



# PROFESSIONALS AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

*David Biggins*

Many readers of *Social Alternatives* are professionals of some kind — teachers, social workers, lawyers, scientists — or students preparing to enter this type of work. Most progressive professionals recognise the labour movement as a political ally and as a major historical force in achieving social reforms. Yet the relationship between workers in the professions and other workers has often been an uneasy one. Why is this, and how can we work together in progressive political action in the 1990's?

## The Relation between Professionals and Other Workers

To understand the source of difficulties which often occur between professionals and other workers we need to recognise the position of professionals in the socio-economic structure. One of the most useful analyses I have come across is that provided by Barbara and John Ehrenrich<sup>1</sup>. Using a Marxist approach, they argue that the nature of the work of people in the "professional-managerial" class of society differs fundamentally from that of other workers. Traditional workers are engaged in labour which

produces commodities — a factory worker produces cars or washing machines or furniture. A professional-managerial worker, on the other hand, is engaged in labour the purpose of which is to reproduce capitalist social relations: in other words, this work involves managing, organising and controlling the economic system and the workers in it to enable that system to continue functioning. Professionals are concerned not so much with production as with the maintenance of social relations.

Of course part of the work of professionals is genuinely helpful to other people. Teachers really do educate

students, helping them to acquire valuable skills and knowledge, and to appreciate some of the beauty and wonder of the world. But part of their job also is to control and discipline students, and the education system shapes students into social roles. Most professional work has these two sides: lawyers, doctors and social workers serve real needs of people, but are also part of the apparatus of social control. These two aspects of professional-managerial work can be distinguished as an organising and nurturing function, which is necessary for the production process and for people to live, and a supervisory function for controlling, disciplining and containing labour. These aspects are also evident in the work of technical professionals such as engineers and scientists, who are involved in the construction of technology

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in such a way as to provide a production process which enables workers to be controlled and regulated.

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The role of the professional-managerial class extends beyond the realm of consumption. A range of professional workers, increasing in scope all the time, is involved in the management and control of patterns of consumption, leisure time, domestic and family life. Here the possibilities, options and preferences of people's lives outside work are shaped, especially by advertising and the media, but also by social workers, health workers, town planners and an array of state bureaucracies. So that whilst social workers may be helping us to find somewhere to live they are also re-fitting us for the same old system. The management of people as consumers is essential to the smooth functioning of the economy.

We can see then, why relations between professional and labour are difficult. In an important and fundamental way the role of professionals in capitalist society is to manage and control labour, not to liberate it. The rather ambivalent relationship which often exists between social worker and client reflects this.

The professional-managerial class also has its own class interests which are not shared with labour. These include maintaining its relatively privileged and powerful position, and promoting the professional view of the world which centres on rational, but not especially democratic, social planning.

At the same time however, the professional-managerial class is in certain ways fundamentally antagonistic to capital. Professionals repeatedly see their work frustrated or entirely negated by the economic expediencies of capital, and they have little real influence in the direction of society. Capitalism is opposed to the authentic ideal of professional work, service to humanity.

Professional values are fundamen-

tally at odds with those of capital and, ultimately, what professionals seek to achieve can only be realised in alliance with labour.

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**Professionals and Labour Working Together**

Over the past several years I have become involved in occupational health, i.e. those conditions of work that affect people's health. This includes such things as dangerous machinery, toxic chemicals and asbestos, and also more complex aspects such as work organisation and management practices which cause stressful work conditions. My experience suggests that professionals and the labour movement can work fruitfully together, and indicates some general guidelines for such work.

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Three broad ways in which professionals can work with other workers are<sup>2</sup>:

1. **Serving workers' organisations.** There is a long tradition of progressive professionals supporting working class organisations. Professionals can contribute valuable information, knowledge, education, training and technical support.

2. **Critique within the profession.** Progressive professionals can play an important role by challenging conservative structures and ideology within and around their profession.<sup>3</sup> In occupational health, for example, we can challenge the notion of the "careless worker" which blames the individual rather than recognising the structural causes of work injury and disease.

3. **Establishing worker-controlled organisations.** Recent legislative reforms in occupational health provide for worker-elected health and safety representatives with certain rights, such as the right to be provided with information about health and safety issues and the right to participate in decisions about how work will be organised to make it safe and healthy. These offer important opportunities for workers to exercise control over aspects of the organisation and conditions of work, and professionals can assist workers in achieving such changes.

With the increasing attention being given to occupational health in recent years, there has been increasing research attention to the area. There is valuable research which progressive professionals can do in occupational health. There are also research projects which could be done but which would be unlikely to bring significant benefits to workers. And there is research aimed at securing management control or delaying reform.

The trade union movement has produced a set of guidelines<sup>4</sup> to help workers and unions decide what sort of research it would be in their interests to support. These guidelines are also very valuable for researchers to help them design projects which can be of real benefit to workers.

