Innovations in Trade Union Learning Programs in Canada

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Union learning: why the interest?

• Neglected by scholars and practitioners in adult education, labour relations and unions

• Each year over 100,000 workers participate in some sort of union sponsored education program (Jeffery Taylor *Union Learning* 2001)

• Significant arena for socially engaged education today

• Potential for institution change and experimentation in unions
Union learning: concepts

1. Union education (primary concern)
2. Labour studies (post-secondary education)
3. Labour education (all three of the above)
4. Workers’ education (non-institutional)

Learning as distinct from vocational training
Research questions

1. What role does union learning play in developing union cultures that:
   • Enhance the capacity of unions to defend the interests of their members in collective bargaining
   • Strengthen union democracy
   • Advance broader socio-political change

2. (Conference theme) How can union learning contribute to institutional change and experimentation?
Related questions: intellectuals/academics/outsiders and worker/union education

• Academics in labour education. Responsibility of the intellectual. Involvement of universities/colleges in delivering union education

• How much has higher education got involved in shaping labour education?
  – United States reliance on universities/colleges
  – Canada more “worker-centred” union education
Changing approaches to labour learning

• Worker/union education programs through the 20th century
  Mechanics Institutes
  Knights of Labour
  Industrial Workers of the World
  Workers’ Educational Association (WEA)
  Union educational programs
  Labour studies in post-secondary education
Union education programs

• Changed focus from workers’ education to union education programs
• Emphasis on training for union service
• Social movement unionism. E.g. Walter Reuther’s vision for union education with the United Auto Workers (UAW) Black Lake year-round education and recreational centre
• Canadian Labour Congress and FTQ through their Solidarity Fund in Quebec offer their own residential programs
All the possibilities and limitations of unionism reflected in labour education

• Unions as schools for social change (Marx)
• Labour movements & economism (Lenin, Perlman)
• Class struggle & development of organic intellectuals (Gramsci)
• Intellectuals & unions (Wilensky)
• Union culture & learning (D’Arcy Martin)
• Institutional change & experimentation?
Worker/union/education/learning

• Responsive to special needs of workers (educational backgrounds, shift work, distance between workplace, home & union hall, family demands)
• Shared pedagogical approaches with adult education
• Associated with popular education tradition Paulo Freire “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”
Funding for union/worker learning

• Union dues
• Negotiated with employers
• Educational institutions (WEA Univ. of Toronto, St. Francis Xavier Univ., McMaster Univ.)
• Government (Provincial & Federal) for research, training and education
• Education and political groupings (Labor Notes in U.S., Worker Action centres, Toronto Workers Assembly)
Union learning for a changing labour movement

• Higher educational levels overall
• Professional, paraprofessional & public sector unions
• Alternative pathways to union awareness
Engaging membership in education and research programs

• Steelworkers “back to the locals” campaign in 1970s. Origins in Quebec with training of worker-educators. A subsequent innovation was the development of “facing management” courses

• Swedish experience with “research circles”
Union staff educators

• In the recent Canadian experience education staff have mostly been recruited from the union membership

• Prior union involvement of staff sometimes the result of a personal decision to enter industry and play a role in unions

• Some union staff recruited as activist oriented students who secured internships with unions often on government funded programs
Role of union educator

- Harold Wilensky’s classic study of staff working for U.S. unions post-World War II used the concept of organizational pressures on professional roles.
- Non-elected position. Responsible for working with members but does not need to court their votes. Opportunities for contribution to experimentation and internal debate. Risk of falling out of favour with leadership.
Unifor as case study

Unifor the coming together of two unions to form the largest private sector union in Canada:

Canadian Auto Workers (CAW)
+
Communications, Energy and Paperworkers of Canada (CEP)
Unifor Education Department

“The strength of our future is not only at the bargaining table and on the picket line, it is in the classroom” (statement on department masthead)

Related departments:
• Research
• Communications
• Women
• Health and Safety
• International
Union members and learning

-- How does the union design courses other than those that have a practical training component?

-- What do unionists in education programs have in common? Two characteristics that form starting point:
   Members work in similar workplaces
   Are members of the same union

(David Robertson, Former Director: Work Reorganization and Training, CAW)

-- Workers not seeking neutral education. Being in a union confers some understanding of power

-- Union education allows union to explain and popularise key union policies, especially some that were controversial e.g. reducing work time
Unifor education offerings

• Union awareness (former Big Three auto companies during work time)

• Programs organized by locals (area courses)

• Education Centre at Port Elgin Ontario
Unifor-McMaster University labour certificate program

• takes advantage of education benefits traditionally negotiated with auto companies
• courses can lead to a labour studies certificate that is recognised for undergraduate credits
• courses held in union halls in Ontario auto locals allowing for swing shifts schedules
• video conferencing courses
• on-line self-paced courses (economics, politics course in preparation)
Engaging membership (CAW-Unifor)

Unifor experience involving union members in teaching and research

-- Union discussion leaders
-- research method courses for Certificate Program
-- participation in research (Former CAW Work Reorganization and Training)
-- participated in local to local exchanges with workers in similar work in other countries (e.g. GM workers in Canada, the United States and Mexico)
Education and working-class politics

• Worker learning is social, not individual

• Worker learning does not occur in a vacuum. Education cannot effectively take off without a strong labour movement

“Absent ongoing struggles, education can seem beside the point to people dealing with the problems of everyday life. Fighting for change, on the other hand, raises questions that make education relevant.”

Sam Gindin (ex-CAW) & Michael Hurley (Pres. Ont. Council of Hospital Unions - CUPE) writing in *Canadian Dimension*
Challenges for Union Learning

• Unions under attack. Education more important than ever. Example of “right to work” offensive

• Unions and the so-called “learning economy.” Importance of unions asserting their own legitimacy and maintaining the autonomy of labour education programs

• Education and changing union cultures. Increasing focus on key sectors of women, immigrants and youth

• Borrowing from and working with social movements
Future developments for worker/union learning

• Cooperation between unions on education programs. (Joint union-sponsored initiatives of the WEA fell apart during rivalries of cold-war)

• Bridging the divide between post-secondary education and unions. Role for labour-oriented academics? Quebec experience involving seconding university faculty to unions.

• Labor Notes in the U.S. Some local unions (e.g. Amalgamated Transit Union ATU) have partnered with Labor Notes to offer short courses. In Toronto some local unions have cooperated with Labour Committee of the (former) Worker Assembly in Toronto.

• Role for education and preparing a new generation for union organizing drives