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Institute for Workplace Studies

A newsletter on
workplace issues
and research from
the School of
Industrial and
Labor Relations at
Cornell University

CORNELL

ILR Study Assesses NYC Firefighters' Well-Being

EVER SINCE 9/11, when 343 New York City firefighters lost their lives as the World Trade Center towers crumbled, the health and welfare of the remaining 10,000-member force has been a concern of the firefighters themselves and of the public at large. But as stressful as that tragedy was – and make no mistake, its impact was unparalleled in the history of the department – firefighters have always lived with tension and trauma. Every time they are called to the scene of a fire, and in recent years, to the scene of a medical emergency, they face risk and uncertainty.

About a year ago, the Uniformed Firefighters Association (UFA) and the Uniformed Fire Officers Association (UFOA) decided it was time to take stock of the stress levels associated with the job, with the tangible and intangible factors that affect how their members function in and out of the workplace. UFA president Stephen Cassidy and health and safety officer Philip McArdle turned to **ILR** professor Samuel Bacharach for help in gathering the relevant data; Peter Gorman, president of the UFOA, soon joined the team. Prof. Bacharach, director of the New York City-based *Institute for Workplace Studies* and the R. Brinkley Smithers Institute for Alcohol-Related Workplace Studies, has long conducted research on work-related stress and workers' health and readily agreed to help out. "It was our responsibility," Prof. Bacharach says. "We're part of the New York City community."

Through the Smithers Institute, Prof. Bacharach mobilized the resources needed to begin the study. He developed a detailed 40-page survey questionnaire that should enable the firefighters to understand how chronic work stressors and traumatic incidents affect their psychological well-being. The unions provided input on vocabulary and other critical specifics and are counting on **ILR's** neutrality to give the survey the credibility required to induce strong rank and file participation. Prof. Bacharach says he hopes that whatever the data reveal will be useful to both labor and management.

The research is being conducted in three waves. An initial 3,000 questionnaires were mailed to firefighters from 144 companies this past summer. The survey explored factors such as workplace culture, available resources, internal communications, involvement in decision making, job hazards, critical incidents, alcohol and substance abuse, and social and familial support. Follow-up surveys will be distributed in 2004 and 2005; Prof. Bacharach's research group is seeking support from federal sources for these next two phases. To date, more than 1,800 questionnaires have been returned. The Survey Research Institute at **ILR** is coding and analyzing the responses.

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Colloquium Series Begins in February

This year's Workplace Colloquium Series pays tribute to Prof. Milton Konvitz, one of **ILR's** founding faculty, who passed away in September at the age of 95. In honor of Prof. Konvitz's commitment to cross-disciplinary scholarship and practice, two Cornell professors and two alumni will address workplace and socio-economic policy issues that relate to their particular expertise. Prof. Konvitz was an authority on civil and human rights, and labor and constitutional law.

The opening session, slated for February 12, will feature Harold Levy (**ILR '74, Law '79**), senior vice president of Kaplan, Inc., and former New York City Schools Chancellor and student of Prof. Konvitz. Mr. Levy will focus on public education in the 21st century.

On March 11, Robert Frank, the H.J. Louis Professor of Economics at the Johnson Graduate School of Management, will address the effects of rising inequality on America's middle class.

Labor and management perspectives on the health care crisis will be discussed on April 15 during a panel presentation moderated by Harry Katz, the Jack Sheinkman Professor of Collective Bargaining at **ILR**.

And finally, Sheryl WuDunn (A&S '81), a news anchor on the Discovery Times Channel, will speak on May 13 about the economic outlook for Asia in the aftermath of the financial crisis that roiled the region in the 1990s. Ms. WuDunn is a member of Cornell's Board of Trustees.

The colloquium series is sponsored by the *Institute for Workplace Studies*. Contact Katie Briggs at kb41@cornell.edu or (212)340-7931, or visit www.ilr.cornell.edu/iws for program and schedule details.

Employees Respond to Pension Changes

Editor's note: The article below and accompanying sidebar continues a series highlighting the correlation between the work of ILR Extension faculty and the research projects of students in ILR's Master of Professional Studies (MPS) program in New York City.

FOR YEARS, FEDERAL EMPLOYEES counted on receiving a defined (guaranteed) benefit upon retirement that was based on age, seniority, and salary. But when a funding crisis threatened to undermine Social Security in the early 1980s, Congress decided it was time to revise the civil service pension plan. The result: a tripartite arrangement that brought federal employees into Social Security, reduced the defined benefit component, and required a defined contribution, whereby employees put a small percentage of their salaries into any of several approved investment vehicles. The changes, implemented in 1984, introduced an element of uncertainty into what had been a thoroughly dependable system.

