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# Global Perspectives on Labour Education into the New Millennium

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# Global Perspectives on Labour Education into the New Millennium

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**Abstract:** *This is a comparative exploration of labour education across five continents by international leaders in the field. Beginning from unique national contexts, questions of distance education, pedagogy, labour-university linkages, and leadership training are mixed with engaged discussion of the role of national and international structures, and alternative models of civil society and the role of labour in it. Across the globe, we see that challenge remains to educate from top to bottom while nurturing the ideals of social justice.*

## **New Frontiers in U.S. University-based Labor Education: The Harvard Trade Union Program Labor Leadership Forum**

Since the labor upsurge of the 1930s, organized labor in the United States has sought to build a network of labor and trade union programs in land grant (public) universities. Demanding a share of post secondary public educational resources, unions lobbied state legislatures demanding that publicly funded universities develop labor education programs in collaboration with organized labor. Labor was also successful in directly approaching universities and gaining a foothold in some premier private institutions such as Harvard University with the launching of the Harvard Trade Union Program in 1942. While collectively these university programs have trained tens of thousands of labor activists through credit and non-credit courses, with the decline in power of the labor movement, trade union and labor programs have become increasingly marginalized, isolated or in some cases entirely eliminated.

Labor differs in a number of ways from many traditional university client groups. The labor movement is organized as a group with its own leadership, structures, policies and objectives. It designs and delivers its own programs and it often regards post-secondary institutions with some hostility. Universities have similarly questioned the appropriateness of labor education in a university setting. It is a sad political reality that while business programs explicitly aimed at touting the virtues of "privatization" or "entrepreneurism" are

viewed as exciting public policy programming, labor programs are constantly forced to take the defensive against charges of "advocacy."

The Harvard Trade Union Program (HTUP) has evolved with the changing environment of labor education in the United States. The HTUP is the oldest senior union leadership program in the U.S. From the outset, the HTUP was charged with the mission to provide labor leaders with the same advanced, non-credit, executive education that Harvard developed for government and business leaders.

For most of its history, the central educational activity of the HTUP has been a 10-week residential program, operating annually during the spring semester. HTUP fellows are mid-career union leaders, who are sponsored by their union to attend the program. There is some engagement with students in other Harvard programs, but the majority of the HTUP's curriculum consists of dedicated classes specially designed for the union leaders. For both labor and the university, the connection with other Harvard programs remains an important aspect of the HTUP as many generations of Harvard students, including some of the current university faculty, were first exposed to labor thinking and union leaders through forums and joint classes with the HTUP fellows. The HTUP has sought to design an educational program that fosters mutual learning.

While the residential fellows program remains the core activity of the HTUP, in recent years, the program with financial support from the Ford Foundation has developed an exciting model for creating innovative and

new public policy dialogue among labor leaders, community activists and academics. The Labor Leadership Forum (LLF) sponsors short, intensive, mutual learning symposium, where participants explore the economic underpinning and possible policy options of major social issues and problems. For both organized labor and the academy, the Forum provides a unique mutual learning environment by bringing the experience and insight of workplace leaders to researchers and research and analytical findings to the attention of activists and leaders. From a labor education perspective, it has permitted the HTUP to attract participation from very senior labor leaders, too senior and too busy to participate in longer term programs.

Generally, these are issues which labor believes that its perspective could be enhanced by dialogue with senior researchers and academics. In the HTUP, activists and leaders jointly identify topics for Forums in advance, and design sessions to facilitate mutual learning and networking. Participants jointly explore ideas about how society might respond to diverse social and economic problems, such as rising inequality, injustice, crime, inadequate access to society's benefits to the disadvantaged, global financial crisis.

The underlying rationale for the LLF was our belief that there is an urgent need to bring together representatives of labor, activists, academics and opinion leaders in business and the community. For most of this century, organized labor has played a vital role in developing progressive policies in the United States. Unions have strengthened democratic processes and provided a voice for individuals to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. Today, despite 40 or so years of declining union density in the U.S., organized labor remains the most important, mass-based, democratic, social organization in the country, with over 15 million members, and with union locals in every city and state.

