

Ideas into Motion: Progressive Economics and Social Change Movements

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Introduction: A Natural, but Difficult, Alliance

"Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it." Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845.²

There is a natural synergy between progressive economists and progressive social change movements.³ Progressive economists challenge conventional economic theories and policies on grounds of inequality, exploitation, or unsustainability. They work to explain why business-dominated, market-oriented economies fail to meet human and environmental needs, and develop alternative economic models and policies which would do a better job. Progressive social movements, meanwhile, work to build stronger popular awareness of the failures and problems of modern-day capitalism, educate the public about their causes and potential solutions, and then mobilize political pressure and power to win changes that improve human and environmental conditions. Social change movements need the ideas and expertise of progressive economists: to make their arguments stronger and more convincing, and to help design structures and policies that could realistically solve the problems they confront. And progressive economists (those who care about real-world problems and conditions, at any rate, as opposed to those whose engagement is motivated only by intellectual curiosity) need social movements if they hope to see their ideas contribute to real progress. Thinking, writing, and publishing will not change the world: only concrete political struggle and change can do that – whether in the electoral arena, or in broader movements and popular consciousness. So there is an obvious common cause between the work of progressive economists, and the campaigns and struggles of progressive movements which fight for similar goals.

Despite the inherent complementarity of progressive economics and progressive political movements, however, in practice it can be challenging to build strong and effective ties between these two worlds. In my experience, most progressive economists (in academia and in other settings) care deeply about the state of economic, social, and environmental reform, and would love for their own work to contribute to

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² Published in Feuer (1959), p. 245.

³ This chapter uses the terms progressive, heterodox, and left economics interchangeably, acknowledging the nuances of different meanings and applications.

achieving those goals. And most social change activists welcome the input, knowledge, and advice that can be provided by like-minded economic experts – so long, crucially, as that input is offered in a respectful, democratic manner. Nevertheless, the links between progressive economic research and progressive activism are underdeveloped; the intellectual and personal capacities of progressive economists are rarely utilized to their fullest potential by social change movements. Progressive economists engage fiercely and effectively in the battle of ideas within their discipline: within academic departments, in journals, and at conferences. Fewer are engaged as energetically in the real-world policy and political struggles that will determine the course of our economy and society.

Several concrete factors help to explain the limited success achieved in bridging the gap between academic and theoretical research, and on-the-ground social activism. For progressive economists in universities, the institutional environments in which they work may limit their capacity to contribute actively to social change campaigns – all the more so in light of the relentless corporatization and marketization of universities. Too many economists (including progressive ones) are notoriously bad communicators, cloaking their discourse in jargon and often unnecessary mathematical formulations; this inhibits cooperation with grass-roots social movements which must communicate their messages accessibly and effectively. Some academic or professional economists are too quick to adopt the trappings of expertise, discounting the knowledge, experience, and perspectives of the activists they aim to advise and support – or, worse yet, offering unsolicited criticisms of movements and their leaders. These problems create needless distance between activists and heterodox economists whose expertise is genuinely valuable, but which must be offered with respect and humility.

On the social movement side of the relationship, certain practices and attitudes may also undermine the potential for a stronger working relationship with progressive economists. Activists are naturally focused on immediate, actionable demands and opportunities, often with little time for big-picture meta-analyses and theoretical models. They may discount the contributions that professional economists could make to their theoretical understanding and strategizing, in favour of immediate “facts and figures” and other easy-to-use information. They may not appreciate or respect the institutional constraints which limit what practicing economists can contribute to their movements, or take for granted the time and resources which those responsibilities require. On rare occasions, activists may exhibit a knee-jerk “anti-academic” bias, disparaging the knowledge and perspective of supportive economists and other experts.

These factors may explain why progressive economists have not been as fully engaged in real-world social change movements as they could have been. But they are surely surmountable. Indeed, throughout the history of progressive economics, there are many examples of theorists and teachers who made outstanding contributions to social change: they have done so, not just by thinking great thoughts, but by connecting those thoughts to relevant political debates and openings, and supporting efforts by grass-roots campaigners to mobilize those ideas and win change. Considering the daunting economic, social, and environmental crises which face the world today, the collective body of progressive economic thought can and must be mobilized to its full potential. This is possible, with appropriate effort and planning on the part of both economists and social change campaigners.

This chapter further considers the relationships between progressive economics and social change movements. The next section proposes several “best practices” which could improve and strengthen the ways in which progressive economists can participate in and support social change movements. The

following section then provides a non-exhaustive catalogue of examples of progressive economists who have successfully connected their intellectual work with real-world social change struggles. This inventory is organized into several categories: including social movements; trade unions; progressive economic associations; progressive economic think tanks; and political parties and governments. The final section of the chapter considers a more detailed case study of one successful example of fruitful cooperation between progressive economic research and social change economic campaigning, embodying many of the best practices discussed earlier. The conclusion of the chapter evaluates the prospects and challenges for the deeper integration of progressive economics with social change organizing, at a moment in human history when the need to both critique the many failures of the existing economy and design (and win) better alternatives, is perhaps more urgent than ever.

