

July 2014 — June 2015

## Annual Highlights

### Labor Education Engages Workers On and Off Campus



New leaders practiced investigation, writing, and presentation skills at a Fall 2014 New Steward School

2014-15 Labor Center education programs reached over 2,800 workers, including residents of 75 different Iowa counties.

More than 70 off-campus classes reached workers in their home communities, while over 300 union members spent one to five days at 12 different intensive non-credit courses on campus, including the 64<sup>th</sup> Annual Labor Short Course, which drew 30 new leaders to campus in April for a week of work on communication, leadership, and representation skills, along with classes on labor history, economics, and

labor policy issues.

The year kicked off with a July, 2014 program on health and safety protections for rail workers, and concluded with a June, 2015 program on labor economics for Midwest members of the Laborers union.

Central Labor Councils in Burlington, Cedar Rapids, Des Moines, Iowa City, Keokuk, the Quad Cities, and Waterloo hosted classes that brought new and experienced leaders together to learn about subjects like collective bargaining, workplace legal rights, labor history, and contract administration.

Labor Center classes typically use highly interactive teaching methods designed to draw on the rich experiences of adult learners, especially in multi-union courses where leaders from various unions, sectors, and industries have the rare opportunity to spend time learning from each other and acquiring new skills to apply in their day to day work. As one course attendee put it, "I learned new ideas from the Labor Center and also from all the other students," while another praised a bargaining simulation exercise that "truly gave me a feel of what the process will be like."



The Fall 2014 Union Communications course brought together labor writers and editors from across the state



A series of Spring 2015 courses covered workplace laws including FMLA, OSHA, and Workers' Compensation



*“I want to know what you can do when your pay is stolen?”*

*-Gloria, in Voice Lessons by Janet Schlapkohl*

## New Play Puts Spotlight on Wage Theft

“I write all my hours in a little book. You should too. I’ve seen when they don’t pay me right,” a character named Gloria counsels her new co-worker in *Voice Lessons*, a new play by Janet Schlapkohl.

The short play introduces audiences to the intertwined work, family, education, and migration stories of three women characters who help each other find their voices and change their lives. The play’s initial performance in May sparked rich audience discussion about the growing epidemic of wage theft (the underpayment or nonpayment of legally owed wages).

Working with Labor Center staff over the past year, Schlapkohl and leaders of the Center for Worker Justice used participatory research to develop the script based on

stories and survey data collected from Iowa low-wage and immigrant workers who had experienced wage theft and sought to recover unpaid wages.

The project builds on ongoing Labor Center research (stretching back to co-authorship of the 2012 report “Wage Theft in Iowa,” which has been widely cited in Iowa media), while using live performance to connect new audiences with the human stories that lie behind published statistics and media accounts. Based on input from workers and audience members in pilot performances, a revised version of Schlapkohl’s script will be staged in other Iowa communities in the



**Molly Hurtado and Alba Quinones in the May 2015 premiere performance of “Voice Lessons”**

coming year.

The project is supported in part by a UI Center for Human Rights (UICHR) Working Group initiative to foster partnerships between human rights advocates and performance artists.

## Community Events Focus on Workers’ Rights Education

A well-attended “Local Workers Speak Out” forum last fall allowed the public to hear directly from low-wage workers about experiences confronting workplace health and safety hazards, wage payment violations, and discrimination.

A panel of academics, policy-makers, enforcement agency representatives, and faith and labor leaders then shared their perspectives

on worker testimonials.

Co-sponsored by the Labor Center, the forum also served as an essential hands-on learning opportunity for Labor Center Leadership School participants from CWA District 7, who gained new experience with planning various aspects of a public event.

Other Labor Center campus-community events this year included documentary film screenings, public lectures, free workshops on issues like health care and basic workplace rights, and co-

sponsorship of an annual Workers’ Memorial Day observance to remember Iowans who lost their lives on the job in the past year.



**Labor Educator Paul Iversen addresses the crowd at the 2015 Iowa City Workers’ Memorial Day observance honoring 38 Iowans who died on the job in 2014**



**Effrin Hobbs speaks about his experience working for temporary staffing agencies at a September “Workers Speak Out” forum**

## From Farm to Factory to Restaurant Table: “Injustice on Our Plates” Examines Conditions of Food Workers

A February Labor Center conference titled “Injustice on Our Plates: How Conditions of Food Workers Affect Us All” focused on conditions facing workers throughout today’s globalized food production systems.