The Forums seek to address the need for innovative labor thinking and for emerging leaders to develop the background knowledge and confidence to engage fully in these public policy debates on both domestic and international issues. It is a need widely felt within the union movement, as demonstrated by their interest and sponsorship of the LLF. From a labor education perspective, it is a way of moving labor education from the margins to the center of the public policy concerns and activities of the university.

#### **South African Perspectives:**

#### **Questions from the "Periphery"**

For many South African labour educators, the closing

decades of this century feel rather schizophrenic. In our collective memory lie the not-too-distant experiences of the "years of struggle" alongside current experiences of our post-apartheid reality. Our version of "social movement unionism" in the 1980s produced a vision of a radically transformed future, some of which filtered through into the economic and social policies adopted by the ANC in its original electoral platform. Since 1994, the trade unions have participated in tripartite forums to substantially expand workers' rights, and have played a key role in developing the broader education policies and workplace training strategies of the new government.

Our labour movement has experienced in a condensed and truncated way many of the processes that took place over decades in other countries. And like elsewhere, the union movement's new role of "social partner" of the state and capital has had its isolating and demobilising effects, thus weakening its ability to protect workers from the growing effects of globalisation. The loss of layers of leadership to government and the private sector have diminished its strategic and organisational capacity and led to a growing gap between union leadership and rank-and-file membership. As the ANC government has increasingly embraced the neo-liberal economic policies that are globally dominant, workers have been buffeted by retrenchments and casualisation of jobs, leading to a significant drop in union membership in some sectors and growing stratification amongst workers. The labour movement has become more inward looking, and less inclined to forge links with other social groupings.

Some of these broader developments have been mirrored by trends within labour education. Put rather simplistically, union education has moved away from a concern to develop a coherent, alternative political vision to a more narrow emphasis on organisational skills training and "servicing issues," and on providing the economic and legal expertise to engage with government and business. As the focus has shifted from shop-steward training to "capacity-building" of leadership and full-time staff, this has tended to privilege those with higher levels of formal education and marginalise those without (often women workers, older workers, and those living in rural areas). This has been accompanied by moves towards the institutionalisation of labour education.

We are painfully aware in South Africa that the radical, social-movement unionism of our recent past cannot be simply "re-created." Furthermore, educators –

however radical – do not “create” social movements; their role is to serve such movements as they develop in their own time and with their own momentum. What role can we play, then, if we are to strengthen the kind of labour education which will further workers’ interests in the new millennium?

In order to elaborate on this question, I will draw on my experiences of co-ordinating and teaching an “Advanced Course for Trade Union Educators,” offered since 1997 by the national trade union development and education institute, Ditsela, and delivered through my university department. The majority of the 30 students who attended are employed as full-time educators by their unions, and are generally young with little experience of the unionism of the 1980s, or knowledge of union history.

The first issue we have grappled with is that while university-based labour education and institutionalised forms of trade union education can play an important role in helping to build capacity to engage effectively with employers and government, there is a danger that such programmes can isolate participants from the “heartbeat” of the union’s life, and blunt their appreciation of the intellectual potential of everyday organisational activity. We are struggling to find effective ways to link our course work with the many informal sites of experiential learning.

A second issue is that ironically, our present era of instant global communication has coincided with a substantial weakening of communication capacity within our labour movement. We are conscious that perhaps the most important learning on the educators’ course takes place when participants network and share experiences. But we have been singularly unsuccessful in sustaining this network outside of the course. How can we work to harness the possibilities that electronic technology presents for the sharing of knowledge in a context such as ours where information literacy and skills as well as the availability of such technology are highly unevenly distributed? Can our labour movement successfully compete with the globally dominant, giant media industry?

A third issue is that trade union educators such as our course participants are generally uninvolved in workplace training issues. Those labour activists who do engage with workplace training issues quickly find themselves entangled in a profit-oriented industry associated with the commodification of knowledge and increasing competitiveness. At the same time, elements of “credentialism” and aspirations of upward mobility

and “career-pathing” are creeping into the world-view of trade union educators. In an era of “historical amnesia” and “new realism,” it is extremely difficult to keep alive traditions based on solidarity and collectivism. We need to empower labour educators to take alternative understandings of “skills training” that emphasize its shared, social purpose rather than its role as a source of international competitiveness.