I should acknowledge that these observations inevitably reflect my personal experience as an activist, progressive economist. I trained at universities that encouraged heterodox and radical approaches to economics. I then worked professionally in various roles with great opportunities for engagement with real-world social change movements, including serving as economist for a major trade union, working for a progressive economic think tank, and conducting popular economic literacy training in various settings. But I have also worked in universities, and hence also appreciate the challenges and constraints facing progressive economists in that milieu. This mixture of experience sparked my own thinking about practical ways to strengthen cooperation between progressive economists and social change movements.

Best Practices for Mobilizing Progressive Economics (and Economists)

Most progressive economists care deeply about realizing the changes and reforms that their research indicates would improve the human and environmental condition. Most also understand well that merely expounding progressive ideas (in books, articles, and conferences) will not by itself win the policies we need – no matter how insightful or compelling their presentation. While there are numerous pragmatic and political challenges encountered in enlisting economists more fulsomely into social change movements, those challenges can be overcome (as attested by the illustrative review of successful examples of progressive economics activism provided later in this chapter). In my experience, some relatively simple strategies and practices, utilized by economists and activists alike, would support more successful engagement and cooperation between economic experts and social change activists.⁴

Invest in Relationships: Cold calls from social change activists seeking immediate assistance or support from economists will be less effective than the cultivation of ongoing relationships and partnerships. Good social movement organizers know to identify potentially sympathetic experts who can provide validation, credibility, and research for their cause. Over time, maintaining a roster of intellectual allies (based in academia or other settings) is a valuable tool in any movement's arsenal. Similarly, economists who want to support progressive movements need to develop trust and credibility with their hoped-for activist partners. They can't just "show up" to enlighten activists with their favoured theories or strategies. Instead, they must get to know a movement, its members and leaders, making sure to understand its history and goals, and successfully complete some initial tasks and assignments. The resulting bonds of communication, trust, and goodwill will then facilitate more ambitious and continuous participation and cooperation.

⁴ This section develops ideas initially presented in Stanford (2008).

Collaborate to Identify Priorities: Progressive economists will have their own ideas on the most important and promising topics around which they are keen to research and mobilize. Indeed, their knowledge and perspective on economic forces is useful intelligence for social movements as they develop their agendas and priorities. But ultimate leadership in selecting priority issues for ongoing activism must ultimately rest with the campaigns and movements attempting to build power and win change. Sympathetic economists should follow the lead of the movements in identifying the most promising and pressing issues on which to focus their efforts. Remember, too, that successful social change movements make their own news: an issue will become important (hence sparking broad interest, among policy-makers and journal editors alike) if social movements are strong enough to make it important. In that way, activist economists benefit from their connections to movements and campaigns that are effecting real-world change.

Educate Communities and Activists: One of the most important contributions heterodox economists can make to social movements is to help train their members and activists in economics.⁵ Orthodox economics deliberately fosters an aura of technical jargon and complexity that deters many interested people from learning more about economics. That lack of knowledge and confidence then holds back activists from demanding and fighting for progressive goals, which they worry might not be “economically viable”. Progressive economists enjoy a unique capacity to share knowledge and empower activists. Such training can occur in a range of settings: from formal school and higher-education offerings, to organized community and adult education initiatives, to on-line instructional resources. To fulfil this potential effectively, however, economists need to be thoughtful and respectful in how they teach. Needless technical or quantitative presentations will be neither useful nor interesting to most non-specialist audiences. Pedagogy should focus on broad concepts and arguments that participants can wield in their real-world organizing and activism, building wherever possible on the lived experience of the audiences.⁶ Trying to educate activists on obscure internecine economic debates will be far less useful than providing information and arguments which directly support their immediate activism. Another way that academic economists can connect their teaching with real-world activism is by supporting their own students to become more acquainted with and engaged in social justice campaigns – through term papers and research, work-study placements, and experiential learning.

Respect Mutual Constraints: One condition for a stronger relationship between heterodox economists and social movements is a healthy understanding of the respective structures and constraints which shape each partner’s activity and opportunities. Movement-based activists need to understand and appreciate the limits typically placed on the political activity of sympathetic economists – whether they work in academic, business, or NGO settings. Professional economists must often be careful about their statements and affiliations, and/or are required to refrain from engagement in direct advocacy or partisan activity. That need not prevent these economists from making valuable contributions: of ideas, research, writing, verification, review, or public commentary. Indeed, in some cases economists’ effectiveness in supporting a movement may be enhanced when they maintain an arms-length institutional distance. By the same token, social movements have their own constraints and limitations that allied economists should observe and respect. Membership-based organizations (like movements, parties, or trade unions) are accountable to their members, and must make judgements and trade-offs

⁵ See Stanford (2015) for more discussion of the potential of an “activist pedagogy” in progressive economics.

⁶ Linking curriculum and pedagogy to the experience and existing knowledge of course participants is a core principle of popular or liberatory education, as enunciated (for example) by Horton and Freire (1990).

accordingly – which may be frustrating for economists hoping for more undiluted or transformative programmes. Movements must always judge what strategies and demands are most helpful in building their power; that may lead them to be more incremental and pragmatic than some more idealistic economists would wish. Financial and political realities also constrain what movements can and cannot do, shaping both their demands and their organizing strategies.

