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## IWS briefing, Summer 2007 Volume 7 Issue 2

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## IWS briefing, Summer 2007 Volume 7 Issue 2

### **Abstract**

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

### **Keywords**

ILR, Institute for Workplace Studies, IWS, labor, market, employee, managers, Stuart Basefsky, librarian, Prof. Givan, collective bargaining, labor law, labor history

### **Comments**

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## Academia Meets the Real World at ILR

**The so-called gap between theory and practice is looking ever narrower at ILR these days.**

Alumni and practitioners are facilitating this development through their involvement with a course given in New York City for undergraduate participants in the school's credit internship program and through a colloquium series sponsored by the *Institute for Workplace Studies (IWS)*.

"As a teacher and director of the institute," said Prof. Samuel Bacharach, "I'm concerned about how to integrate practical knowledge into the more academic agenda." His strategy: invite individuals who daily grapple with workplace issues to teach a class in his course on the politics of organizational change or to give a talk at one of the round-table sessions that bring together academics, practitioners, policymakers, and students.

These activities are linked not only by a common purpose but also by their connection to the *IWS*. The motivating premise behind the founding of the institute in 1999 — to enhance **ILR's** presence in New York City and to serve as a center for the melding of research and outreach — is realized by the contributions of accomplished **ILR** alumni and friends of the school in students' learning and in the exchange of knowledge and ideas among colloquium attendees. During the spring 2007 semester, four practitioners (including alumni) spoke about their experiences with, and observations of, tumultuous times within organizations to the 10 students in Prof. Bacharach's course. Five other alumni, including one **ILR** professor and former dean (David Lipsky, **ILR '61**), spoke in the collo-

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## ILR Librarian Serious About Information

**W**HEN IS A LIBRARIAN NOT A LIBRARIAN? When he wears several hats, lends out ideas at least as often as books, considers people an integral part of the library's collections, and goes by the name of Stuart Basefsky.

Folks, this is not a joke. Since joining **ILR's** Catherwood Library in 1993, Mr. Basefsky has expansively interpreted his job by corralling an innate curiosity and boundless energy into a multi-pronged career that serves the disparate information needs of the **ILR** community, broadly conceived. On paper, he is senior reference librarian, director of the *IWS (Institute for Workplace Studies)* News Bureau, and a lecturer for the human resource studies department. But if you ask Mr. Basefsky to define exactly what he does, this is the gist of what he says:

"I see my role as that of facilitator. I match people to information products and bring people to people. I help create networks at **ILR** and others that involve **ILR**, which are as much a part of the library as books and articles. I disseminate documents to a wide audience and help people link facts to a larger context...I'm also a consultant, a trainer, and a reporter...Basically, my skill set allows me to be a gap filler."

Indeed. Way back in 1999, Mr. Basefsky expressed his view of libraries as agents of change in an article for *Information Outlook*, a journal of the Special Libraries Association. He discussed the importance of outreach, of breaching the physical limitations of the library by taking information directly to patrons. He urged librarians to be active providers of knowledge and to stretch beyond the traditional functions of collecting, organizing, and assisting. He called for engagement with the parent institution's management, demonstrations on the use of information, development of special services for key constituencies, and understanding what clients need instead of simply responding to their requests.

By almost any measure, Mr. Basefsky has personally met the challenge he laid out for his profession. In his role as senior reference librarian — perhaps the most traditional aspect of his job — Mr. Basefsky's primary task is to support the mission of the school. That means accommodating the information needs of students, faculty, and administrators; assisting scholars, workers, managers, policymakers, and anyone else with an interest in workplace issues; and helping to develop internet guides to relevant commercial and free resources.

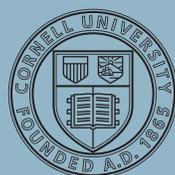
But it is through the additional roles he plays that Mr. Basefsky has the chance to implement his vision of the postmodern library. Consider, for a

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*A newsletter on workplace issues and research from the ILR School at Cornell University*



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## ILR Librarian

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moment, the *IWS Documented News Service*. This free email product, conceived by Mr. Basefsky more than 10 years ago as an informal aide for ILR faculty, is now a must-have resource for 2,000 practitioners, journalists, and researchers worldwide. The service provides real-time notification of just-released government data and reports; policy papers from agencies, associations, institutes, and think tanks; and scholarly research related to the workplace. Each email contains the title of the document and its author(s), an excerpt and/or abstract, other content indicators as appropriate, and a link to the original source. Subscribers may choose daily announcements or a weekly summary.

