Robert L. Aronson, professor emeritus of Labor Economics at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, and the last remaining member of the first generation of faculty who built the ILR School, passed away in April at the age of 104. Bob was born on January 22, 1917, in Dunkirk, New York. In 1929, his family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. He attended Ohio State University, earning his B.A. in Economics in 1940 and an M.A. in Economics in 1941, at which point his education was rudely interrupted by the Second World War. Bob joined the Army Air Corps in 1942 and served as a B-24 navigator with the 456th Bombardment Group, based in Italy, through 1945. During the war he flew upwards of 50 missions. One of us liked to tease Bob that, given the odds of being shot down on each mission, he was statistically dead by 1944.

After the war Bob went to Princeton University for his Ph.D. in Economics (completed in 1953), where he studied under the prominent labor economist Richard Lester. It was at Princeton that he met his first wife, Judith, when she audited a course in advanced economic theory. They married in 1948, and two years later, in the fall of 1950, Bob joined the faculty of the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations. When Bob arrived in Ithaca, ILR was not yet five years old. He was a key member in the early development of the School’s Labor Economics Department and helped to assemble the strong group of labor economists that the School has had since the 1970s. Bob taught the required labor economics course for both undergraduates and professional masters students, and also a course on Labor Markets and Economic Dislocation. In 1983, he became an emeritus professor, a victim of mandatory retirement.

Bob published several monographs and articles on topics associated with U.S. (and New York State) labor markets in the decades after the Second World War. He was primarily interested in the effects of industrial and technological change on workers, unions, and labor markets. He published two monographs on the effects of plant closures in New York: “The Economic Consequences of Plant Shutdowns in New York State” (1980, with Robert McKersie), and “Workers and Industrial Change: A case study in labor mobility” (1957, with Leonard Adams). The latter work, which examined workers’ attitudes and mobility in Auburn, New York, before
and after its International Harvester plant closed in 1950, was named by the Princeton Industrial Relations Section as one of the year’s Outstanding Books on Industrial Relations. Bob also published studies of “Vesting and Transferability of Pension Rights,” federal manpower planning, the impact of federal government spending on the labor market for scientists and engineers, the challenges of automation to collective bargaining, and industrial workers in Jamaica.

Bob’s contributions to the ILR School and the field of labor economics went far beyond his published research. He served as the associate editor of the *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* from 1952-56, and as its editor from 1957-62. He also served as ILR’s assistant director of research from 1952-62, and as the director of its Manpower Research Program. Among other activities, he was a Fulbright Fellow at the University of the West Indies in 1957-58, a consultant to the Government of Ghana on wage policy in the public sector in 1967, and, from 1972 to 1991, a member of an ad-hoc panel of mediators/fact finders for the New York State Employment Relations Board. Over the years he also held positions as a visiting professor at Ohio State University, the University of Louisville, and the University of California, Berkeley, and as a visiting fellow at Birkbeck College, University of London.

Along with his teaching, research, and service, Bob was a mentor to many students, some of whom went on to become prominent in the fields of economics and industrial relations. David Lipsky, emeritus professor at ILR and Dean of the School from 1988 to 1997, writes how, as an undergraduate at ILR, he planned to go to law school until he took the required labor economics course from Bob. He loved the course, “adopted” Bob as his faculty advisor and mentor, and eventually, with Bob’s guidance, went to MIT for his Ph.D. in Economics. David describes Bob’s advice and assistance as “invaluable.”

Bob was a mentor to younger faculty and an example for older faculty. At his retirement party in 1983, Bob told his labor economics colleagues that the last five years of his career were the happiest ones because he had learned so much from them. His kind words had what we suspect was his intended effect, leading senior faculty members to increase their mentoring of younger colleagues. When this committee asked those who remember Bob to comment on him, they described him as compassionate, supportive, gracious, patient, and a gem; the two words most often used to describe him were kind and gentle. Bob helped all of us, in one way or another, and in doing so he made ILR a better place.

Bob contributed to Cornell and the Ithaca community in many ways. A strong believer in faculty collegiality, he served as president of the Statler Club, Cornell’s former faculty club. He was committed to community service, and served on the board of Planned Parenthood of Tompkins County and as chair of the Town of Ithaca’s Ethics Board. Bob also was a board member of the Ithaca Memorial Society and a member of Local Group 73 of Amnesty International (Ithaca) and he volunteered with Literacy Volunteers of Tompkins County.

When Bob retired in 1983 he did not give up academic work or coming to campus. He began work on a book entitled *Self-Employment: A Labor Market Perspective*, which was published by ILR Press in 1991. He also continued to come to lunch at the Statler, being there almost every Monday through Friday for several years after retiring, and every Friday (for the clam chowder
and free cookies) until he was well into his 90s. Friday lunches with Bob (and former ILR colleague Ron Donovan) were something that several of us looked forward to every week. Bob’s nonprofessional interests included reading, music (especially the piano, on which he began taking lessons at age 60), foreign travel, playing tennis and squash, cross-country skiing, nature walks, and flying.

Bob and his wife Judy raised two daughters, Michal and Elizabeth. Judy passed away in 1992 after a battle with cancer. Three years later Bob married Nancy Bent, which brought him additional family and happiness. Nancy passed away in 2000.

Bob remained interested in the ILR School long after his retirement. He was a frequent attendee at the Labor Economics workshop, and seldom missed a job talk. Indeed, he attended a job talk on his 90th birthday. When four of us (including then Dean Kevin Hallock) visited Bob on his 100th birthday, he inquired about retirements, hiring, and diversity among the faculty, and he asked Kevin more than once if the School was hiring more women.

The day after we visited Bob, he emailed to thank us for coming to see him and concluded: “I will always be grateful that Dick Lester, my mentor at Princeton, steered me to ILR and Cornell.” We are sure that all of the faculty that remember Bob would respond that we too are grateful that he came to ILR. Bob was a great colleague, who by his kind and gentle demeanor taught us how to be better human beings. He will be missed.

Written by George R. Boyer, chair; Ronald G. Ehrenberg, Robert S. Smith