One of the first principles that the guidelines lay down is that researchers in occupational health enter an industrial relations (i.e. political) setting by virtue of their research, and that therefore there is no such thing as value-free research. Workers and unions — and researchers — must identify the values and assumptions on which the research is based, and make a political decision as to whether to support it. Unions should only support "necessary" research, i.e. studies which have the potential to bring real benefits to workers. In order to assess a project a researcher needs to realistically appraise its potential to bring improvements to the workplace environment. The research itself should be part of this process of change, not artificially separated from it as has so often been the case. The latter is really a way of enabling the status quo to be maintained, and the progressive potential of the research rendered impotent. Unions and workers, for their part, need to establish priorities, so that researchers have guidelines as to which are the most needed areas of research, where greatest benefit can be achieved.

A second important principle is that workers, their unions and representatives be fully consulted and informed about the research and kept informed as it progresses. This goes much further than the usual notion of "informed consent". It involves the recognition that relevant and useful research can only be achieved by working with those who experience the work environment and — most importantly — are able through collective

action to improve it. The research proposal must include ways of ensuring the findings of the research are used and its recommendations implemented to improve working conditions.

In the industrial relations setting progressive changes will only be effected if they have the understanding and support of the workforce. If researchers want to see their work put to good use it is in their interest to work with workers in this way.

A third principle is that research provide opportunities for workers to learn concrete skills and knowledge in the process of the research study. In occupational health this can involve increased knowledge of particular hazards, understanding of the assumptions and limitations of exposure standards, technical skills in monitoring health hazards such as excessive noise or toxic chemicals. Increased understanding, skills and confidence enables workers to take effective preventative action before problems arise.

Workers can have an important input into research in two ways.<sup>5</sup> First they can contribute information. Many workers have long experience and detailed knowledge of particular work processes, which should not be wasted. They also have "subjective" knowledge of health effects of work — discomfort, aches and pains, etc experienced from the particular work conditions. Professionals should use workers' knowledge and experience and recognise that, without it, understanding of occupational health is incomplete. Workers' knowledge is recognised in the legislation and occupational health services of some countries.<sup>6</sup>

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The second important contribution workers have to make is in shaping the research. They should be involved in defining problems, setting goals, deciding methodology, and interpreting data, as well as putting results into practice. At all these stages they can play a crucial role in ensuring that research is effective. Professionals need to recognise the limits of their specialised knowledge, and how they can learn from workers' experience.

In these ways we can change the nature of research, change relations between worker and researcher, promote the validity of workers' knowledge, and promote research by workers alongside professionals.

The trade union guidelines suggest that before research begins an agreement should be drawn up spelling out the obligations of each party and establishing a joint committee of workers and researchers to oversee the project. It is essential that this agreement protects the needs of both parties. As one researcher has written: "Action research is often presented as an altruistic gesture on the part of scientists in the service of the working class. We feel this concept is simplistic and does not recognise the fact that we, as scientists, have our own goals and objectives which necessarily have a bearing on the research".<sup>7</sup> As well as having their own goals and objectives researchers have to work within constraints imposed by their institutions if they are to be able to continue working. An example is the requirement for researchers to publish, which needs to be clearly negotiated between the parties.

The partnership between researchers and workers is not a straight forward one, but it can be very productive. Researchers have knowledge and skills which can be of value to workers. Perhaps the primary gain for the researcher, *qua* researcher, is that research done in this way has a much greater chance of being acted on, rather than collecting dust on a library shelf, and acted on in ways likely to achieve progressive ends.

### **Conclusion**

George Bernard Shaw once wrote that "professions are conspiracies against the laity".<sup>8</sup> The source of conflict between professionals and other people in capitalist society is that professionals are placed in the role of disciplining and controlling people as workers and as consumers. The highest goals of professionals, however, can only be achieved in alliance with labour, not in the service of capital.

Central to the idea of a profession is a body of high-level, specialised knowledge. This generalised, rather theoretical knowledge, is incomplete without the long practical experience and detailed local knowledge of non-

professionals. Professionals need to recognise the limits of their knowledge and the distortions that the narrow self-interest of professions have brought to their knowledge. Professionals and other workers need to work together to democratise knowledge.

Professional work is being increasingly proletarianised. Professionals are losing control of key features of their work to bureaucracies, governments and private corporations. Job conditions for professionals are being eroded. As this happens professionals are coming to recognise they are workers with needs and interests similar to other workers. Professionals can learn from labour's political experience of the need for unity, discipline and collective action.

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Professional workers have been placed in the role of managing labour in the interests of capital. The highest values of the professions — truth, service, the well-being and full development of humanity — are antithetical to this. All workers, professional and non-professional, have a common interest in building a just, moral and sustainable society.

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