Sponsored in conjunction with the UI’s Spring 2015 “Food for Thought” theme semester, the conference brought together scholars, workers, employers, students, and community members.



“Injustice on Our Plates” brought together Iowa food workers and UI students, scholars, and community members from faith, labor, and sustainable food organizations

Keynote speaker Fekkak Mamdouh engaged attendees in lively discussion of initiatives under way to improve working conditions in the restaurant industry.



Keynote speaker Fekkak Mamdouh

Mamdouh, co-author with Rinku Sen of *The Accidental American: Immigration and Citizenship in the Age of Globalization*,

described how in the wake of the September 11 attacks he came to co-found the Restaurant Opportunities’ Center (ROC), a dynamic national organization that brings together workers, consumers, and high-road employers to confront race-based barriers to advancement, sexual harassment, low pay, and unsafe conditions in the restaurant industry.

Prior to September 11, 2001, Mamdouh had served as headwaiter at Windows on the World restaurant in New York City’s World Trade

Towers. As he and co-workers sought new employment in the wake of the September 11 attacks, they formed ROC-New York to confront the discrimination and poor conditions they discovered to be endemic to the city’s restaurant industry. Since then, ROC has expanded into a national organization of more than 13,000 restaurant workers in 26 states. The group has recovered over \$10 million in unpaid wages for restaurant workers,

produced dozens of research reports documenting conditions in the industry, developed advanced restaurant worker training and placement programs, and assisted workers in opening several cooperatively owned restaurants.

The conference also featured sessions on the challenges of creating sustainable work within food systems locally, nationally, and globally. *Edible Iowa River Valley* editor and restaurant owner Kurt Michael Friese spoke about the need to consider environmental sustainability and labor standards as intertwined, rather than separate, issues within the food world.

Other conference sessions addressed labor rights in the global food industry; case studies of national initiatives to transform working conditions in agricultural, restaurant, grocery and fast food industries; and the central roles Iowans can play in shaping standards in food production and processing.

The day concluded with a panel discussion on food work in Iowa featuring restaurant and meatpacking workers, union representatives, and UI faculty with expertise in analyzing how public policy shapes work.

*“I learned a lot and feel more connected to the issue and passionate about sharing information. As an undergraduate student, it’s important to be informed!”*

*“Great group of people from many backgrounds collaborating for a vision of a more just food and economic system. Very energizing and powerful event.”*

*–“Injustice on Our Plates” conference attendees*



UI graduate student Fidencio Martinez (MFA candidate, Print-making) created this original print to illustrate conference themes

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## About the Labor Center

The Labor Center is a unit of The University of Iowa's Division of Continuing Education. 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** for union members on the UI campus, and regularly **travels to communities across Iowa** to provide classes on a range of topics tailored to the needs and interests of Iowa workers.

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.

## Clark-Bennett Recognized with UI Catalyst Diversity Award

Labor Educator Robin Clark-Bennett received a 2015 UI Diversity Catalyst Award, which honors those "engaged in diversity initiatives during the previous academic year that have promoted the development of an inclusive, diverse campus community at the University of Iowa."

Clark-Bennett was recognized for her development of innovative education programs on issues of race, class, immigration, and workers' rights; engagement of UI faculty, students, and staff in service learning collaborations with diverse, multi-lingual populations of low-income residents; and success in forging lasting campus-community partner-



Labor Educator  
Robin Clark-Bennett

ships built on equality and mutual respect.

Clark-Bennett has taught at the Labor Center since 2008 and is also a founding board member of the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa.

## Iowa Labor Oral History Project Wins Archie Green Fellowship

Labor Center Oral Historian John McKerley has been named a 2015 Archie Green Fellow by the Library of Congress American Folklife Center. Funding from the Center will support McKerley's work to conduct a new round of interviews documenting experiences of immigrant workers in Iowa's meatpacking industry for the Iowa Labor History Oral Project (ILHOP).



Oral Historian  
John McKerley

A joint project of the Labor Center and Division of Continuing Education, the Iowa Federation of Labor, (AFL-CIO) and the State Historical Society of Iowa, ILHOP was initiated in the early 1970s and is widely recognized as one of the most

comprehensive worker oral history collections in the world. Over the past two years, McKerley has conducted over 100 interview sessions for ILHOP, expanding the collection's attention to recent decades of Iowa labor history.