The news bureau and its news service allow Mr. Basefsky to showcase his talents as matchmaker, reporter, and public servant. "I use my knowledge of authoritative resources to give people the full-text document behind the news," he explains. In so doing, Mr. Basefsky fills a public policy gap by disseminating knowledge that might otherwise have languished out of sight. The news service positions him to respond to queries about critical documents and supply the background that helps patrons make sense of the information. He also relies on the news service to mediate relationships between ILR and other researchers and organizations. "They want their products to be useful but can't efficiently distribute them on their own," he notes. "So I do it for free and that opens the door to other possible connections with the school, like internships and faculty exchanges." And finally, the news service reinforces ILR's brand and extends the library's domain by bringing facts and ideas to people at their desks regardless of their affiliation.

A four-credit course Mr. Basefsky offers every spring burnishes his skills as a consultant and trainer. He designed the class to enhance students' understanding of, and ability to use, the commercial and free publications that

support the practice of human resource (HR) management. Students achieve this goal by solving real-world problems or answering real-world questions posed by HR practitioners affiliated with ILR's Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies. The 18 students — mostly from the professional graduate program — work in teams of two to complete four projects during the semester, including one of their own choosing. With Mr. Basefsky serving as consultant-in-chief, he simultaneously teaches them the art of consulting by guiding them through the process of client interviews, research, report writing, and oral presentations. "Some companies have given the same question to consulting firms, and we do at least as well," Mr. Basefsky says. In fact, several years ago a Swiss pharmaceuticals company flew two undergraduates to headquarters so they could brainstorm with the HR team.

For clients outside the university, Mr. Basefsky uses his knowledge of search methodology and databases to customize training sessions that help organizations build internal capacity in the identification and use of key resources. He has traveled to Europe to train professors in efficient and productive use of the internet and has also helped a U.S. company that was concerned about recruiting and retaining top talent.

Sometimes there's no stopping Mr. Basefsky. His self-described need for continuous learning and high levels of social interaction sustain his passion for the job. He once thought about a career in the diplomatic corps, attended law school instead, but then taught social studies and German to high school students. He found his true calling when he took a job as government documents librarian at Duke University where he quickly became an authority on government documents and public policy issues. "I was finally able to match my neurosis with my occupation," Mr. Basefsky laughs. "I get bored easily and like to learn something new daily. And I have a compulsion to share the interesting things I find." ■

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## Academia Meets Real World

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quium series about a variety of challenges now roiling the workplace.

Organizational change rises or falls on the basis of process and practice, perhaps more so than on the correctness of any structural redesign. Prof. Bacharach's focus on applied leadership in lectures and assigned readings underscores the importance of interpersonal and power dynamics to the outcome of change initiatives. After setting out that theoretical framework, he relies on the savvy of proven leaders to make the point come alive. Ed Watt, secretary-treasurer of Transport Workers Union Local 100 in New York City, told students about the five years of preparation undertaken before the contract negotiations, and subsequent strike, in 2005. Union leaders forged coalitions inside and outside the organization and surveyed members and the public about safety in the subways, service levels, fares, and similar matters. He also discussed the elements of leadership: "It's about having a vision, being competent, communicating, earning trust, and showing sincerity and reliability," he said.

Another guest lecturer, Daniel Corr (ILR MPS '05), principal and senior consultant at Mercer Human Resource Consulting, shared his perspective on organizational change as it happened to and around him. Referring to the consolidation of two units within the company, each with its own culture and structure, Mr. Corr noted the challenges of navigating the political landscape. He was pursuing his master of professional studies at ILR's New York City program at the time and sought advice from Prof. Bacharach, his research advisor. "He reinforced the notion that change presents opportunity and urged me to look at developing relationships and gaining support from others by offering insights and being constructive," Mr. Corr said. These are the lessons Mr. Corr hoped the students would imbibe. "I tried to relate my unique situation to theories of organizational change so they would see these are not just academic ideas but also the basis for real-life transformation," he explained.

That message was heard loud and clear. Seth Warshaw, a junior who interned at an investment bank last semester, also looked to the course work and Prof. Bacharach's guidance to figure out how to approach his supervisor to ask for greater involvement in the work of his unit. Christopher Tazzi, a junior with

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## Watching and Learning as Britain Privatizes Health Care

**N**ATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE IS A HALLMARK of British society — a model, of sorts, for the type of system some health care advocates would like to see established in the United States. But even as criticism in this country escalates about the structure, the costs, and the gaps of the free market approach to health care, the British system itself is moving cautiously toward privatization. Just how this transformation affects the workplace and the unions representing health care workers is the main item on Professor Rebecca Givan's research agenda.

A recent addition to ILR's Department of Collective Bargaining, Labor Law, and Labor History, Prof. Givan notes that the health care system in Britain has been in transition since the Thatcher era of the 1980s. "The shift reflects a belief that the private sector can do it better," Prof. Givan says. "Privatization is seen as a way to introduce competition to the public sector and to finance things, like new hospitals, with less of an upfront outlay of public funds." Prof. Givan is collaborating on this project with Stephen Bach, a colleague from King's College, London.

