



Cornell University
ILR School

Lois Gray: Sixty Years of Service and Leadership to ILR

Q. Tell us about your undergraduate college days at Park College in Missouri.

A. During college, I was a member of the debate team and our debate topic was government regulation of unions, which inspired an interest in labor and labor relations. And I also majored in economics. The rise of labor unions, the growth of labor unions and the conflicts on the labor scene attracted our attention as a topic in economics. So I decided on a career in labor and labor relations.

Q. How did your PhD thesis influence your work and career?

A. Well, of course having a PhD influenced my work and enabled me to be promoted to a professorship, and I probably would never have been considered for director of extension unless I had a PhD. The topic which I chose, which was Puerto Rican Migration As a Training Investment, fitted with Gary Becker's contribution to economics which was recognized with his Nobel Prize, which was the study of human capital. Therefore, I needed to choose a topic that fit with that interest. It's the kind of reality of graduate work, and because of my interest in Puerto Rican migration in New York, I chose that topic. How did it influence my career? It certainly encouraged me to do more work along those lines. I wrote on that subject and I wrote on Puerto Ricans and the union response to Puerto Ricans. I developed the Latino Leadership Program.

Q. Tell us about your first job with the National Labor Relations Board.

A. When I graduated from college, it was my ambition to go into the field of labor and labor relations and so I passed a civil service test which took me to Washington, D.C. to military intelligence where I worked in the secret branch at the end of World War II. While there, I applied for positions in labor relations. When the war ended, I received a call offering me an opportunity to go to Buffalo, Pittsburgh, or Cleveland on a temporary assignment to take votes in the steel industry about whether they were going to go on strike. I chose Buffalo because I thought, 'Well, I'm only going to be there six weeks, I could see Niagara Falls,' – that's how I wound up in Buffalo. However, when I got to Buffalo, it turned out to that there was a permanent opening in the Buffalo office as a field examiner and I was asked by the director to take that position. As a field examiner, I investigated unfair labor practice charges brought by unions. At that time, under the Wagner Act, there were no unfair labor practice charges brought by management --- that wasn't part of the Act. I conducted elections in plants for union representation.

Q. How did you become ILR's first extension office director in Buffalo in 1946?

A. I had read about the ILR School establishment in 1945-46 when I first went to Buffalo. I developed an interest in going on to graduate school and thought I would probably apply there. And so when Jean McKelvey and Maurice Neufeld, the founders of the school, came to Buffalo with the idea of establishing the first extension program there, their meeting was held in the NLRB office, and I asked the director to meet them. He asked me to sit in on the meeting and

afterwards when I inquired about graduate work. Maurice said, 'Well, we don't really have a graduate program now,' and Jean said, 'Why don't you come to work with us and help us start the program.' So, without thinking hard about it, I actually quit my job with the NLRB and took what I thought was a temporary job with the ILR School to help them start the extension program and I've been here ever since.

Q. Was the position what you expected it to be?

A. Of course, I had a lot of advice from senior people. Effie Riley was hired to work out of Ithaca, supervising labor programs. There was another professor borrowed from another school who was supervising management programs. So, it was my job initially, just to organize a public lecture series, to make contacts with labor and management and with community organizations to get this whole program going. We actually had to beg and borrow, not steal. We had no office so we borrowed an office from the state education department, a corner of an office. We borrowed secretarial help. We borrowed facilities from the local universities – the library – in which our courses and lecture series could take place. So, I did all that. I established an advisory committee consisting of key labor and management leaders in that area in Buffalo first. From then on, we organized programs, classes, and conferences.

Q. How did you establish priorities and initiatives during the ten years you were there?

A. Certainly the advisory committees were very helpful in that respect. Faculty, resident faculty, participated heavily in the early days of the school and again also offered advice on priorities. But at the beginning our programs were offered without charge; they were free programs supported by state money. We had many volunteers. We after a while with such a big demand were running out of money, and then we had to establish priorities in effect to ration the services which we would provide. We looked for programs then which had maximum impact and we turned to – instead of offering mass education programs – more targeted programs and training trainers within organizations so the organization could provide the training themselves. We developed the course materials, the concepts, and trained them in the education methodology. Another priority was working with key leaders and a third would be working on cutting-edge issues in the field.

Q. What was happening in 1946 in the world of industrial and labor relations?

A. Strikes. Right after World War II, strikes were prevalent everywhere, and western New York was seething with conflict. It was a period of testing and combat with respect to whether unions were to be recognized and if recognized, under what terms and conditions. So setting the terms of employment under collective bargaining was a major priority. Most of the requests we received from unions were for courses on grievance procedure and maybe arbitration, labor law from management, and employers were faced with the reality of unionization or in that period, trying to develop more sophisticated personnel systems and asked for our help in doing that.