Share Resources: Professional economists can often mobilize various monetary or in-kind resources that can assist social and political movements. For those working in universities, that could include accessing funds through academic grants; providing space for meetings, classes, or offices; accessing information technology, printing, and libraries; and providing speakers and lecturers for various events. Economists in other institutional settings may be able to provide similar forms of assistance. Providing such material assistance is a tangible expression of commitment to the goals and activities of partner organizations and movements, and will help to cement goodwill and two-way communication. On the other hand, progressive economists should be cautious about approaching progressive organizations and campaigns for financial or other material resources to support their own research and publishing. It is rare that progressive movements have access to discretionary resources that could legitimately be channeled to aid the work of economists; they typically operate with very scarce funds, and their top priority is to use available resources to build their membership and activity. Of course, when economists perform direct work on movement-related projects or consulting they should (where appropriate) be reasonably compensated – but working economists should err on the side of generosity in these arrangements. While they cannot usually offer financial support to progressive economists, social and activist organizations may be able to provide access to other valuable resources that benefit the work of their economist allies. Chief among these is access to relevant research opportunities or communities. By partnering with activist organizations with strong roots in specific communities or sectors, economists can gain unique opportunities for research, data collection, and feedback.

These strategies for improving cooperation between economists and social and political movements are relatively simple, practical, and straightforward. If both sides of this relationship can bear these principles in mind, and find other ways to enhance goodwill and cooperation, then the success of their future joint work will be enhanced.

Examples of Effective Political Mobilization by Progressive Economists

This section provides examples of notable instances in which progressive economists have been successfully engaged in progressive social and political movements, fighting for and implementing progressive economic policies. The review is organized into several broad categories: including social movement organizing, trade unions, progressive economics associations, progressive economic research institutes and think tanks, and interventions in formal politics and government. The review does not attempt to be comprehensive: legions of progressive economists have made important contributions to social change initiatives in innumerable ways and places, and that rich body of practice could never be fully described in a single overview. The purpose of this survey, rather, is to provide a sampling of the different ways progressive economists, and their ideas, have advanced real-world economic, social, and environmental progress.

Social Movements: Most social change starts with the development of popular consciousness regarding concrete economic, social, and environmental problems. As larger numbers of people express concern over these problems, and learn about how they could be solved, that places pressure on politicians and

policy-makers to enact appropriate responses. That pressure may be mobilized through formal electoral channels (discussed below), or through non-parliamentary activism and advocacy. Most issues that spark progressive social movements embody some economic dimension: including understanding the economic causes of the problem, measuring its costs, and developing credible policy responses. Thus many progressive social movements and campaigns rely on the insights and support of progressive economists.

One important area in which progressive economists have made vital contributions is the struggle for gender, racial, and ethnic equality. Feminist economists have described and explained the various factors contributing to women's economic, financial, and labour market inequality: including the tensions between paid and unpaid work; barriers to women's employment and financial participation and power; and the fiscal and social policies required to reduce gender inequality. Marilyn Waring highlighted the gender biases in conventional economic categories and statistics. Feminist economists such as Diane Elson, Brigitte Young, and Isabella Bakker helped develop the gender budgeting movement, which fights to evaluate fiscal and other policies of government with a gender lens, and for more gender-aware policy-making (Young, Bakker and Elson 2011). Heidi Hartmann founded the Institute for Women's Policy Research in the U.S., which has contributed abundant research and expertise to campaigns and movements fighting for gender equality. Feminists like Marty Chen and Renana Jhabvala have linked their study of informal work to concrete struggles to improve conditions for women workers. Similarly, economists have contributed to other equality-seeking movements and campaigns – including most recently the Black Lives Matter movement and related struggles. Economists like Lisa Cook and William Spriggs helped build campaigns to recruit black and Latino students to economics programs, to reform curriculum to include analysis of racism in university economics courses, and to fight for government policies that reduce racial economic inequality. Economist Patrick Mason, a leader of Partners for Dignity and Rights, has helped civil rights organizations develop broader proposals for economic reforms to address racial injustice in the U.S.⁷

The environmental movement is another important progressive cause which has also benefited from the participation of progressive economists. Of course, there are many varying perspectives among environmental economists – some of which are more compatible with conventional neoclassical assumptions (emphasizing market signals like carbon pricing as a central policy response) than others. But many environmental economists, from varying intellectual traditions, have supported activist initiatives to raise awareness of environmental problems, and fight for appropriate policy responses. Herman Daly led environmental economics research at the World Bank, advancing arguments around the “steady-state economy” (Daly 2014); he actively supported numerous environmentalist campaigns and organizations. Nicholas Stern's work (2007) on the economic costs of climate change, and the net benefits of reducing carbon emissions, has been taken up in worldwide campaigns to support measures to reduce greenhouse gas pollution. Australian economist John Quiggin has been an active advocate for environmental campaigns on many issues, including the phase-out of coal (Quiggin, 2020).

