit dry cleaning local was played back one Wednesday afternoon to retirees while they were preparing a major mailing, collating letters, licking stamps, and it was a very enjoyable afternoon, with lots of chuckling and commentary at the story being told, and recognition of incidents as well as correction of details—and the mailing got out in time too.