Today, the issues are different, they're not union recognition. Well, union recognition is still an issue, but they're not grievance procedure or conflict mechanisms but terms of employment, gains from the past such as retirement, health benefits, job security – those three issues which had been written into contracts in major industries are now under question and change.

Q. What convinced you to move to New York City and take the position as the Director of the Metropolitan District in 1956?

A. Opportunity and desire. Opportunity was that the director of our metropolitan office Effie Riley, the person who helped me get started in Buffalo, became the director of the New York office and developed a heart condition and had to retire early, so there was an opening. There was a search in New York for a director. After the search, the director of extension called me and said, 'Would you consider taking the job'. I hadn't really thought about it. I never applied for it but it appealed to me. It was an exciting challenge to move to another scene, to an area with entirely different labor relations practices and systems – different from western New York, different industries. In addition to that, I spent the first two years of my life in New York. My father was a student in Union Theological Seminary and at age 1 and 2, I lived in New York, and I always had in mind that maybe I was really a New Yorker.

Q. How did you go about setting goals and establishing priorities?

A. Effie Riley had established a beachhead here. She had another professional staff member and a secretary and an office. She worked through the mediators and arbitrators in the New York City area who became volunteers, in effect, to recruit clients for the program and also serve as teachers in the program. That was already in place. The program was known to a wide variety of practitioners.

My goal was to make the program more visible to a broader audience as we'd been able to do in Buffalo and western New York where the audience is, of course, smaller and easier to reach. We started with some big conferences on controversial issues. We borrowed the auditorium at the New School for Social Research, attracting big audiences so we would get to be known. I also tried to work through associations; there was a personnel management association at that time. That gave us a linkage to the companies, the chambers of commerce in the boroughs. On the union side, the Central Labor Council, where we were very fortunate in that the president of the Central Labor Council, Harry VanArsdale Jr., was very highly committed to labor education and was himself a promoter for the program.

Q. Tell us about some of the initiatives that you spearheaded and wanted to move forward on. Let's start with the Institute on Women and Work.

A. I should say that I was fortunate as I expanded the staff in attracting very talented and creative people. One of them was Barbara Wortheimer, who applied for and received a grant from the Ford Foundation to study women and unions and why are so few represented in leadership and why don't women participate actively. She published a book called *Barriers To Participation of Women In Unions*. Growing out of that, we developed Trade Union Women's Studies. I worked with her on it and Career Development For Women, which was a program of courses offered in banks and manufacturing companies to help women in low-level jobs to move up. And so, that led to the establishment of the Institute on Women And Work. We also at that time established a nationwide set of union-women summer school's offered in all four regions of the country and involving other universities. That's how we got started with the women and work issue which has proliferated at Cornell. Certainly, today, we do programs on a wide variety of issues including preventing sexual harassment, equal opportunity for women, career advancement, domestic violence. It's a big part of what Cornell does today.

Q. Tell us about your efforts in the area of labor-management cooperation.

A. In New York City, there were already many systems in place for labor-management cooperation. These were old established industries where unionization had existed for many, many years. For example, garment, trucking, long shore. A wide variety of industries already had labor-management cooperation systems and we did some work with those groups. When I became director of extension, I saw the desirability of trying to do this upstate where there was really more conflict, more overt conflict. With the help of William Foote Whyte, our famous founding professor, we developed a program called Programs For Employment and Workplace Systems, which we were able to get funded by the state with the objective of providing education, training, and consultation to companies and unions which want to work together to save jobs in New York State.”

Xerox was one of the first places where Peter Lazes, who first headed that program, worked and we worked with a wide variety of companies around the state under that program. In addition, upstate around that time was beginning to establish some labor-management councils – one in Niagara Falls and one in Jamestown for which we provided technical assistance, consultation, and training.

Q You also developed international programs. How did that come about?

A. First, I was very fortunate --- in 1956, I was given a study leave to go to England to study labor and management education in Great Britain and I picked up a number of ideas there which I was able to apply back in our own territory. That, I guess, sparked my interest in international and while I was there I was asked by the O.E.C.D. to go to Austria to help the Austrian trade unions after World War II to establish a worker-education program. So I began my interests along those lines. Later my interest in Puerto Rican migration, curiously enough, also led me to a linkage with the University of Puerto Rico. The ILR School received a grant to train Latin-American labor leaders to become labor educators, and I was in charge of that program, which we offered in cooperation with the University of Puerto Rico.