Progressive economists naturally have strong views on macroeconomic policy issues too, including fiscal, monetary, labour market, and international trade policies. They express those views strongly in the normal fora of economic debate, offering suggestions to finance ministers and central bank governors alike. But many progressive economists have also worked hard to build active movements to win

⁷ See, for example, M4BL (2021).

changes in those policy areas. For example, the movement of participatory or alternative budgeting engages grass-roots populations in challenging the precepts of austerity that underpin modern fiscal policy, combining popular economics education (on how budgets are developed, and the true range of choice available to budget-makers) with advocacy for stronger economic and social policies. An initial experiment with this model was implemented in Puerto Alegre, Brazil, in the early 1990s under a municipal government led by Mayor Olivio Dutra (a former bank worker and union leader). Its successes in improving urban and social conditions inspired similar efforts in jurisdictions around the world (surveyed in Wilhelmy 2013) – often advised and supported by progressive economists. For example, John Loxley, a prominent development and finance economist, helped found a network of alternative budget campaigns in Canada and other countries.⁸ Similarly, French economist Dominique Plihon played a central role in founding the global anti-globalization organization ATTAC. It initially campaigned for an international financial transactions tax, and then broadened its scope to include other progressive economic demands. The recent expansion of interest in the economics of inequality (represented by writers such as Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman) has aligned naturally with advocacy movements around the world fighting for fiscal and social policies (like wealth taxes) to redistribute income and wealth; these and other economists have offered important, personal support to those campaigns. Progressive advocacy movements aimed at challenging conventional monetary and financial policies have also been strengthened by the active participation of progressive economists. For example, in recent years activist organizations in various countries have mobilized in support of policy proposals advanced by versions of “modern monetary theory.”

Many other social movements have also benefited mightily from the passion and knowledge of progressive economists. Many economists have spoken out strongly on matters of international relations, militarism, and peace. For example, the organization Economists for Peace and Security (founded in 1989 as Economists Against the Arms Race) has enlisted dozens of prominent economists (including numerous Nobel Prize winners) to speak out against the economic waste and risks associated with militarism, nuclear weapons, and global inequality. Similarly, many progressive economists (such as Ann Pettifor and Michael Hudson) have supported the global movement for a “debt jubilee” to cancel onerous international and domestic debts.

Trade Unions: Most progressive economists place core emphasis in their work on issues of employment, work, and income distribution, with special attention to the status and condition of working people. For that reason, there is a natural relevance of progressive economics to the goals and activities of trade unions. Since they represent the interests of working people at the point of production (in their workplaces), unions are directly engaged in many of the processes and struggles which directly concern progressive economic theorists: including the organization of work, struggles over compensation and distribution, technological change and innovation, labour market inequality and segmentation, and more. Some progressive economists criticize the practices of existing trade unions, and the structures and institutions of industrial relations, for their limited ambitions and their potential mis-use as agents of control. Most would agree, however, that unions are critical to winning better economic and social outcomes under existing capitalism, and are a vital element in the constellation of forces which may hope to bring about social change.

⁸ See Chances (1998) and Stanford (forthcoming).

An outstanding example of the application of progressive economic ideas within a union setting is provided by Rudolf Meidner, a PhD economist who worked for the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen i Sverige*, or LO). In the 1950s (jointly with Gösta Rehn, another economist at the LO) he helped design what came to be known as the Rehn-Meidner model: a vision of full-employment labour market regulation and economic planning which emphasized narrow wage differentials, rapid technical innovation, and export competitiveness. Implemented in part through strong corporatist governance practices under social democratic governments at the time, this approach shaped Sweden's emergence as a high-income, relatively egalitarian society. Meidner later developed and advocated for a system of gradual socialization of capital ownership through a system of wage-earner investment funds, eventually dubbed the Meidner Plan. Under this policy, workers would be "compensated" for their restraint in wage demands through grants of equity shares in the companies they worked for, which would ultimately lead to majority worker ownership of major Swedish businesses. The system was eventually defeated by forceful opposition from employers and sections of the ruling Social-Democratic party. Nevertheless, Meidner's life work exemplifies the potential for applying a grand vision of economic and social transformation within the day-to-day work of trade unions to better the lives of their members.

Other progressive economists have played vital roles advancing trade union organization and struggles in many countries. Notable progressive economists Ron Blackwell, Thea Lee, and Tom Palley worked with the U.S. AFL-CIO in recent years, supporting the labour movement's campaigns against neoliberal labour, fiscal, and trade policies. Other progressive economists have played important staff roles at other U.S. unions. Economist Sam Gindin was a crucial figure in the formation and radicalization of the Canadian Auto Workers union (now called Unifor), which split from its U.S. affiliate (the United Auto Workers) in the 1980s, and later charted important innovations in collective bargaining and worker activism.⁹ Economist Hans-Jürgen Urban is a member of the leadership team of the influential and progressive German union, IG Metall, and has advised many of their campaigns – including for shorter working hours, skills training, and environmental reforms. Economist Alec Erwin played a leadership role in the National Union of Miners and other union groupings in South Africa, both before and after liberation (later serving as a minister in the post-apartheid government).

