

**Keynote Address: Sociology and Organized Labor:  
Helping to Salvage a Vital Institution**

*Arthur Shostak*  
*Professor Emeritus, Drexel University*

**Editor's Note:** *Dr. Arthur B. Shostak is a recognized expert on futurism and the history and future of the American work force and organized labor. An applied sociologist since earning his Ph.D. in 1961 at Princeton University, Shostak taught at Drexel from 1967 to 2003. Previously he was on the faculty of the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, University of Pennsylvania (1961-67). He introduced courses at Drexel in futurism, race and ethnic relations, social implications of 20th century technology, and urban sociology.*

*Dr. Shostak made this presentation at the 1999 annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Sociological Society. I was fortunate to have a front row seat for Dr. Shostak's remarks. He had a captivating presence. His passion for sociology and, in this presentation, the future of labor unions was inspiring. In 2004 Dr. Shostak received the Distinguished Sociologist Award from the Pennsylvania Sociological Society.*

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Pennsylvania sociologists operate against a special backdrop. Our state is unique in its place in labor history. Philadelphia vies with New York City for the title of "Site of the Oldest Labor Union in Pre-American History" even as the western part of the state is the focus of some of the most consequential labor-based class warfare in all of American history. Given this start Pennsylvania sociologists have good reason to ally with modern local unions in an unending joint effort to help our neighbors achieve lives close to their hearts' desire. Having myself spent over 40 very satisfying years as a labor-focused applied sociologist, I would like to recommend other Pennsylvania sociologists soon try their hand at six related roles. I plan to comment briefly on each role – in alphabetical order – as each is valuable in its own way. I have learned much from taking each of them – and possibly thereby made a contribution to both the discipline I am proud to be part of and the labor movement I am proud to assist.

Coursing through all of this will be my conviction that organized labor – here in Pennsylvania in particular and elsewhere throughout the nation and world – needs all the help it can get, especially that possible from sociologists like ourselves. I take this position conscious of the disparity between it and the profession's "politically correct" preference for value-neutral social science (or any other science, for that matter). I believe an open declaration of one's bias is far more honest, and, thereby, much more preferable than the deceptive and costly myth of value neutrality.

### **Six Roles as an Applied Sociologist and Union Supporter**

While there are many more than six ways for Pennsylvania sociologists to help one another, six stand out:

**1. Advocate.** To begin with, we can help labor by championing certain ideas unionists might not otherwise wrestle with. Unlike some applied sociologists who shy away from taking the position of

## Sociology and Organized Labor: Helping to Salvage a Vital Institution

advocate believing it the prerogative only of the client, I champion a lot of options in my consulting work, and I urge them where appropriate on my union clients.

Some of these reforms are far less controversial than others. Typical is my urging clients to survey the ideas of the membership whenever possible, a method that can help explain decisions taken thereafter by union power-holders. I operate here from a foundation of respect for the rank-and-file, and find most (though not all) union leaders willing to go along.

Other positions I advocate are far more contentious, such as favoring the (far too rare) unionization of the field staff of a union. The opposition inside labor argues this will tie the hands of the leader and force the retention of poor performers. Two arguments, I remind them, we hear commonly from rabidly anti-union employers. I also recommend benign quotas to speed the advancement of staffers of talented women and people of color. And I champion more mediation and less militancy whenever a company seems trustworthy (a far too rare occurrence).

Most recently I am busy advocating a fresh approach to Informatics, the heart of the computerization process, which I regard as *the* single greatest opportunity for union renewal to come along in decades. A powerful mixture of telecommunications advances (fiber optics, satellite waves, etc.) and information technology (the Internet, the World Wide Web, etc.), informatics is making possible the “most extensive communications system on earth.” (Ogden; 17). Organized Labor thereby confronts a New Economy – one “all about . . . the ability to transform [organizations] into new entities that yesterday couldn’t be imagined and that the day after tomorrow may be obsolete.” (Tapscott; 43)

As an applied sociologist I have studied labor’s computerization process in considerable detail, both here and overseas (Canada, England, Israel, Norway, and Sweden). I have interviewed scores of pioneer users, observed many applications, assessed results, and especially sought out visionaries (in and outside of Labor) with “blue sky” ideas about possibilities.

As an applied sociologist I now write papers, speak at union functions, and in 101 other ways struggle to get labor to appreciate how it might far more creatively use computers to reinvigorate itself. My 1999 book, *CyberUnion: Empowering Labor through Computer Technology*, particularly in its affordable paperback edition, offers fresh thinking about novel applications and could help Labor get beyond limiting conventional ideas about this unlimiting phenomenon. (Shostak; 1999)

Eager to promote “out of the box” thinking I now urge an ambitious alternative to the labor-computer status quo, one that dares to incorporate a zesty mix of futuristics, innovations, new services, and old labor traditions (F-I-S-T) – all of which go better when they build on mind-boggling computerization gains.