Also during that period, the A.I.D. was very active in funding labor programs and labor exchange programs and we entertained and educated large numbers of teams from all over the world – Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, on campus, and in New York. I was also asked to participate in a contract with A.I.D. which Cornell had to establish a labor relations institute at the University of Chile, where I was responsible for developing a labor education program. And then finally, in the interest of Harry VanArsdale, whom I mentioned before as the President of the Central Labor Council, was heavy again in international affairs. He required all of his business agents to take a trip abroad, a planned trip. He offered courses on international relations for his business agents and with Cornell he sponsored study tours of first Puerto Rico, which is not international – it’s part of the United States – then Jamaica, in order to understand the Caribbean, another area immigration to New York, and Mexico, and finally, to the I.L.O. in Geneva.

Q You were also involved in was the development of credit bearing courses for trade unionists. Tell us about that.

A. That idea grew out of my trip to Great Britain. I found that the British system was in contrast to the American experience. I had written an article which was published at that time in *The*

American Way In Labor Education. The American Way in Labor Education was short-term courses and in management education short workshops, conferences, a sort of quickie approach to education. The British, in contrast, had a long-term approach. They offered evening courses both for labor and management which lasted 12 weeks, 15 weeks, and were the equivalent of credit programs in that the students were required to do papers, to read extensively, and even to take examinations. So I decided to introduce that concept to New York, first on a non-credit basis. Also on campus, around that same time, the Ford Foundation funded a program which Cornell participated in – The National Institute Of Labor Education – which was a liberal arts training for union leaders which we offered for two years.

So we were getting immersed then in what you might say a more in-depth approach to education in our field. But the way we got from non-credit to credit was the students in New York City, who were participating in this program and seeing themselves as doing the equivalent of college work, decided they should be getting college credit and mounted a political campaign to do that. They campaigned internally within the ILR School contacting faculty and contacting the Board of Trustees, alumni, and Governor Rockefeller, who was our governor at that time, through Harry VanArsdale. It was also, getting, ‘Please, why aren’t we getting credit, Cornell should offer an off-campus credit program.’ So, after protracted faculty votes, the faculty -- after an examination at length as is true of any academic institution, the issue was examined at length – the faculty voted to authorize credit courses off-campus in New York ,and subsequently we extended those courses throughout the state.

Q Long before many of us were talking about the globalization of our economy, you recognized the need for union leaders to be aware of the world beyond the shores of the United States. Why?

A. Well, there was always a commonality of interests, which is much more true today. The reason it is more true today is that all of the issues have moved off shore. The same companies that are employing here and developing policies here are employers in other countries so unions here have that common interest. That was already beginning in the 50s and 60s. Another motivation was that it’s always desirable to learn from the experience of others, and I found that by going to Great Britain as I did and learning about their educational system, I thought we could also learn about labor practices in other countries that would be helpful to unions here and that was an interest shared by resident faculty. Professor John Windmuller was a pioneer in that study and many faculty members even in the early days were already beginning to look abroad for what we called then comparative labor relations.

Q. What do you perceive to be the state of organized labor today.

A. Certainly, from its peak, organized labor has gone down both in density of membership in the industries in which it functions and in power since its peak. In the 50s, it represented thirty-five percent of the work force and today, it’s about twelve....twelve point-five, I believe. The saving grace to organized labor, in terms of density, has been the rise of public sector unions and unions in the professional sector as manufacturing unions have gone down.

Unions have increased their power, clout, and density in professions such as teaching and arts and entertainment and definitely in the public sector. For example, in the city of New York, the density is probably about 80 percent of all public sector workers belong to unions. Going back

to your main question – the state of labor today, certainly, labor leadership is more sophisticated, has developed more emphasis on strategic thinking, has greater linkages with other countries than in past times, but its power and membership has gone down and the recent split in the AFL-CIO raises the question about whether the power is further weakened. Certainly, the AFL-CIO has been weakened by the split. It's lost dues and resources. It's lost membership and there's the possibility of rivalry resulting in jurisdictional disputes and rival organizing campaigns which would further weaken the unions.

Q. What are the challenges that organized labor has today and how do they deal with those challenges?

A. The challenge is to organize the unorganized, particularly in the service sector. This is a low wage sector and the one that theoretically would be the most open to organize but to meet that challenge, the unions need to: one, do a more vigorous job, put more resources internally; two, try to get a change in labor law to remove certain barriers to organizing that exist today; third, develop community linkages which in the early days of the CIO in particular, were very important in their ability to reach low-wage workers; church groups, community groups – join with them. Now, we do see some evidence that is happening and that is our hopeful aspect of what I described as a crisis, a discouraging development of a split in the AFL-CIO and a decline in membership and power.

It's certainly a difficult challenge. The way that organized labor is attempting to deal with it is to increase its political power and alliances with other groups with like interests. There is some evidence that is happening. The other thing which is promising in that respect is that even though the Change to Win, the new federation, and the AFL-CIO have separated, they are joining together in political campaigns and this is the way they're hoping to have more political power.