Progressive Economics Associations: Progressive economists have banded together in associations to exchange ideas, facilitate shared research, and provide platforms for heterodox approaches to economic theory and policy.¹⁰ Dozens of such associations exist around the world: some focused on specific streams or subject matters in progressive thought, some focused on developing networks of like-minded economists within specific countries. The *Heterodox Economics Directory* (currently hosted by the Institute for Comprehensive Analysis of the Economy at Johannes Kepler University in Linz, Austria) includes a convenient catalogue of several dozen such associations, too numerous to list here.¹¹

These associations aim to achieve a stronger presence and influence for heterodox economists within academic and professional communities. But many also work to facilitate engagement by their members in social change movements and initiatives, providing progressive economics training resources and

⁹ After his career in the union, Gindin later published many important political-economy writings, including with his frequent collaborator political-economist Leo Panitch (eg. Gindin and Panitch, 2013).

¹⁰ The role of these associations was discussed in more detail in the preceding chapter by Stilwell and Thornton.

¹¹ See "Institutions in Heterodox Economics," in Kapellar and Springholz (2020).

opportunities for members of social movements, and participating in real-world policy debates and campaigns. For example, the Union for Radical Political Economics in the U.S. sponsors a speaker's bureau to connect willing members with organizations seeking progressive economic experts; it also circulates links to connect members and students with activist campaigns and movements of relevance to left economics. Canada's Progressive Economics Forum sponsors an annual summer school for undergraduate students and others interested in progressive economic ideas, with connections to social change movements.

Global networks among heterodox associations and their members have also been nurtured. For example, the International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics (ICAPE) connects many heterodox associations, exchanging information and resources, and undertaking joint conferences and other initiatives. As the organization's mission statement gently puts it, "Achieving productive discussion and debate across schools of economic thought is not a simple matter,"¹² and so ICAPE aims to facilitate more mutual awareness and cooperation among heterodox-leaning associations. The World Economics Association has a similar mission to build connections among individual progressive economists from around the world. It aims to be a "truly international, inclusive, pluralist, professional association,"¹³ and publishes three regular journals – including the *Real World Economics Review*, an accessible and policy-relevant bulletin that is widely read in activist communities. Finally, the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics links activist student committees in universities around the world, campaigning for more relevant and pluralist economics instruction in their respective institutions. Many of these student committees have also developed strong links with local social justice movements.

Progressive Economic Research Institutes: Research institutes and think tanks produce more accessible and immediate economic research and policy proposals, which may be more easily mobilized in advocacy and political campaigns than formal academic research. Some progressive think tanks have affiliation to universities, drawing on academic staff for research input and expertise. Others have no academic affiliation, receiving funding from sources such as foundations and granting agencies, philanthropists and individual donors, and trade unions.

Because of their flexibility and independence, progressive research institutes can nurture closer relationships with social movements, trade unions, and other progressive political communities. Their publications, advocacy, and commentary can thus be integrated effectively into progressive activism and advocacy. Many of these institutes have formal relationships with social movements of various kinds (through funding channels, advisory or directorial boards, and other shared structures), further facilitating joint research, planning, and priority-setting.

Table 1 provides a non-exhaustive but representative list of some of the more prominent progressive economic research institutes in several countries – including short excerpts from their respective mission statements.¹⁴ The *Heterodox Economics Directory* (Kapellar and Springholz 2020) provides a broader catalogue that includes several other progressive economic think tanks.

¹² "Statement of Purpose," International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics (2020).

¹³ "General Information," World Economics Association (2020).

¹⁴ This sample of progressive economic research centres is disproportionately composed of think tanks from industrial countries, reflecting the greater resources and hence consistent presence that research institutes in

those countries can mobilize. In addition to those listed in Table 1, many other progressive think tanks have been established in the global south; some are surveyed by Carroll (2014).

Table 1
Sample of Progressive Economics Research Institutes

Country	Name	Location	Website
Global	Institute for New Economic Thinking	New York	ineteconomics.org
	"We conduct and commission research, convene forums for exchanging ideas, develop curricula, and nurture a global community of young scholars."		
Global	World Institute for Development Economics Research	Helsinki	wider.unu.edu
	"Sustainable and inclusive development requires transformative changes ... in the structures of economies, in the state and institutions ..., and in society itself."		
Global	International Development Economics Associates	New Delhi	www.networkideas.org
	"A pluralist network of progressive economists across the world, engaged in research, teaching and dissemination of critical analyses of economic policy and development."		
U.S.	Economic Policy Institute	Washington	epi.org
	"Believes every working person deserves a good job with fair pay, affordable health care, and retirement security."		
U.S.	Center for Economic & Policy Research	Washington	cepr.net
	"Promote democratic debate on the most important economic and social issues that affect people's lives."		
U.S.	Political Economy Research Institute	Amherst (U. of Massachusetts)	peri.umass.edu
	"Promotes human and ecological well-being through our original research; translate what we learn into workable policy proposals that are capable of improving life on our planet."		
U.S.	Institute for Policy Studies	Washington	ips-dc.org
	"Dedicated to building a more equitable, ecologically sustainable, and peaceful society. In partnership with dynamic social movements, we turn transformative policy ideas into action."		
U.S.	Schwartz Center for Economic Policy Analysis	New York (New School U.)	economicpolicyresearch.org
	"Economic insights for a more equitable society."		
U.S.	Center for American Progress	Washington	americanprogress.org
	"America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility... to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity."		
U.S.	Levy Economics Institute at Bard College	Annandale-on-Hudson	levyinstitute.org
	"Encourages diversity of opinion in the examination of economic policy issues while striving to transform ideological arguments into informed debate."		
U.K.	Institute for Public Policy Research	London	ippr.org
	"Promote research into (and the publication of the useful results thereof) and the education of the public in the economic, social and political sciences."		
U.K.	Centre for Labour & Social Studies	London	classonline.org.uk
	"Working to ensure policy is on the side of everyday people."		
U.K.	New Economics Foundation	London	neweconomics.org
	"Aims to create a new economy that works for people and within environmental limits."		
U.K.	Common Wealth	London	common-wealth.co.uk
	"Focus on six systemically vital areas where democratic ownership can transform how our economy operates and for whom."		

