

Labor Extension Bulletin

A Publication of the University of Massachusetts Labor Extension Program
UMASS AMHERST ■ UMASS BOSTON ■ UMASS DARTMOUTH ■ UMASS LOWELL

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Making Sense of the Economy

American politics these days seems rife with discussions about inequality. The plight of the “99 percent” has been pushed to the front of our public consciousness by outrage following the economic crisis in 2008, and by an Occupy Movement that has helped to frame this narrative. And today the symptoms of this inequality appear all around us as the wages for most American workers remain stagnant¹, as fewer and fewer people have access to secure retirements², and as the unemployment rate remains at 6.3%³, while the “1%” continue to see their income and share of the national wealth balloon.

Explanations for economic inequality abound from every side, but there seems to be little consensus among economists as to how (or even if) it should be corrected. On the left, some economists argue that capitalism inevitably trends towards levels of inequality that, if left unchecked, threaten to undermine democracy.⁴ On the right, other economists argue that concerns about inequality are overblown because it has little impact on economic mobility.⁵ Perhaps the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw summarized this state of affairs best when he famously remarked, “If all the economists were laid end to end, they would not reach a conclusion.”

Despite this lack of consensus inequality is increasingly becoming the most important issue for working people themselves. In the absence of a comprehensive framework for understanding inequality, the real causes of economic problems are obscured and working people are divided and pitted against each other. We see these divisions happening all around us as public sector workers are blamed for municipal budget woes, undocumented immigrants are blamed for reducing pay, and workers in the global south are blamed for “stealing” our jobs. The consequence is a divided working class fighting over the smallest piece of the pie.

What is clear, however, is that this state of affairs is neither inevitable nor accidental, but instead is the outcome of specific, deliberate, and systematic policies. For example, changes in the tax rate on the wealthiest households over the last fifty years have led to an increase in the money that goes to a few individuals while starving federal and state governments of the resources needed to provide



*“You’re kidding. You still pay taxes?
 It’s a nostalgia thing? Right?”*

essential services. Similarly, the failure to increase the minimum wage has resulted in more workers earning poverty wages.

Could an understanding of the causes and impacts of inequality help to unite working people to fight for better policies?

Presenting a comprehensive narrative for making sense of the inequality in our economy today has fast become the central challenge for those concerned with the “99 percent.” All around us there are some signs this is beginning to happen. At the national level, the AFL-CIO releases its Common Sense Economics curriculum aimed at providing unions and community partners with a clear framework for discussing and addressing inequality and its outcomes (see Spotlight). In Massachusetts, campaigns such as “Raise Up Massachusetts” have brought together a coalition of workers, unions, and community organizations to push back against the growing inequality we see around us (see Resource Corner). The long term success of these efforts to take control of the conversation around economic equality and to begin to correct the policies which have led us to this point will largely depend on our ability to organize and continue to engage with all workers about these issues.

1 Mishel, L. and H. Shierholz. 2013. A Decade of Flat Wages: The Key Barrier to Shared Prosperity and a Rising Middle Class. Economic Policy Institute. May 6. <http://www.epi.org/publication/a-decade-of-flat-wages-the-key-barrier-to-shared-prosperity-and-a-rising-middle-class/>
 2 Wiatrowski, W. 2012. The Last Private Industry Pension Plans: A Visual Essay, 135 Monthly Labor Review. <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2012/12/art1full.pdf>
 3 <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>
 4 Piketty, T. (2014). Capital in the twenty-first century.
 5 Winship (2014). Overstating the Costs of Inequality. National Affairs, Issue 15, Spring 2013. <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/articles/2013/03/overstating%20inequality%20costs%20winship/overstating%20inequality%20costs%20winship.pdf>

Around THE STATE

Summer Women's Leadership Opportunities

The 28th Annual WILD Summer Institute

June 20-22, 2014

Cost: \$225 for room, board, materials. \$165 for commuters. Childcare \$60, \$30 additional children

Location: University of Massachusetts - Dartmouth

Contact: Kathy Casavant, 617-825-0520, kathy@wildlabor.org

Theme: Rise up for Social and Economic Justice

WILD is an inspirational educational program that provides women with the leadership vision, confidence and skills to become more effective leaders and organizers in the Massachusetts labor movement. The program begins with dinner on Friday, June 20th, and continues through the weekend with workshops on leadership development and a variety of skill building workshops. There is also ample time to network with other labor sisters and have a lot of fun. The Institute ends at 3:00 p.m. on Sunday, June 22nd.