Just how and why Congress settled on this plan and how employees responded was the subject of John Campbell's MPS research project. As an attorney for the U.S. government who specializes in labor and employment law matters, Mr. Campbell had more than an intellectual curiosity about these issues. "The topic was a natural outgrowth of what I do every day," he explains, "and it pertained to my personal experience in being part of the system."

By reading the legislative history, reviewing the academic literature on pensions and retirement, and interviewing designers of the plan and affected employees, among others, Mr. Campbell found his story. Congress had several objectives, he says,

Firefighters' Well-Being

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ILR and the firefighters are engaged as partners in this project. "This is exactly why there is a New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations," Prof. Bacharach says. "This is a study of New York workers by a New York academic institution. It's been an exhilarating experience." Data analysis from the survey will provide the foundation for additional research and will help guide policy aimed at meeting the needs of New York City firefighters.

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which included stabilizing Social Security, limiting the federal government's long-term pension liabilities, enabling employees to earn potentially higher returns on retirement savings through discretionary investments, and fashioning greater portability for employees who leave government service. Federal employee unions agreed to the changes so long as elements of the defined benefit remained. "It was a consensual undertaking," Mr. Campbell says. "The process reached across divisions among all the interest groups."

The big surprise was employee reaction. Employees at the time had the option of remaining in the defined benefit plan or switching to the new system. The plan's designers had expected 40% to make the shift, but only 3% chose to do so. Apparently, Mr. Campbell says, employees felt safer and more secure under the old system. "It was a big disappointment to the designers," he adds. Employees hired after 1983 were automatically enrolled in the new plan.

It is too early for federal employees to assess which system would have left them better off. A defined benefit is predictable; in a defined contribution plan, the return on employees' investment is a wild card. The recent slump in the stock and bond markets has slashed many Americans' retirement savings and the long-run economic outlook remains cloudy. Employees who chose either plan

... and Take Responsibility

The federal government was hardly alone when it modified the employee pension plan almost 20 years ago. At about the same time, defined benefits gave way to defined contributions as the organizing principle for retirement savings plans in the private sector as well.

"The philosophy of benefits has changed and evolved over the past 25 years," says Susan Brecher, a senior extension associate at ILR. "The focus now is more on employee involvement, which means giving employees a decision-making role in how their retirement money is invested." That principle has also been applied to health benefits, in that employees are being asked to take more responsibility for their own wellness.

Employers and employees no longer use the word "pension" to talk about the company-sponsored plans that pay out funds upon retirement, says Ms. Brecher, who manages ILR Extension's workshop series on human resources (HR) and has developed HR courses for eCornell, the university's distance learning partner. Instead, the discourse is about "savings" or "investment plans," with the emphasis clearly on employee responsibility for managing the process. The eCornell course on strategic benefits planning, which is geared to higher level HR professionals, highlights the four components of sound retirement plans: Social Security, working past the age of 65 to lock in the highest salary and the most benefits, company retirement and savings plans, and personal investments.

One byproduct of this shift in plan structure is portability, which allows employees to carry their savings to a new job. This is a particularly desirable feature in an economy where employees no longer stay with a company for life, as was typical when traditional pensions were still the operative model.

Contact Susan Brecher at (212)3402872 or swb6@cornell.edu for more information.

may ultimately regret or celebrate their decision. Regardless, employee behavior in response to pension plan changes warrants further study.

Go to www.ilr.cornell.edu/mpsnyc to read about the MPS program.

ILR Student Interns Work New York

NEW YORK CITY IS THE HEADQUARTERS of American capitalism. It is home base to numerous corporations, financial service providers, international organizations, labor unions, law firms, and non-profits. Not surprisingly, it's an important base for ILR's undergraduate internship program, an elective piece of the curriculum that provides students a chance to actually do the work they only learn about in the abstract while on campus.

"Our students know how to succeed in the classroom," says Cletus Daniel, a labor history professor and director of the program. "But the ways you succeed on a test and in the workplace are different. Giving the students a chance to work in a career encompassed in the field of industrial and labor relations is extremely gratifying for them."

In any given semester (and sometimes the summer before or after), about 30 juniors and seniors are ensconced in internships in locales as far flung as New York City, Washington D.C., the West Coast, Europe, and points in between. ILR has a roster of approximately 175 employer sponsors, including many alumni who understand the value of real world experience. Potential sponsors undergo stiff questioning by Prof. Daniel and program coordinator Brigid Beachler before being approved for the program. ILR insists that interns' responsibilities be clearly related to the academic discipline of the workplace and consistent with the type of work done by professionals. Interns at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), for example, might help conduct representation elections or investigate unfair labor practice charges; those at private companies might get involved in compensation surveys, college recruiting, and the like.