What this suggests is that one useful way of conceptualising the role of the labour educator is that of building bridges – or better, still, networks – for facilitating communication across time, between generations, and across geographic, institutional and intellectual space.

### **Australian Unions: Part of the System or Part of Civil Society?**

From 1983 to 1996 the Australian Labor Party (ALP) was in government in Australia at the federal level. During that time the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the ALP were parties to an “Accord.” This formal agreement covered not just wage fixation but employment, methods of combatting inflation, industry development, health care, superannuation, and other matters coming under the rubric of the “social wage.” The Accord went through a number of renegotiations and moments of tension but lasted the full thirteen years.

The Accord meant that unions were represented on a raft of advisory bodies along with government and employers. Gains resulted. Lower paid workers without industrial muscle benefited from nationally negotiated wage increases. A national health care system was reintroduced. And many more workers were drawn into employer funded superannuation schemes.

It could be said that during the period of the Accord the unions were in the ascendancy. However, other features of those thirteen years make for a different story. Union membership dropped significantly, from over fifty percent of the workforce to just above thirty percent. Decisions were taken at peak level, and the democratic processes at the workplace were weakened. The government implemented economic rationalist policies, such as floating the Australian dollar and lowering or removing import tariffs, and workers in many industries lost their jobs. Some industries closed.

Some unionists felt their leaders had lost sight of their major purpose of protecting and improving wages and conditions. In effect, they objected to their peak body being part of the system. Jurgen Habermas &

scribes “the system” as being the processes of exchange that make up the economy, and the political and administrative controls that make up the state. It is the combination of money and power that dictates much of our lives.

The conservative Coalition Government, which was elected in 1996, has been no friend to unions. The spirit of tripartism has been abandoned. Legislative “reforms” have been introduced to reduce the power of the unions.

Deprived of their direct influence on government, trade unions have had to reconsider their position. Are they part of the system, or must they now operate as part of civil society? “Civil society” is a concept offered as a counterbalance to the system. Eva Cox (1995) describes it in terms of community groups with democratic, egalitarian and voluntary structures, such as sporting clubs, craft groups, local environment associations, some ethnic and religious groups, playgroups and neighbourhood centres.

These changes in industrial relations present union educators with a challenge: to help union officials and members distinguish between the roles they can play in the system, and in civil society. If the decision is to engage more completely in civil society, then union education programs will need to refocus on local democratic practices, on workplace representation, and strategies for union renewal. This shift is already taking place, in some union educational programs and in the ACTU project “Organizing Works,” which is aimed at educating a cadre of young union activists.

But as well as distinguishing between the system and civil society, union educators will need to help union officials and members examine different concepts of civil society. Cox suggests that civil society is constructed on “social capital,” that is, the accumulation of trust through cooperation at a local level. This concept, however, is a little *too* civil; and we may need to search for “harder” forms which envisage the development of trust amongst like-minded people, but also envisage the existence of people and organisations who cannot be trusted.

Antonio Gramsci (1971) described one of these harder forms of civil society as being made up of organisations such as schools and universities, enterprises, and the church which shored up the state and reinforced its hegemonic control. Activists needed to see these organisations as sites for struggle, to gain entry to them and to engage in what Gramsci called “a war of position” to alter their policies and practices.

With this concept of civil society in mind, union educators will need to provide programs dealing with infiltration, persuasion, provoking and managing change, subversion even.

Another of these harder forms of civil society is to be found in social movements (Newman, 1999). A number of recent social movements have brought about huge social change: examples are the women’s movement, the environmental movement, the indigenous people’s movement, and the vast collection of people combatting the spread of HIV/AIDS virus and caring for sufferers. Union educators can help officials and members learn from other movements and form alliances with movements with similar ideals.

Union educators can draw on all three ideas of civil society in the design and implementation of programs. The intention will be to develop a form of unionism which can generate social capital at a local community level, can engage in collective action within the structure of the state, and can forge alliances with other movements committed to the ideals of social justice. The intention will be to create a civil society which provides effective alternative forms of representation, and an alternative site in which we can act and give meaning to our lives.