Q. What do you see as the role of 'outreach' activities of the Extension Division?

A. It's more important today than ever. It was part of the mandated mission of the ILR School from the very beginning. Today, the need to translate findings from research, knowledge, and experience to practitioners is more compelling than ever. So the challenge to Extension is to capitalize on its past gains and experience and reputation to build a common front with resident faculty in reaching wider audiences, having a stronger impact through leadership, education, policy, policy studies, policy conferences, consultation with leading organizations, governmental as well as labor and management. I think that can be done and I would hark back to what my mentor, Jean McKelvey, one of the founders of the school said. She said, 'We initially started with the theme the state is our campus. Then, we moved to see that the nation is our campus, as we work with national organizations. And today, the globe is our campus.'

Q. What do you consider to be the highlights of your work with the Extension Division?

A. The personal highlight of my time with Extension was the opportunity I had when I was Associate Dean and Director of Extension to work on trying to bring together the best practices from all over the state to a common statewide program and extend these programs to have a national and in some cases even an international influence. I was gratified by the fact that I had the cooperation of a very talented extension faculty who tried to establish linkages with resident

faculty and one of the linkages was to work on issues which related to faculty research. As I mentioned with Professor Bill Whyte, his research on workplace systems and labor-management conflict was built into an extension program of action and research. Faculty research: Jean McKelvey's interest in arbitration and labor-management conflict was built into programs of training women to be arbitrators, training minorities to be arbitrators, training arbitrators in general and offering conferences on the latest issues in conflict resolution. Sam Bacharach developed a study of teachers throughout New York State. We helped him get the entrée to the teacher organization and after the study was completed, we did 'feedback conferences and courses' for these teacher organizations. That's where we had our most effective success and linkage, and I hope to see that will continue under the leadership of Dean Harry Katz who has that strong emphasis.

Q. Tell us about your appointment as the first McKelvey-Grant Professor of Industrial Relations in New York City.

A. The Jean McKelvey-Alice Grant Professorship of Labor Management Relations was created after the death of Alice Grant, who put Cornell ILR in her will, and Jean added the funds to make it possible to establish the first endowed professorship at the ILR School. I was thrilled to be appointed to that professorship, which was a joint appointment of Extension and the Department of Collective Bargaining at the ILR School. I stepped down as Director of Extension and was located in New York City when I was awarded that professorship. I began to teach in the Cornell-Baruch Master's Degree program, and I offered seminars for the undergraduate students who were here in New York on internships and I offered a course on labor relations in New York City for these interns. Also, around that same time, I received a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to study the impact of technological change on the arts and entertainment industry and this began what has been a long term research interest in that field along with my colleague, Ron Seeber, whom I recruited to work on this. We published a book called *Labor Relations In Arts And Entertainment Under The Stars*, published by Cornell Press. Since then, I have been doing a wide variety of programs both consultation, action education. We did training of trainers about the economics of the industry and research.

Q. You are currently involved in a study of the film industry in New York City. What can you tell us about that?

A. It's a very exciting study because it's been commissioned by producers and unions. It's a joint labor-management study and it involves an effort on their part to work together to make New York City a stronger place for attracting the production of films. And in the study, we're cooperating with Susan Christoferson in the School of Urban Planning at Cornell and with the Fiscal Policy Institute. My two colleagues, Damone Richardson and Maria Figueroa. are working with me on the manpower, labor relations, and employment aspects of the study. Our study will be published probably spring 2006 once it's been submitted to the sponsors.

Q. Tell us a bit about your work with students in an internship program.

A. The one program I am continuing to work on is the Harry VanArsdale Internship which was established by his admirers including such industrialists as David Rockefeller and other leading industrialists and labor officials who admired him. They established an internship at Cornell for students to spend a summer or a semester in New York studying some aspect of labor and labor relations. I supervise that intern and many interesting studies have come from it. One was on

Harry VanArsdale's role in the fiscal crisis in New York where we interviewed past mayors and leading labor and management figures. The most recent of these interns studied the ethnic clubs in Local 3 I.B.E.W, which is Harry's union, electrical workers with the ethnic clubs as a way of bringing about maximum participation in unions. That article has already been published. I'm quite proud of the interns who have gone through the program and have done such an effective job.

Q, Finally, Lois, what was it that provided the opportunity for you to have such a marvelous career at the ILR School?

A. The President of Cornell at the time the school was founded was Edmund Ezra Day, who was progressive in the sense that he wanted to tie Cornell to the community, and he actively sought the ILR School's establishment at Cornell. There were many other competing universities for a state sponsored school and he said at the time, 'We're bringing the campus into hot controversy.' He said, 'That's where we should be; where there's a need. Where there's a need, education should follow.' I think the administration at Cornell and the Dean's of the ILR School have followed that dictum.