U.K.	Political Economy Research Group	London (Kingston U.)	www.kingston.ac.uk/faculties/faculty-of-business-and-social-sciences/research/perg
	"Believe that effective demand, institutions and social conflict are of fundamental importance for the understanding of economic relationships and outcomes."		
Europe	European Trade Union Institute	Brussels	www.etui.org
	"In the service of workers' interests at European level and of the strengthening of the social dimension of the European Union."		
Germany	Hans Böckler Foundation	Düsseldorf	boeckler.de
	"Focuses on the improvement of life chances, on social justice and fair working and living conditions."		
France	Les Économistes Atterrés	Paris	atterres.org
	"Reopen the space of possible policies and debate alternative ... proposals, which restrain the power of finance and organize ... progress of European economic and social systems."		
Austria	Institute for Comprehensive Analysis of the Economy	Linz (Johannes Kepler U.)	www.jku.at/en/institute-for-comprehensive-analysis-of-the-economy
	"Investigating the causes and consequences of the economic and financial crisis as well as its cultural and political implications."		
Netherlands	Transnational Institute	Amsterdam	tni.org/en
	"Committed to building a just, democratic and sustainable planet; unique nexus between social movements, engaged scholars and policy makers."		
Canada	Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives	Ottawa	www.policyalternatives.ca
	"Independent, non-partisan research institute concerned with issues of social, economic and environmental justice."		
Australia	Australia Institute	Canberra	australiainstitute.org.au
	"Publishes research that contributes to a more just, sustainable and peaceful society."		
Thailand	Focus on the Global South	Bangkok	focusweb.org
	"An activist think tank ... providing analysis and building alternatives for just social, economic and political change."		
South Africa	Centre for Civil Society	Durban (U. KwaZulu-Natal)	ccs.ukzn.ac.za
	"Advance socio-economic and environmental justice by developing critical knowledge about, for and in dialogue with civil society through teaching, research and publishing."		
Source: Author's compilation from organizational websites.			

Formal Politics and Government: Many progressive and radical economists engage directly and eagerly with political parties, electoral campaigns, and government policy-making. Indeed, efforts by progressive economists to shape the course of political history are visible throughout the history of left economic thought. Early utopian socialists, for example, such as Robert Owen and Étienne Cabet, worked to implement their visions of cooperative or intentional communities in practice, through political reforms and even establishing their own experimental communities. Marx and Engels, of course, helped found the international communist movement; they combined political activism with theoretical work throughout their careers. Subsequent socialist economists and political-economists of various persuasions – such as Rosa Luxemburg and Edward Bernstein – also worked to build socialist political parties and campaign for power. In subsequent socialist revolutions, economists played key roles in experiments with economic planning, engaging in ongoing debates over development strategies, sector

balances, the role of markets, and other topics. Examples include Yevgeni Preobrazhensky in the early USSR; Michał Kalecki, Oskar Lange, and Edward Lipinsky in Poland; and József Bognár in Hungary.

In the advanced capitalist economies, heterodox economists also regularly engage in politics, policy-making, and government. Keynes and his colleagues helped design the postwar macroeconomic and financial order, including at the international level. Economist William Beveridge defined the main features of the postwar welfare state in the U.K., and other Keynesians played vital roles in charting U.K. economic policy through the 1970s, such as Nicholas Kaldor. Other left economists were active in the opposition Labour Party after Margaret Thatcher came to power, including Meghnad Desai and John Eatwell. In the U.S., progressive economists such as John Kenneth Galbraith, Alvin Hansen, and Wassily Leontief designed wartime planning systems and later developed postwar mixed-economy strategies and policies. Progressive economists were influential in postwar economic and social policy in other industrial countries, such as Gunnar Myrdal in Sweden, Jan Tinbergen in the Netherlands, and François Perroux in France.