Pennsylvania’s labor movement urgently needs the rewards possible from reliable forecasting. And, the rewards that 21<sup>st</sup> century innovations, such as computer data-mining, uniquely offer. And, the rewards that computer-based services, such as volume discounts on PCs, can provide. And the rewards possible from the computer-aided modernization of traditions (as in the production of interactive software rich with labor history material).

Why this unusual combination? Because as a professional futurist, I long ago learned how much all organizations have to gain from this ancient, and yet *avant garde*, art form. Similarly, as a labor educator, I believe labor needs to have the public associate it with cutting-edge innovations. And, like most labor educators, I champion both the extension of union-offered services (as in offering cheaper PCs and portal access for members) and the celebration of labor traditions (as in offering pro-Labor VCRs sparkling with “edu-tainment”). Overall, my CyberUnion model goes further than anything now on the labor scene, in Pennsylvania or anywhere else, and it has already earned much valuable attention from a growing number of intrigued union reformers.

## Sociology and Organized Labor: Helping to Salvage a Vital Institution

**2. Consultant.** Thanks to the mystique that accompanies the label – “applied sociologist” – I have been invited over the years to serve as a (moonlighting) consultant on a wide range of “challenges.” (I do not use the term “problem,” as it invites mind-dulling defensiveness and unduly hasty and conservative responses).

Typical of the many consulting jobs I have had with labor unions is the survey research and advising role I occupied from 1980 through 1982 with PATCO, the now-infamous and non-existent union of air traffic controllers. I prepared four national surveys of the union’s 14,000 members at four-month intervals, interpreted the data, and traveled widely explaining my findings to high-level PATCO gatherings.

My major forecast – that over 85 percent would honor a strike call – was vindicated by ensuing events, though nothing could have prepared PATCO for a Reagan-initiated firestorm. When the smoke finally lifted, the union had been decertified and 12,400 of the 12,900 PATCO strikers had been fired – two (unwarranted) acts without precedent in federal employment history.

Far more satisfying for me personally was consulting I did more recently for the American Federation of Government Employees’ Union (AFGE-AFL-CIO). This unique and progressive union asked me to survey its membership about the pluses and minuses of their computer uses. As well, AFGE asked for advice based on my findings, just the sort of request I welcomed as I was then spending three years writing my *CyberUnion* book.

Another type of consulting has had me serve a labor union client as a long-range forecaster (a very special role inside applied sociology). The Transportation and Communications Workers Union (TCW), for example, hired me to address their Constitutional Convention about the changes union members should expect in their industries, especially the railroad sector, over the next 10 or so years. I have done similarly commissioned “crystal ball” talks for unions in the communications field (CWA), electrical field (IBEW), and steel (USW), among others.

Consulting with Organized Labor, whether as a forecaster or in more conventional ways, beckons to all Pennsylvania sociologists willing to start for modest remuneration, able to work with no-nonsense pragmatists, and open to constructive criticisms from those paying the bill.

**3. “Green Power” Board Member.** For the past six years (1994 to date) I have served as a non-paid member of a multi-million dollar mutual fund pioneering in bringing “Green Power” (financial resources) to bear in labor-management relations.

The Fund was created after a longshoreman’s union officer (Bob Eason) read in my 1991 book, *Robust Unionism*, about how millions in jointly-managed (union/company) pension funds might be leveraged on behalf of improving labor-management relations. (Shoats, 1984) He persuaded a finance company in Boston (MFS Investment Management Company) to back a one-of-a-kind mutual fund, Union Standard Equity (USE), which invests 70% of USE assets in unionized firms with a good record in industrial relations.

As a pro-labor applied sociologist, I serve on the Labor Advisory Board to the Fund, and I help vet the names of companies being considered eligible for investment. (The Fund has over \$350 million, and regularly trades in nearly 90 companies.) I offer advice about demographics that bear on company prospects, consumer market trends, company reputations, and other such social science material. (Shostak, *ed*; 1966).

I also go to union functions and urge switching of pension money into USE, as I believe the Fund’s ability to vote its proxies for “good causes” in tandem with other “white hat” organizations, its support for “best practices” management, and its boost to labor solidarity (as from pride newly taken in “Green Power”) make USE a very admirable social invention.

## **Sociology and Organized Labor: Helping to Salvage a Vital Institution**

Very few, if any, Pennsylvania local unions presently participate in USE or in other related “social conscience” in screening funds, even though billions of dollars are involved in jointly-managed labor-management pension funds. Pennsylvania sociologists could get usefully involved in raising consciousness about this optional use of “Green Power” on behalf of a finer social order.

**4. Meeting Advocate.** Given how little sociologists seem to know about Organized Labor and the less-than-obvious aspects of this social invention, I have tried for years to help close the information gap. As a regular presenter at various annual meetings of the several sociological societies in which I maintain membership I often focus my paper on some aspect of unionism I am currently studying here or abroad. As well, and especially for the receptive annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, I often arranged for a panel of area union activists to share ideas with my sociology peers. These high-energy events commonly win accolades from both sides of the podium.

