

Obituary

Dan Clawson (1948-2019)

Ruth Milkman, City University of New York, United States of America

Dan Clawson, who served as RC44's Vice President from 2006 to 2010, died suddenly on 7 May 2019 of a heart attack. He was a prolific labour sociologist, and a brilliant, tireless organiser with an unwavering commitment to social justice. He came of age in the late 1960s and was indelibly marked by the New Left. Dedication to participatory democracy, feminism and progressive politics permeated his scholarship, his activism, as well as his personal conduct over the years. He had truly extraordinary leadership abilities, and yet was utterly unpretentious – a rare soul who never craved personal recognition.

Dan had a habit of creating new organisations, even if he was reluctant to take credit for doing so. He was a founding member of the American Sociological Association's section on Labor and Labor Movements, which he went on to chair in 2004–2005. Earlier, he had helped to create Scholars, Artists and Writers for Social Justice, a group whose mission was to strengthen ties between intellectuals and the labour movement; he served as its national chair in 1998–1999. He also was a founder of the Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts and of a progressive caucus in the Massachusetts teachers' union.

Dan had wide-ranging intellectual interests and published a rich body of rigorous, first-class scholarship. The research questions he chose to pursue were not narrow ones of interest only to specialists; instead he consistently aimed to illuminate critical political and social issues. He is best known for his extensive research on labour, especially his books *Bureaucracy and the Labor Process* (1980) and *The Next Upsurge* (2003). But there was much more. He was an early analyst of what we now call “money in politics”, co-authoring *Money Talks* (1992), a study of corporate Political Action Committees, and *Dollars and Votes* (1998). More recently he wrote about the transformation of higher education, especially the growth of contingent faculty, including a co-authored book, *The Future of Higher Education* (2011). He also contributed to scholarship on work–family issues, co-authoring a pathbreaking book, *Unequal Time* (2014), one of the few studies in this field that seriously engages class inequality (as well as gender) and the role of labour unions. He published many articles on all these topics as well, in both academic journals and more popular outlets. Dan did more than his share of editorial work, most notably serving as editor of *Contemporary Sociology* from 1995 to 1997, as co-editor of the Rose book series from 2000 to 2005, and editing or co-editing three books.

Dan spent his entire academic career at one institution, to the great good fortune of his colleagues and students at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. There he was not only a pillar of the Sociology Department but also a stalwart supporter of the campus' vibrant Labor Center, which he helped rescue more than once from the ever-threatening administrative axe. The Center's website features a brief [remembrance](#) saying that when the next crisis comes, they'll start by asking “WWDD: What would Dan do?” He was a beloved activist in and leader of the [Massachusetts Society of Professors](#), the union that represents the UMass Amherst faculty and librarians. He served a term as its President in the early 2000s, and many terms on its executive board. Just a month before his death he [spoke at Berkeley](#) about the union's remarkable record of

improving the conditions of non-tenure-track faculty, and building solidarity between them and the more privileged tenure-track professoriate.

Dan also became deeply involved in the MSP's parent body, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, within which he helped create a progressive rank-and-file caucus, Educators for a Democratic Union. He went on to become the campaign manager for Barbara Madeloni, an insurgent candidate who won an upset election to the MTA Presidency in 2014. She wrote in a [tribute](#) published soon after his death about his patience and fortitude, and of his exemplary organising skills: "He listened. He made an ask: come to a meeting, sign a petition, run for office. And if he wasn't successful at first, he didn't give up hope.... He believed in our collective capacity to build a better world. He acted on that faith with each individual. His was a generous and determined heart."

Dan had planned to retire this summer, after more than four decades on the UMass Amherst faculty. He wanted to devote his time to continuing activism in the MTA and also to writing about the union from an insider's perspective.

Dan was married to Mary Ann Clawson, a distinguished sociologist who recently retired from a Professorship at Wesleyan. They met in college and have been together ever since – partners in life and also occasional co-authors. Their daughter Laura at first seemed primed to take up the family business (she earned a PhD in Sociology) but ultimately found her niche as a journalist at the *Daily Kos*, where labour is part of her beat, and where she recently posted a moving [tribute](#) to her father. Dan was committed to egalitarian parenting from the outset; a few years ago, he became a devoted grandparent to Laura's son Danny.

I can't quite remember exactly when Dan and I met, sometime during the 1990s. At first, we were just professional colleagues with similar interests and sensibilities, but over the years he became a treasured friend. I always looked forward to getting together with him and Mary Ann for a meal at conferences or whenever our paths crossed. We met more often during the year he was in New York as a Russell Sage Foundation visiting scholar, a sojourn that happened to coincide with the meteoric rise of Occupy Wall Street, which riveted both of us. As we spent more time together, I learned that I could always count on him – indeed I can't remember him ever saying no to a request. To cite but one example, a few years ago he accepted my invitation to co-chair the American Sociological Association's Task Force on Contingent Faculty Employment. That turned into a much larger task than either of us had anticipated, but Dan was characteristically undaunted. This past winter he devoted his Christmas holidays to producing the [final report](#), which was formally approved by the ASA in March. Sadly, Dan's life came to an end before it was publicly released.

Dan was the genuine article. He practiced public sociology long before there was a name for it; he was passionately committed to both scholarship and social change, and devoted his life to nurturing the relationship between the two. I can't believe he's gone.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Ruth Milkman is a labour sociologist who teaches at the CUNY Graduate Center and the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies. Her most recent book is *Immigrant Labor and the New Precariat*, forthcoming from Polity in spring 2020). [Email: RMilkman@gc.cuny.edu]