Revolutions and national liberation in developing countries opened up many opportunities for input and influence from progressive economists. For example, left economists from a rich variety of intellectual and political traditions played a critical role in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, including advising the subsequent ANC government. Economists from both within South Africa (such as Vella Pillay, Vishnu Padayachee, and Alan Hirsch) worked with international economists (such as Lawrence Harris, Ben Fine, John Sender, and John Loxley) in formulating and debating economic policy in the post-apartheid era, in fora such as the Macroeconomic Research Group and the National Economic Forum.¹⁵ Of course, debate over the policy choices made in South Africa continues, as does the struggle over South Africa's future direction – and numerous progressive economists are active participants in those debates. Prominent economists played key roles advising and designing policy with other revolutionary or progressive governments in developing countries, including figures such as Jomo Kwame Sundaram, Alice Amsden, Bill Gibson, and Lance Taylor.

Left-wing economic ideas, and left-wing economists, have been especially influential in Latin American debates and policy-making. The U.N.'s Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) exerted a strong intellectual influence on economic policy throughout the continent in the postwar era, projecting the analysis and policy recommendations of Raul Prebisch and other structuralist thinkers into government policy in several countries. More recently, economists have been key figures in progressive governments which came to power in several Latin American countries – the so-called “pink tide.” One government was actually led by a Ph.D. economist: Rafael Correa was elected President of Ecuador in 2006 on a socialist platform, and served for over a decade. His government undertook far-reaching health, education, and redistribution measures; his successor, Lenin Moreno, attacked and tried to prosecute Correa, and reversed many of his policies, but his shift to the right encountered strong opposition from sectors of Ecuadorian society loyal to Correa's reforms. Another left economist, Fander Falconi, served as Foreign Affairs Minister under Correa (and Education Minister under Moreno). Brazilian economist Nelson Barbosa received his Ph.D. from the heterodox New School for Social Research, later serving as Minister of Finance and Minister of Planning under the Workers' Party government of Dilma Rousseff.

¹⁵ See Freund (2013), Bond (2014), and Padayachee and van Niekert (2019) for more on this history.

Economist and activist Axel Kicillof served as Minister of Economy in the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, and is presently the Governor of Buenos Aires.

Modern left political parties continue to draw on the ideas, advice, and active support of progressive economists in their efforts to build popular support, contest elections, and mobilize power. For example, Bernie Sanders' insurgent campaigns for U.S. President were advised by several progressive economists, including Robert Pollin and Stephanie Kelton. Several left economists participated in Jeremy Corbyn's policy team in the U.K., including James Meadway, Mariana Mazzucato, and Richard Murphy – contributing to the Labour Party's ambitious 2017 and 2019 economic platforms (advanced by then-Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer John McDonnell). Economist Francisco Louçã helped found Portugal's Left Bloc party (founded in 1999), which later participated in coalition governments with the larger Socialist Party. Economist Yanis Varoufakis was a key figure in the government formed by the left Greek party Syriza, served for a short time as Greece's Finance Minister in 2015 (at the height of the Euro debt crisis); he now serves as a member of parliament with the MeRA25 party.

These efforts by progressive economists of varying stripes to put their ideas into real-world political and policy practice have confronted daunting obstacles – not least being the vested interest of existing elites to preserve the current economic order. And debates among these various streams of left economists are often as fierce as their debates with orthodox thinkers. But in various ways, and in vastly differing circumstances, they all reflect a common goal of harnessing the power of progressive economic ideas in the service of a more equitable, humane, and sustainable future.

A Case Study: Putting Economic Ideas into Action

As the survey above has illustrated, a rich community of progressive economists have endeavoured to put their knowledge and ideas into action in real-world movements and campaigns for progressive social change. The examples above are illustrative only, and cannot include innumerable examples of other economists who have also strived to connect with and support social change organizing. I conclude this review with one detailed description of a case study of progressive economists contributing concretely and effectively to concrete policy changes. While a single case study cannot represent the breadth of experience of progressive economics activism, this specific example – the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE) at the University of California at Berkeley – very nicely embodies several of the insights and “best practices” enunciated above.

The IRLE is a multidisciplinary policy research centre based at UC Berkeley; its publications and policy engagements reflect a strong economic bent, and many of its central figures and leaders have been economists.¹⁶ Its general mission is to “promote better understanding of the conditions, policies, and institutions that affect the well-being of workers and their families and communities, [and] ... inform public debate with hard evidence about inequality, the economy, and the nature of work.” (IRLE 2020)

The Institute (along with a sister institute at UCLA in Los Angeles) was originally founded at the end of the Second World War, with funding from the California state government. Its initial mission was to promote research and training in industrial relations, as the U.S. economy became more acquainted with the practice of collective bargaining in the wake of Wagner Act reforms and a historic postwar

¹⁶ Prominent progressive economist Michael Reich served as director of the IRLE from 2004 through 2015. He was succeeded by economist Jesse Rothstein, who in turn was succeeded by economist Steven Raphael in 2020.

increase in unionization. Indeed, the centres were initially called the Institutes of Industrial Relations. Their names were changed in the 1990s, in part to reflect their broadening interests – as well as the precipitous decline in U.S. unionization during the neoliberal era.

