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THE UNION FOR RADICAL POLITICAL ECONOMICS: ITS HISTORY AND NATURE

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The Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) was founded in the summer of 1968, when graduate students and faculty from the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), Harvard University and Radcliffe College held a working meeting in Ann Arbor just a few weeks before the National Democratic Party Convention in Chicago. Some of the founding members included Sam Bowles, Marilyn Power, Lourdes Beneria, Paddi Quick, Barry Bluestone, Gene Coyle, Herb Gintis, Art McEwen, John Pool, Michael Reich, Tom Weisskopf, and Howard Wachtel. URPE's core purpose was and is to be an alternative professional organization for left political economists and an intellectual home for academics, policy-makers, and activists who are interested in participating in a left intellectual debate on theoretical and policy issues.

The prospectus of URPE, developed in the first few weeks of its inception, included the following objectives (URPE 1968). First, to promote a new interdisciplinary approach to political economy which includes also relevant themes from political science, sociology and social psychology. Second, to develop new courses and research areas which reflect the urgencies of the day and a new value premise. Such areas include the economics of the ghetto, poverty, imperialism, interest groups, and the military-industry complex. And third, political economics should be sensitive to the needs of the social movements of

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our day, and have more group research, with an approach that links all issues to a broad framework of analysis.

The organization opposes all exploitation on the basis of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other social/economic/cultural constructs. URPE presents constructive critical analyses of the capitalist system and supports debate and discussion on alternative left visions of a socialist society. URPE was founded by activist-oriented individuals who realized the need for coherent strategy and theory. It has often experienced a tension between theory and activism. Those interested in theory see URPE as an intellectual community to discuss and develop research in left political economy. Those interested in activism see URPE as an organization that can be a proactive resource for non-economists to understand economic issues from a left perspective. Organizational efforts to wed these divergent views have focused on preparation and dissemination of publications and other activities that present alternative left visions of economic analysis.

URPE's main activities include publications, annual meetings, and associated projects. The publications include a journal which is published four times a year, special education projects, and a newsletter. The journal is called the *Review of Radical Political Economics*, and is run by an elected editorial board and a managing editor. Many special issues of *RRPE* have emerged, including five on the political economy of women. Over the years URPE has published a number of special projects in book form, such as *U.S. Capitalism in Crisis* (1978); two volumes on *The Imperiled Economy* (one on micro and macro, respectively) (1987, 1988); and volumes on political economy courses and readings. The *URPE Newsletter* is also published quarterly and includes news of the organization and short articles on current topics from members. The most prolific period of publication activity was the 1970s, when URPE was organized in research collectives, and published the results of this research in the areas of, for instance, food policy, energy, public sector spending, and women's issues. The URPE home page on the World Wide Web includes information on the journal and on activities in the organization (organized by Eric Nillson in 1995).

There are two main annual meetings of URPE. First there is the academic conference held in January of each year in a prominent US City, as part

of the Allied Social Science Association (ASSA). In this forum, URPE members present papers in a collegial environment (usually about 30 URPE sessions are held), and socialize at dinners and other gatherings. And secondly, there is the annual summer camp conference, where both academics and activists informally participate in discussions, classes, work-in-progress, networking, and social activities. Topics are chosen to reflect relevant policy debates in the news, as well as other themes.

URPE has undertaken many other activities. For instance, research groups have been active, including the Political Education and Action Project and the Economics Education Project. The Women's Caucus was formed in 1971 to protest the white male domination in the organization that tended to mute women's and feminists' voices. The Gay, Lesbian and Bi-Sexual Caucus was formed in the early 1980s and has actively participated in sponsoring workshops and panels on issues such as sexuality, family policy, and AIDS, as well as presented the concerns of gays, lesbians, and bi-sexuals to the organization as a whole. Also, the Third World Caucus was founded in the late 1980s in order to bring a representative voice of people of color and from countries of the South into the organization and onto the Steering Committee.

The struggle within the organization for representation and participation in the radical debate not only led to greater heterodoxy of views in the organization, but has also reinforced a non-hierarchical structure. URPE has attempted to maintain a broad community of left academics and intellectuals among its membership, despite individuals' diverse political and theoretical perspectives. Through overlapping membership and similar goals, URPE has connections with other left political economy organizations. These include exchange of information and ideas with the Conference of Socialist Economists in the United Kingdom (which publishes the journal *Capital and Class*), and sponsorship of *the Dollars and Sense* Publishing Collective, when it first began in the mid-1970s. Serious efforts are made to keep the journal, *RRPE*, accessible to low-income students and the unemployed with a multi-tier system of subscription rates and a special membership rate without a journal subscription. URPE membership has always run the whole gambit of heterodox schools of thought, from neo-Marxist to institutional, to post Keynesian, feminism, and social economics.

URPE's influence in the economics profession is concentrated in the United States; although the journal and conference meetings have an international showing. The period of greatest prominence ranged from its inception through the 1970s at a time when graduate and undergraduate students were clamoring for alternative, left, and Marxian teachings in an atmosphere of broader social change in the United States. The organization served as a recruitment center for many universities and colleges that were searching for academics in political economy to fulfill the demands of their students. In the late 1980s and 1990s, however, reduced interest in Marxian economics and radical economics, an increased number of interdisciplinary programs that incorporate radical social theory, an escalation in the number of other political economy organizations and journals, and a rise in the significance of conservative political economy reduced the importance of URPE in the political economy debate among academics. The shrinking space for radical political economists' voices in the public debate makes the existence of an organization like URPE as important as previously, but more difficult as well.

Perhaps the most promising development for radical political economy has been increasing linkages between the schools of thought. Many members of URPE have been active in the commencement of new organizations and journals. For instance, the International Confederation of Associations for the Reform of Economics (ICARE), seeks to build bridges between the various strands of heterodoxy. Some members of URPE became active in the formation of the Association for Social and Economic Analysis (which publishes the journal *Rethinking Marxism*), and the International Association for Feminist Economics (which publishes *Feminist Economics*). Also, in the 1990s, URPE developed a stronger membership base among post Keynesian economists and institutionalists. On the internet, and at conferences, there are stronger links between the schools of radical or heterodox economics. And many more publishers are active in soliciting manuscripts in political economy. Some of these activities negatively impact on URPE, but at the same time emanate to some degree from the very successes of URPE in helping to revive political economy in the late 1900s into the next century.

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