### **Labour Education in Europe**

European trade unions have faced the heaviest assault on their activities since the ravaging unemployment of the 1930s decimated organisation and membership. The reasons for this are well documented and do not need reviewing again here. Rather, I want to explore how labour education has fared during the period of decline, identify the new challenges facing the unions and explore how education providers need to respond.

It is a commonplace of company decline that the first budget to be cut is that devoted to training. It is regarded as a peripheral activity and an investment with limited short-term returns. Reducing revenues from declining membership and cuts in State support have led trade unions to act like other businesses and look to their training budgets. The difference for the unions is that training is a core, not a peripheral, activity and the failure to support it contributes directly to the downward spiral of decline.

Current research by the European Trade Union College drawing on national reports from 15 countries identifies a common litany of problems. Revenue decline has meant the closure of training centres or their sell off to compete in the market place and the reduction in the

provision of courses and the development and distribution of new teaching materials. Hostile employers were reluctant to provide time off for training or seeking to undermine its independence through joint provision or via the restricted framework of works councils. Traditional course provision around structured programmes that had been common in Scandinavia and countries such as Italy and France had been challenged as unresponsive to new problems. The countries in Southern Europe, such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, which had emerged from dictatorships in the 1970s had failed to establish widespread education programmes after initial surges of activity. All of this led to redundancy and demoralisation for labour educators and declining course participation.

As the trade unions and labour education emerges from this period of decline there are clearly new challenges to the process of renewal. However, there are indications that give some cause for optimism. Firstly, we may not like the new world of work and new patterns of employment may not be conducive to mass membership but at least the reality is being confronted. Secondly, the emergence of a social dimension within the European Union is now established and further underpinned by the election of social democratic governments in Europe. This process is inevitably uneven, as the recent elections in Austria demonstrate, and there remain limited expectations of radical change. Thirdly, European trade unions are moving closer together and the ideological divides between “communist” “Catholic,” and “socialist” confederations are far less significant. Finally, and perhaps most significantly for labour educators, there is the new responsibility assumed by trade unions for their own plight. More recently, we have seen policies developing and taking their inspiration from the USA and Australia, which re-focus on organising and self-activity. These approaches are not without their own problems and contradictions but it is impossible to develop them successfully without a major educational underpinning.

It would be foolish to argue that the problems for European trade unions are simply fading away and labour educators cannot ignore the need to deal with them in programme delivery. I want to conclude this paper by focusing on three areas of content and two issues of training delivery.

The first area of content I have already touched on, that of what the British TUC refers to as “Winning the Organised Workplace.” There are clear instrumental reasons for training activists to recruit new members

but the joiners are quickly lost if organisation and self activity is not at the heart of the strategy and this can't be achieved without an educational “life support system.” The second area for development is in response to what have been described as “new” management strategies. No longer new but still pervasive across Europe, trade union responses are now beginning to engage in the debate, identify the contradictions that are characteristic of human resource management and force themselves into the gap. Thirdly, there are the opportunities inherent in the development of European-wide industrial relations systems and global corporate strategies. Conference exhortations for international solidarity now ring true for shop floor workers but there are twin dangers that the responses are either to revert into a parochial nationalism or be overwhelmed and disempowered.

In terms of content delivery I will touch on just two issues. Firstly, the electronic delivery of programmes. Every European trade union confederation is exploring distance delivery of its programmes and placing materials on its Internet sites. What they are often failing to do is to ensure that this leads to interaction not isolation. Initiatives in Sweden are integrating electronic delivery with face to face programmes but there is much to learn from other trade union movements about how to use electronic delivery effectively. Secondly, many of the European trade union confederations are establishing or re-establishing links with universities. However, opportunities are growing for fruitful relationships between committed academics and trade unions with limited resources to undertake research or provide some types of programmes.

There are now opportunities to place labour education at the heart of trade union activity in ways that have not existed in Europe for many years.

### **Canadian Challenges**

Like most other industrialized countries, Canada's governments are actively involved in creating conditions for increased privatization, deregulated services, and a more compliant workforce welcoming to foreign investment. Canada's labour movement is fragmented by province and sector, uneven in strength, and, although stronger than the U.S., still declining from 37% to 32% over the last 10 years. In Ontario alone, a province of 10 million people, it's necessary to organize 30,000 new members a year just to maintain current union representation, and we are well short of this level. The leadership, at the middle as well as top levels, is still overwhelmingly

white, male, and over 45, even though the membership is increasingly diverse, young, and female.