The UC Berkeley branch of the IRLE houses several specialized projects and sub-centres. One is the Centre for Labor Research and Education (known as the Labor Centre), which undertakes cooperative initiatives with regional trade unions – including union leadership and membership education, research, and policy engagement. The Labor Centre’s close ties with the union movement have facilitated productive cooperation and engagement on the part of the broader IRLE with various labor campaigns and struggles in California, and nationally.

Like other university-based research centres, IRLE works to strengthen academic output and achievement – including sponsoring conferences, grant applications, supporting graduate students, and so on. For present purposes, however, the more unique aspect of the Institute’s work is its sustained and effective engagement with a rich range of current policy debates and labour and social justice campaigns. The collective expertise represented by the Institute’s staff, affiliated academics,¹⁷ and students has been a powerful influence in numerous grass-roots campaigns and movements for labor and economic reforms. The issues addressed by ILRE research and policy engagement over the years include the impact of ordinances to improve labour standards at the municipal level;¹⁸ the feasibility of policies to ensure health care coverage for low-wage workers (Flores and Lucia 2015); and prospects for job-creation in “green” industries (Zabon 2020). A particular example of the Institute’s influence has been its applied work on the economics of minimum wage ordinances (including at the sub-national and regional levels), which has been globally influential in shifting both economic theory and policy on this matter (see, for example, Jacobs, Perry, and MacGillvary 2015). Most recently the Institute’s research on the economics of the ride-share industry (Reich 2020) was referenced widely in the campaign to win employee status for gig workers (with platform businesses such as Uber and Lyft). That campaign was initially successful: the California state legislature passed path-breaking legislation in 2019 to extend employee status to gig workers and other dependent contractors, although the law was later overturned through a corporate-funded ballot proposition in 2020.

Staff and affiliates at the IRLE are committed to conducting their scholarly research to high academic standards, independent from political, labour and social justice campaigns. This is critical because of regular efforts by conservative political leaders, business lobbyists, and other union opponents to discredit and defund the Institute and its centres and activities. For example, then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed funding entirely for both the Berkeley and UCLA Institutes in the 2000s; a strong campaign by academics and community activists subsequently won back state financial support. The Institute’s scholarly independence and strong public reputation help to insulate its work against these external attacks, and also enhance its value as an influential source of data, analysis, and policy innovation that is cited by union and community campaigns around the world. IRLE affiliates participate actively in policy debates and dialogues, including as invited experts before inquiries and commissions at

¹⁷ In addition to staff and academics directly affiliated to the IRLE, it also engages progressive faculty members from UC Berkeley’s economics department.

¹⁸ A book of scholarly essays published through the IRLE documented the positive economic and social impacts of San Francisco’s innovative municipal laws requiring regional employers to meet specific benchmarks for pay, benefits, and job security; see Reich, Jacobs and Dietz (2014).

all levels of government. The Institute's effective work has led to requests for research on related issues from all over the U.S., and other countries.

While social change campaigns in the San Francisco area and other parts of the U.S. have benefited from the research, expertise, and engagement of the IRLE, the relationships between the Institute and regional labour and social justice movements are mutually beneficial. For scholars working within the Institute, these partnerships open opportunities for access to research populations, data collection, and policy engagement. This collaboration and two-way information flow helps affiliated economists design their future research agendas, and identify relevant and timely policy topics – knowing their work will be taken up in concrete ways by movements working to realize progressive policies.

In sum, the ongoing work of the IRLE and its affiliated academics is an encouraging example of how a group of progressive economists can effectively and respectfully develop strong, cooperative relationships with on-the-ground social movements – fighting to demand and win the policy reforms which progressive economists dream of realizing. This productive collaboration has made a notable difference in strengthening regional unions and social justice organizations in recent years, contributing to an evident progressive shift in regional and state politics. It provides a good illustration of the tremendous potential for progressive economists to contribute to real-world social change. Economists in other settings (including those outside of universities) will find their own specific ways of organizing that work. But the IRLE experience embodies a very successful application of core principles of mutual respect, communication, education, and joint advocacy that can guide successful collaboration between progressive economists and activists in any situation.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered some of the challenges and pitfalls in achieving stronger engagement by progressive economists in social change movements and campaigns, some best practices to consider in undertaking this collaboration, and examples of ways in which progressive economists have made important contributions to progressive social and political change. This review is not comprehensive: there are innumerable other examples of progressive economists who have devoted their ideas, their reputations, their labour, and in some cases their lives to winning real-world improvements in work, well-being, equality, and sustainability. The goal here is merely to indicate the breadth and diversity of the common interest between progressive economics and social change movements – and to highlight successful examples of how that connection can be made.

After all, the historic role of progressive social change movements is to express the demands of the exploited and the oppressed, and to mobilize them into demanding and winning a better world. Relevant, respectful academic research, analysis, and expertise can help progressive movements fulfil that mission. Progressive economists – motivated by their own hopes and dreams of a better world, as well as by their desire to make a personal contribution to its construction – can be important allies in that struggle. And as progressive economists continue to advance the frontiers of our understanding of the failures of the existing economic order, and how it can be changed, we should keep one eye on the importance of mobilizing that knowledge in the real-world campaigns and struggles that are critical to winning the change we seek.

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