New York is a strong draw for students interested in human resources or the labor movement, or in making contacts for future careers in banking or international work. Moreover, many ILR students grew up in the metropolitan area and are eager to experience the city as nascent professionals. Companies such as IBM, Mercer Consulting, Johnson Controls, and Loew's Cineplex serve as sponsors, as do the NLRB, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the United Federation of Teachers.

The program suffered a setback after 9/11. Several sponsors were lost in the World Trade Center and some students and parents decided the times were too unsettled to locate in the city. In addition, the recession caused some sponsors to suspend their internship programs. Prof. Daniel is now working with ILR's New York City Extension office and the *Institute for Workplace Studies (IWS)* to leverage their labor and management contacts into additional sponsored slots.

Student interns are directly supervised by faculty and earn up to one semester's worth of credit. They work 30 hours a week (some employers pay a stipend) to

earn six elective satisfactory-unsatisfactory credits. They write a paper about some aspect of the work they are doing, which is graded and worth three credits. Interns also enroll in an academic course that adds three more credits. New York City interns take a course on leadership in organizations that is taught by Prof. Samuel Bacharach, a member of ILR's organizational behavior department and director of IWS. Prof. Daniel says the class is well received by students who relish the opportunity to read classic texts, such as *The Prince*, by Niccolo Machiavelli. Course arrangements vary for interns posted elsewhere.

"Most students say the internship is the single most important educational experience they have," Prof. Daniel notes. And for some, it is a springboard to that all-important first job.

Contact Ms. Beachler at (607)255-2266 or bk30@cornell.edu to learn more.

ILR Extends Its Reach Worldwide

THE WORLD GETS SMALLER all the time — even as ILR's reach grows longer. Indeed, several initiatives now underway will raise ILR's international profile and ensure faculty, students, and staff will have opportunities to engage with workplace issues on a global scale.

Collaborative research, academic exchanges, conferences, guest speakers, internships, and easier access to existing resources are the key elements of the current effort. Last year Dean Edward Lawler established a faculty committee, chaired by Prof. Maria Cook, to explore avenues by which ILR can strengthen and promote the international expertise of its core constituents. More recently, Dean Lawler and the New York City Extension office hosted a reception at the Cornell Club for Brazil's president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a former labor leader in his country and an advocate for developing economies worldwide, who was in the United States to address the United Nations' General Assembly.

One focus of the committee's work has been the development of bilateral partnerships. In September, ILR and the International Institute for Labour

Studies (IILS) of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which is headquartered in Geneva, signed a memorandum of understanding that will facilitate substantive contacts between the two institutions, including internships for students, joint research, and study leaves for faculty. On a related front, talks are also taking place between ILR and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC), an agency of the European Union, about devising an arrangement similar to that involving ILR and the IILS. Meanwhile, the committee is overseeing development of a website that would give students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the public a point of entry to all things international at ILR, such as courses, research projects, internships, grants, and special events.

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ilr School of Industrial
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International Focus

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Other international pursuits have recently come to fruition or are in development. Sean Sweeney, director of labor studies for **ILR** Extension, has written a summary overview of labor relations in the United States and presented his findings at an EFILWC conference in Ireland. Stuart Basefsky, chief research librarian at Catherwood Library, is involved in an exchange program with ILO librarians. Arthur Wheaton, a senior extension associate in the Buffalo office, is working with colleagues in the U.S. and Ireland to form alliances and develop educational exchanges as part of an adult education and lifelong learning program in conjunction with Atlantic Corridor, an organization that promotes trade, tourism, cultural and educational exchanges between Ireland/Northern Ireland and New York State. In addition, the R. Brinkley Smithers Institute for Alcohol-Related Workplace Studies is co-sponsoring a conference on drug and alcohol abuse in the

workplace with the ILO's Safe Work Programme, to be held early next year in New York City. The invited participants, including researchers and practitioners, and representatives from government, unions, and employer organizations, will document and disseminate an inventory of best practices for prevention, education, and intervention.

ILR's focus on the larger world is consistent with the commitment of Cornell's new president, Jeffrey Lehman (A&S '77), to build a "transnational university of the future." With Prof. Cook as a member of the university's international studies advisory council and an expanding list of international ventures, **ILR** expects to be a key player in realizing President Lehman's vision. ■

GO TO →

www.ilr.cornell.edu/iws for updates about
Institute for Workplace Studies events.