### *Key Challenges*

1) **We're divided**, by union, province, age, race, gender, class. These social realities are exploited by employers, and internalized by leaders and members alike. In our own union, a class-based pecking order plays out among health care aides, registered practical nurses and registered nurses, to say nothing of house-keeping, laundry and kitchen staff. Solidarity needs to be negotiated, rather than assumed. And now that we have a "sovereignty-association" deal between Quebec and English-speaking Canada in terms of union structures, we badly need to build some bridges.

2) **We're under pressure**. The increasing concentration of media in English-speaking Canada, under the ownership of union-busting magnate Conrad Black, subjects all of us to a barrage of negative messages about workers and their organizations. Yet we're holding our own. A Vector poll, conducted by a coalition of unions in November 1999, found that 59% of union members polled, strongly agreed with the statement that "unions are essential to protect workers' interests, because employers are getting more powerful, and workers have less security due to imports, contracting out, and the impacts of the global economy." Union education needs to dive into this "crack in consent" (a favourite, evocative phrase of educator dian marino).

3) **We're cautious about change**. It's odd, how union activists simultaneously propose radical employer change, and doggedly resist transforming our own organizations. We still hire and fire arbitrarily; under-train and burn out our staff; and reward for servicing while preaching about external organizing and internal mobilizing.

### *Challenging the Boss in Us*

Consider two situations we face routinely in our courses:

**Vignette 1:** She's the chief steward in a small hospital and she's losing heart. But she thinks there are some kindred spirits in the course, and they'd understand if she just lets loose a bit. This is a safe place to vent some frustrations about bad apples who bad-talk the union but who quietly come for help because they're always in trouble with the boss; of the lack of appreciation for the skill with which she guided the last grievance; of the trouble from her spouse about the phone always ringing during supper; of the unpaid

overtime that never seems to end.

**Vignette 2:** He's got a good relationship with the supervisor. They can sort out most problems. In fact, he enjoys talking to the supervisor more than he does to most of the members who don't have much to say about anything interesting. Many of the members say he's "in bed with the boss," but at this point he doesn't care much. He's not sure what this course can teach him, and has been warned by his supervisor that it's likely to be brainwashing.

### *Finding New Options*

While skills in talking back to management, and competence in handling the collective agreement are still important, these capacities alone will not move these worker representatives forward. Here are some options, and we've tried all three at some point:

**Option 1:** *Ignore the feelings, and march through the manual.* This is the preferred route for new union educators who are afraid that if they leave the book, they'll get hammered from some authority figure in the union. It leads to increasingly lengthy coffee breaks, and to participants developing vague but urgent errands that take them out of the class early.

**Option 2:** *Tell them what they ought to think.* For years, union educators have been telling people what they ought to think and feel. It's embedded in our manuals, including the Canadian Labour Congress steward training course that we co-authored 15 years ago. But the members in our courses are the most active and critical from their workplaces – the kind that step forward to be a steward, even though they're in despair. James Scott, in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, quotes: "When the Lord passes by, the peasant bows deeply and silently lets out a long fart." We're trying to develop resisters, not individual peasants capable of a silent fart.

**Option 3:** *Take a risk and dance with their doubt.* As union educators, we can help workplace leaders distinguish between a reasonable question from a member (e.g., Where do my dues go?) and malicious sabotage. We can use the situations activists grouse about to do some problem-solving; we can risk not knowing the answers; we can be more playful with the familiar scenarios that make people tight and anxious.

### *Democracy within Our Courses*

Dancing is less familiar to most union activists than arguing. But we're trying to dance, tentatively, awkwardly, with as much humble, good humour as we can



muster. We're laughing at the boss in us, and helping activists to do the same. This is one way to help people to re-connect with the impulse for justice and dignity that built unions in the past and can renew them in the future. Not only is this approach more fun. It's more feasible politically. How long do you think you can survive in union education when the participants in your courses are bored or patronized? We can either model deep democracy within our courses, or deal with the fact that participants will vote with their feet. Let's invite them to dance.

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