Privatization is also forcing the unions to alter their strategy and tactics. The degree of private ownership and control varies by location, with some hospitals and clinics built with private funds, some staffed with private managers, some cleaned by private subcontractors, and all manner of public-private arrangements in between. What unifies these sites is the critical role the 17 health care unions play in helping to shape and implement new workplace structures and relationships.

"The unions have adopted a twin-track approach," Prof. Givan explains. "They resist privatization on the policy level but deal with it in practice. Some leaders and members are ideologically opposed and argue against profit making in a public service like health care. From a practical perspective, however, the unions are determined to make the transformation as good for the members as possible." Prof. Givan says their success in doing so largely depends on the unions' size and strength at any given location and the resourcefulness and intelligence of the union representatives. In other words, employers tend to be more resistant, and terms and conditions of employment more oppressive, where the unions are small and relatively weak.

Where the unions hold at least some power, many employers, both public and private, rely on them for consultation and communication. Prof. Givan, who first studied employment relations in the British National Health Service for her Ph.D. thesis, says the unions serve as a bridge between public and private employers while helping to win acceptance among the workers for the changes that inevitably accompany structural reform. Although the unions may help facilitate the process, she notes, they have not been co-opted; labor leaders remain troubled by private sector practices such as managerial methods that lead to higher turnover and pay scales and pensions that are inferior to those in the public health care sector.

Unions are pushing back where they can. In some instances, they are exercising their traditional right to withhold labor by mounting and threatening strikes and other job actions — tactics that have occasionally led to increases in pay. Nurses are particularly uneasy about privatization. They worry that the quality of patient care could be compromised by workplace practices such as reliance on subcontractors to clean hospitals and clinics and the allocation of nursing tasks to less-skilled aides and other support services workers. Here, too, the union is taking an assertive stand. "The Royal College of Nursing is very effective in protecting nurses' interests and promoting patient care issues," Prof. Givan says.

Employees' experiences with private sector management have been mixed. At one hospital Prof. Givan studied, workplace conditions are better for support services employees than for administrative employees. Administrative workers reported chronic problems with new work systems and the physical environment of their new building, whereas support services employees had the benefit of a full-time union representative who successfully dealt with irksome issues. The result: membership in the dominant on-site union increased by half in a matter of months, boosting the union's density to approximately 90% from 60%. Workers in England have the option of joining the on-site union or not, Prof. Givan notes, and many see the union as a channel for addressing problems.

At this point it is unclear whether the unions will abandon their campaign against privatization or step up their defiance. However the situation in England plays out, there may be some lessons for health care organizations, policymakers, and unions in the United States. Prof. Givan suggests three broad issues bear scrutiny: the nature of the relationship between professionals (doctors and nurses) and support staff, and accompanying tensions over the permeability of professional boundaries and the perceived deterioration in working conditions; the challenge of organizational change in an industry with strong unions, large workplaces, government regulation, financial and managerial restructuring, and multiple interests pulling in different directions; and the role of subcontractors and the impact on patient care when workers earn low wages, turn over frequently, and lack pride in and commitment to the job.

Insights gleaned from this project have already been transferred to the classroom. Prof. Givan co-taught a new course on work and health care along with seven other ILR colleagues this past spring and is looking forward to making this topic integral to ILR's curriculum. ■

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### **Academia Meets Real World**

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an internship at a financial services company, said the politics-and-change theme was not applicable to his current situation but expected it would be useful in the future. He did, however, pick up on one critical lesson: the power of networking. "Each week we met with people who do different things," Mr. Tazzi said, "and they all said, 'if you need help, don't hesitate to contact me.' That was the best part."

It's not only the students who benefit from alumni participation in *IWS* activities; alumni also come away with new insights into workplace issues. The second *IWS* workplace colloquium this past season featured Joseph Rich (**ILR**'80, MS'86), chairman of Pearl Meyer & Partners, who spoke about executive compensation and regulatory change. Mr. Rich, a member of the **ILR** Alumni Board and the Dean's Advisory Council, was joined at the presenters' table by Lisa Hunter (**ILR** '77), outgoing president of the **ILR** Alumni

Association and president of Newport Consulting Group, Inc., and Kevin Hallock, professor of human resource studies. Following his comments, a lively discussion ensued about the political and social aspects of what is widely perceived as excessive compensation for corporate executives. Talk centered on income distribution and the matter of distributive economic justice. "Every color of the political rainbow was represented," Mr. Rich commented.

And for Mr. Rich himself, the dialogue was eye-opening. "As consultants, we live in an insular world with a singular view of things," he said. "It was an opportunity for me to learn how people think about the range of issues pertaining to executive compensation. And it made me more aware, as a person, of the questions I might think about."

Mission accomplished — at least for now. ■