39th Annual UALE Northeast Regional Summer School for Union Women

Sunday through Friday, July 26th - 31st, 2014

Cost: \$600/person for double, \$665/person for single

Location: Queens College, 65-30 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, NY

Contact: Annetta Argyres, 617-287-7229, anneta.argyres@umb.edu; Clare Hammonds, 413-545-6166, chammonds@soc.umass.edu; Susan Winning, 978-934-3127, susan_winning@uml.edu;

Theme: Our Movement—Our World

This five-day program brings together union women who are rank and-file members, staff and officers to strengthen their knowledge of the American labor movement, understand its present challenges and issues, and develop skills that will prepare them to be more active union members and leaders.

Thinking Big/Moving Forward Breakfast Seminar

Friday, October 17, 8-11 am

Cost: Free

Location: UMass Boston

Contact: Annetta Argyres, 617-287-7229, anneta.argyres@umb.edu

Theme: Out of the Shadows: Reversing 60 years of exclusion for domestic workers

Join union members and community activists to enjoy a hearty breakfast and to hear stories from low-income women fighting for social and economic justice.

The Resource Corner



Campaigns to build equality

Economic inequality is bad for us: it leads to problems in our communities, to less civic participation, to fewer public services, to poorer health...even to less economic growth. But, in Massachusetts there are many opportunities to join in the fight for public policies that can begin to reduce inequality in our communities. Go to the links to learn more about the issue and the legislation, and how to get involved in these important campaigns.

Raise the MA minimum wage (for tipped workers, too!) and tie future increases to the cost of living. [raiseupma.org]

Provide earned sick time to all MA workers, so people don't have to choose between taking care of themselves or their family, and getting a pay check. [raiseupma.org]

Prevent cuts to unemployment benefits and do not make it harder for workers to be eligible for these benefits. [raiseupma.org]

Ensure labor protections for domestic workers by establishing a Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights to establish work week limitations, meal and rest breaks, vacation and sick days, parental leave, and eviction and termination notifications, as well as protection from discrimination and sexual harassment. [domesticworkers.org/mass-bill-of-rights]

Allow everybody access to a driver's license by removing immigration status as a barrier to getting a driver's license, so that all workers can get to work and take care of their families safely. [<http://www.miracoalition.org/en/safedrivingbill/460-safe-driving-info>]

Enact the MA Trust Act which seeks to limit the use of local and state resources used to meet the federal deportation quota program, and to rebuild trust between immigrant communities and local law enforcement agencies. [matrustact.org]

Extend health and safety protections to MA state workers so that all public and private sector workers can be safe at work. [masscosh.org/policy-advocacy/public-employee-health-and-safety-protections]

Program Notes

■ UMASS AMHERST

The UMass Amherst Labor Center has been busy this spring conducting research on low-wage work in the Pioneer Valley and collaborating with several unions and community groups to support the launch of a workers center in Western Massachusetts. The Center was also very lucky this spring to have labor lawyer, and former Labor Center professor, Harris Freeman, who gave series of talks on the laws surrounding low-wage work. Labor Extension has participated in the planning for the WILD Summer Institute and has completed a Workers Rights training for Commonwealth Works, a pre-apprenticeship program for women and people of color. Over this summer we will be working with the Massachusetts Early Childhood Educators Union (MECEU) on developing a Leadership and Professional Development program. Also—Save the Date for an Open Enrollment Stewards training coming this fall!

■ UMASS BOSTON

Spring is finally here and we're already looking forward to the fall! Register now our fall Certificate in Labor Leadership classes—"Assessing Workers' Power: Labor & Economic Transformations in the US since 1945," and "Legislative Labyrinth: Legislative Structure, Power and Process." For more information, contact Wally Soper at 617.287.7267. The Labor Resource Center was hopping this winter. The March *Thinking Big/Moving Forward* Breakfast Seminar featured the work of our participatory research project, the Policy Group on Tradeswomen's Issues, and brought together over 130 stakeholders to explore the Massachusetts model which is successfully increasing the number of women in construction. Our next seminar will be held in October and will focus on domestic workers' struggles to ensure fair, safe and respectful working conditions. We were very lucky to have Fredy Lozano, president of a Columbian mining union, discuss the intersections of labor, environmental, and community organizing within the coal industry. Finally, Labor Extension has been leading workshops and discussions with not-yet-unionized workers in many different settings: we've reached undergraduate students in Sociology classes, graduate Human Service students, ABE and ESOL adult learners in Dorchester, and even second graders in Cambridge!

■ UMASS DARTMOUTH

We have sprung into action here at the UMass Dartmouth Labor Education Center in 2014. We have offered a four week Advanced Officer and Steward Training. It has been taught by the well-known and respected labor attorney, Robert Schwartz. Unions in our area have been appreciative as this type of specialized training is not readily available outside of the Boston area. We are very excited to help host the Women's Institute for Leadership Development this June. While the registration cost is already low, there is an even lower commuter cost to encourage local women to attend. Another exciting project we have currently is in gathering oral history interviews of approximately 15 workers, relating to the past and current work of our Center. We are working with a traveling group of oral historians and editors to complete this work by the end of June.

