THREADS: HUMANITIES IN A UNION SETTING

Marvin Ciporen

ABSTRACT: THREADS is the Humanities project of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). THREADS also received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the New York Council for the Humanities and the Michigan Council on the Arts. The project has conducted programs for thousands of active and retired blue collar workers in 17 states. The programs are interdisciplinary and involve the active participation of the students. Three formats have been used: on-going discussion groups on the themes of work, family and community; programs conducted as part of regular union activities; and single programs or short series on topical issues. Programs utilized print and nonprint materials and were supplemented by appropriate field trips.

Most humanities programs, for traditional and nontraditional students, have been instituted by colleges and universities. In the past two years, however, a growing number of trade unions have also offered humanities programs for their members. One of the pioneering efforts in humanities education for blue collar workers was undertaken by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). In 1978 ACTWU launched, with the aid of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, an experimental program aimed at finding approaches and materials which would enhance members' knowledge of, and interest in, the humanities. The program began at five sites (Knoxville, Tennessee; Detroit, Michigan; Erwin, North Carolina; New Bedford/Fall River, Massachusetts and New York City) and has subsequently involved thousands of blue collar workers in seventeen states.

Marvin Ciporen, a social and intellectual historian, is the Director of the THREADS humanities project of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, 15 Union Square, New York, New York 10003. THREADS was funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the New York Council for the Humanities and the Michigan Council for the Arts.
ORIGINS OF THREADS

The ACTWU has historically served the needs of its members on the job and off. In the past ACTWU, and many other trade unions, often sponsored programs and courses on history, literature and the arts for their members. Noted historians such as Charles Beard and James Harvey Robinson lectured at the Amalgamated Active Workers School. But in more recent years union education has focused on the training of shop stewards and future leaders as well as on political action. Clearly these programs are vital for the organizational existence of the Union, but they do not deal directly with the members' quality of life off-the-job.

National leaders of ACTWU (such as Vice President Joyce D. Miller and the former New England Educational Director Charles Atkinson) saw a humanities project as a way of linking members' experiences and life on the job with their concerns off-the-job. The low self-image of many union members was a major concern. Influenced by the mass media and a view of history which stresses the roles of "great men" in the shaping of events, blue collar workers often feel themselves to be insignificant. Their organizations are often portrayed as corrupt, criminal and even anti-American. Their children grow up ignorant about the work and lives of their parents. Union leaders felt that a greater knowledge of labor and social history would enable members to understand their contributions to the development of the United States.

An understanding of history is also valuable to bridge generational and geographic gaps between workers. Investigating how the work process and working conditions have changed, it was hoped, would enable different generations to understand their similarities and differences. As a national organization, the ACTWU also sought to help members appreciate both their unique local communities and their common bonds with other workers throughout the country.

The ACTWU is a multi-ethnic and multi-racial organization. Often there is also a generational gap between different ethnic groups. In New York City, for example, the earlier generation was primarily composed of Italians and Jews. Most of the current workers are Hispanic, Black or Haitian. The ACTWU saw the humanities as a potential vehicle for strengthening self-awareness among different ethnic groups through special programs on Black history, Hispanic culture, history of Italians in a particular location, and the history and culture of Appalachian whites. These programs could also be used to introduce one ethnic group to another in a non-threatening context, an