Similarly, wearing my hat as an applied sociologist and futurist I regularly put together a panel of union representatives (carefully mixed by gender, race and type of union) for the annual meeting of the World Future Society. As high-brow (and/or New Age) attendees are generally skeptical, if not downright suspicious, of Labor’s place in a 21<sup>st</sup> century post-industrial world, these events are often a well-applauded and long-remembered aspect of the meeting.

Pennsylvania sociologists could resolve to have each, or every other, annual meeting of the state Sociological Society include some serious and helpful attention to Organized Labor – whether a debate about its social worth, a panel discussion of its role in Pennsylvania politics, a VCR film on the latest Pennsylvania labor dispute of significance, or the like.

**5. Researcher and Writer.** Most of the 19 books I have written, edited or co-edited have dealt with some aspect or other of working-class life and/or labor unionism. (Shostak, 1962; 1964; 1968; 1980; 1986; 1991; 1992; 1994; 1996; 1999). Believing themselves ceaselessly under siege by the enemies of Labor, most union leaders shy from dealing with academics, talk only guardedly to them, and expect the worst later from the writings of prissy and naïve “eggheads.” As an applied sociologist I have worked very hard to earn their trust, and it has always helped to be able to note that I carried a union card myself with Local 189, the Workers Education Local of the CWA Union. (Shostak, 1995)

Coursing through all of my research and writing are four thoughts about the role here of the applied sociologist: First, I think it helpful to remember the First Rule of Consulting – “The client’s definition of the problem is part of the problem.” Accordingly, I try never to take what my union friends (or their management counterparts) say as the Gospel. I thereby help them and me struggle toward still-finer insights and more honesty about the matter. (Shostak, 1985)

Second, I remember the First Rule of Forecasting – “A Trend is not a Law.” Accordingly, I try never to take the 30-year decline in labor’s percent of the work force (now down to barely 14%) as irreversible. I thereby remain alert to possibilities (as through creative computerization projects) that Organized Labor may yet turn this around.

Third, I remember the First Rule of Sociology – “Things are seldom what they seem to be.” (Berger) Accordingly, I try never to take the scene for what appears obvious, what calls out for casual acceptance. I thereby force myself to search deeper, longer, and far more creatively for masked, evasive, and consequential truths.

Finally, I remember the First Rule of Communications – “Before uttering or writing a word, ask if it is truthful, kind, and necessary.” Accordingly, I try never to say or word-process anything that I am not firm about, that cuts or wounds someone, and that fails to make a contribution.

## Sociology and Organized Labor: Helping to Salvage a Vital Institution

Unionists seem to appreciate my use of these private guidelines, and reward me with fascinating anecdotes and insider material that endlessly remind me of how much more there is always to learn – and how much an outsider like myself will never really entirely grasp. In turn, I respect their confidences, and tell and write far less than possible – this arguably the First Rule of the Applied Sociologist – at least he or she who wants further business from clients distinguished by very private realities and unsparing anxieties.

**6. Teacher.** Believing as I do that applied sociology requires some actual resulting change and not simply research into or teaching about the matter, I hesitate to include this role of mine – but think I can show some justification. I have taught college students courses in Industrial Sociology, and also Social Change and Social Movements, since 1961. Since 1975 I have also taught these two courses and introduced the first-ever course in “Futuristics” at the National Labor College of the AFL-CIO George Meany Center for Labor Studies, the only such resident campus in the United States.

What qualifies any of this as applied sociology is my development of a one-of-a-kind listserve for those who complete my course. Many continue their learning, and aid the lifelong learning of all of us (especially me!) by exchanging a few times a month fresh insights, better questions, and even an answer or two via the cyberspace email system we share. In this way I like to believe my teaching may truly impact the off-campus world, a litmus paper test for me of what is meant by “applied sociology.”

Pennsylvania has several Labor Studies Programs around the State that could benefit from overdue participation by sociologists – especially those eager to share ideas by teaching such courses as Industrial Sociology, Sociology of Occupations and Professions, Social Change and Social Planning, Stratification, and Race and Ethnic relations.

### Summary

In and outside of Pennsylvania the Labor Movement is on a roll, and more significant changes are tumbling after one another now more than ever before in American labor history. If you are interested in trying out a local role here as an applied sociologist, you will need to add a union bug to your business card, join a union if appropriate (AFT, NEA, etc.), subscribe to the Labor Studies Journal, accept the equivalent of an apprentice role, and welcome being mentored by battle-scarred “veterans.”

In short, if you as a Pennsylvania sociologist are drawn now to help here, please feel free to get in touch with me ([shostaka@drexel.edu](mailto:shostaka@drexel.edu)). The rewards of helping Labor help itself – spiritual and mental rewards, in particular – cannot be matched. The camaraderie (known in the Labor Movement as “solidarity”) is priceless. And the accomplishments are the sort that key founders of our discipline – especially ameliorates in the early Chicago School – envisioned at their best. Pennsylvania sociology has much to learn from such venturesomeness, as does Pennsylvania labor . . . and all the rest of the good people of our Keystone State.

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