■ UMASS LOWELL

2014 has been very busy. Director Susan Winning has chaired the WILD curriculum committee, recruiting facilitators, developing the leadership curriculum, and developing and delivering a training of trainers for all WILD teachers. We are working on updating the Workers' Rights curriculum which is available on the UMass Labor extension website. We continue to work with labor councils, providing strategic planning sessions, and working with the North Shore education conference planning committee. We are funding two student researchers who are working on a linkage nexus report for the New Lynn coalition. We have been kept busy working on various aspects of the Work, Labor and Society (WLS) program (the UML labor studies program). Along with an economics professor, Susan co-taught the core labor studies class for undergraduates at UMass Lowell, as well as served as the service learning liaison between students and community partners. We worked on the WLS sponsored event on campus, which focused on issues related to immigration and work.

S P O T L I G H T

The national AFL-CIO is launching a new comprehensive economics education program called *Common Sense Economics* that will "provide the tools that working families need to educate themselves, each other, the media and politicians." The goal of the program is education that leads to action. All the educational components will be tied to mobilizing for campaigns, so that participants will strategize how to put their new knowledge and understanding to use immediately. Facilitators from community organizations, unions and university based educators (including the University of Mass extension folks) will be trained and available to provide workshops on the following topics, which make up the new educational program:

COMMON SENSE ECONOMICS RAISING WAGES WORKS AFL-CIO

Common Sense Economics Core Module: this workshop breaks down the myth that the economy cannot be changed. Participants will identify ways that income inequality and related issues are the result of public policy choices; and will connect with ways to mobilize for change.

Each of the following modules will build on a basic understanding of the economy to explore impacts specific to different constituencies and to generate solutions: **Women and the Economy, Young Workers and the Economy, Mass Incarceration, Globalization, and Immigration.**

For more information or to schedule a training event, contact the labor extension coordinator in your region (see back page for contact info).

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UMass Amherst

Labor Extension Program

Labor Center, Thompson Hall

200 Hicks Way

Amherst, MA 01003-9277

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In the Past 6 months...

The UMass Labor Extension Program has provided trainings on these topics...

■ The Boss Can't Do That, Can He? Workers' Rights Training

Commonwealth Works
Dorchester Adult Literacy Coalition
conference
E-Team Machinist Class

■ Collective Bargaining Training

Professional Staff Union, UMass Amherst/
Boston

■ Confronting Oppression in the Classroom

United Association for Labor Education
(UALE) conference 2014

■ Financialization of the Economy: What does it mean for workers and unions?

UMass Boston Certificate in Labor
Leadership

■ Identifying Ourselves and Our Interests

WILD in the Winter Eastern Mass

To Contact the UMass Labor Extension Program:

■ UMass Amherst Labor Extension Program

Labor Center, Thompson Hall, 200 Hicks Way
Amherst, MA 01003-9277 www.umass.edu/lrrc
Clare Hammonds: 413-545-6166 Fax: 413-545-0110
email: chammonds@soc.umass.edu

■ UMass Boston Labor Extension Program

CPCS Labor Resource Center, 100 Morrissey Blvd.
Boston, MA 02125-3393 www.umb.edu/lrc
Annetta Argyres: 617-287-7229
email: anneta.argyres@umb.edu

■ UMass Dartmouth Labor Extension Program

Dubin Labor Education Center, 285 Old Westport Road
North Dartmouth, MA 02747 www.umassd.edu/labored/
Kim Wilson Venancio: 508-999-8781 Fax: 508-999-9168
email: kwilson@umassd.edu

■ UMass Lowell Labor Extension Program

600 Suffolk St., 5th Floor, Suite 503
Lowell, MA 01854 www.uml.edu/LaborEducation
Susan Winning: 978-934-3127 Fax: 978-934-4033
email: susan_winning@uml.edu

Contact the UMass Labor Extension Program at <http://umasslep.org>

■ Integrating Equity and Anti- Oppression Throughout Labor Education

UALE conference 2014

■ Introduction to the NLRA and other labor laws

SE Mass various unions

■ Mobilization Strategies

UAW Local 2320

■ Organizing Youth

UMass Boston Talented and Gifted (TAG)
Latino Program

■ Public Speaking

Women's Institute for Leadership
Development (WILD)

■ Stewards training

AFSCME Local 1705

■ Strategic Planning

Bus Riders United
Greater SE MA Labor Council
North Shore Labor Council

■ Strategic Research for Worker Centers

Immigrant Worker Center Collaborative

■ Take Back our Economy Presentation

North Shore Labor Council Education Conference

■ Unions and Human Service Workers

UMass Boston Human Service Program

■ Women and People of Color in the Trades

Commonwealth Works