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Beyond the Activist: Steward-As-Educator

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Beyond the Activist: Steward-As-Educator

Abstract

[Excerpt] The Education Advisory Committee, the longest standing committee of the Canadian Labor Congress, met in 1994 to deliberate on issues of vital importance to the future of trade union education within the Canadian labor movement. At the time, the participants did not realize that their deliberations would determine our movement's direction in education until the year 2000. Discussions ranged from how we can coordinate the development and sharing of education materials, offer more schools and educational activities, use new technology in the area of distance education, and build more resources to further our education work. In the course of the discussions, the question of who we were reaching emerged as the major theme. The discussion document entitled, *Why We Educate* summed up the discussions this way: "...Trade union education has historically targeted the local union leadership and activists through a myriad of educational institutes and schools. Once back in the workplace it was anticipated that this group would share its knowledge and skills. After years of trade union institute training, the time has come to broaden the target group and take labor's message beyond our traditional arenas for education. "Union leaders and activists must take responsibility for undertaking the trade union education of the non-activist members in the local. This will require the education community of the labor movement to gear some of its resources toward coordination with other trade union services such as communications and research, but also to change some of the focus at its institutional schools to providing participants with the tools for education in the local union and workplace."

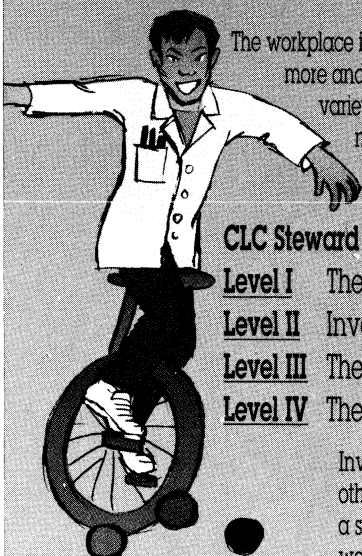
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Beyond the Activist: Steward-As- Educator

■ *Daniel Mallett*

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REACHING OUR MEMBERS WITH LABOR'S MESSAGE

The educators on the Education Advisory Committee grappled with questions of how the trade union movement could initiate a dialogue with membership on issues affecting the workplace and communities. As a movement, we had met with some success using a membership communication model called the On-The-Job-Canvass. Central labor bodies developed it mainly for national and provincial elections and some affiliated unions used it to support other trade union activities particularly in collective bargaining. While the idea of the On-the-Job-Canvass had its merits, it never really became institutionalized or an accepted practice in the activities of the labor movement.

In the minds of the members of the Committee it was becoming more crucial for trade unions to prioritize communication links with the membership for several reasons. First, employers were (and still are) using sophisticated employee involvement schemes under a variety of names to promote employee input and dialogue on work relationships, conditions, problems and productivity. Although couched in the language of cooperation much of the training for involvement in joint programs had as much to do with the acceptance of corporate culture (efficiency, flexibility, the bottom line, etc.) as it did with surviving in a global economy (see *LRR #14*). And throughout all this, the objectives of the union in the memberships' eyes had become somewhat blurred.

Second, the goals and objectives of the union have always required constant articulation. Today's business media and their corporate allies have painted a picture of the union movement as yesterday's institution: Somehow, unions were good at one time, but today, union-imposed conditions make the workplace unproductive and thereby threaten job security. There has also been more discussion by the Right and in the media about the rights of the individual, “forced unionism,” and com-

THE CLC EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE A 40 YEAR HISTORY

The CLC Education Advisory Committee was formed in 1956. Its primary purpose is to advise the Officers of the Canadian Labor Congress on matters relating to labor education and on the broader social issue of education. Over the years it has had a profound influence on the shape and direction of the Canadian labor movement and its members have been instrumental in building one of the largest national adult education networks in the world.

The Committee has also influenced the promotion of Paid Education Leave, the entitlement of government funding for labor education, the institutional concept of worker-teaching-worker, group teaching, flexible progression of labor education courses, the creation of the largest base of trade union instructors (workers) in the world, and the promotion and prioritization of labor education among affiliate unions. The committee meets twice a year and is composed of 45 trade union education staff and activists representing 35 affiliated unions and central labor bodies.

pulsory dues checkoff. Groups like the National Citizens Coalition openly campaign for the elimination of compulsory union dues and tighter legislative restrictions on the activities of unions. In a climate of constant workplace change, high structural unemployment, the erosion of social safety nets and the eradication of national institutions some of our members are buying into the overtures and arguments of the media, the corporations and the Right.

Faced with the need to reach our membership with labor's message, several affiliates were willing to join an education project that would prioritize membership education in the activities of local unions and institutionalize internal communication. Several weekend test courses and a lot of collaboration among CLC instructors and affiliates created education materials that refocused the role of the shop steward as the key organizational and communication link with the membership.

Why was this change in focus needed? Canadian labor educators began to question the emphasis on grievance handling as the most important role and responsibility of the local union steward, and talked about how important it was to prioritize communication with the membership on an ongoing basis. In reality we had only paid lip service to this function. Clearly in the minds of our educators, the labor movement needed to offer stewards and local unions new methods for communicating with the membership and institutionalizing communication

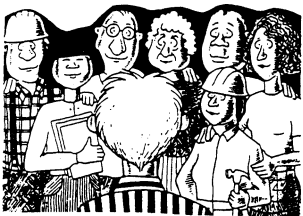
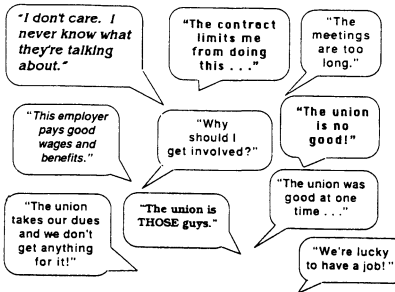
as an ongoing local union priority.

Many of us were haunted by retirees of our unions who emphasized the educational relationships stewards had with the members when they collected dues money every pay period. It is in this context that the roles of today's stewards cannot compare with past educational roles and responsibilities. It is not actually the stewards' fault. Local union politics and structures often prevented stewards from taking an organized education approach on the shop floor and education courses merely reflected the institutional needs of grievance handling and investigation.

TESTING THE REACHING OUT WEEKEND COURSE

The first weekend test course was entitled *Reaching Out*. Because of the network of hundreds of labor education activists it was relatively easy to try out new materials and ideas. In this case, the executives of the Amalgamated Transit Union locals in Ottawa, Toronto and Cornwall were especially willing to work with the CLC and try something new. The test course was a collaborative effort that brought the executive and steward bodies of several unions together to discuss strategies on how to build the union.

The union locals' historic reliance on the membership meeting and newsletters as the sole institutional means of communication with the membership became apparent. The discussion in the test course seemed to center on how we could get the members to the meeting rather than how to bring the meeting or other information to the members. Participants also discussed how the language in the collective agreements and work rules restricted union communication with the members. These clauses included restrictions on union activity in the workplace, steward permission and conditions for leaving the job to solve problems, the use of bulletin boards, the location of posted union information, terms of authorization for posting information, restrictions on the visibility of union insignias, and a limit on the number of stewards recognized in the collective agreement.



Despite the challenges that workplace restrictions posed, participants concluded that the steward body still represented the best way to build involvement and communicate the unions' message in the workplace. The CLC *Steward As Educator* course grew out of a series of test courses and today is one of the most popular courses offered. Affiliated unions have taken the concept and moved it into the structure of their stewards programs to reprioritize the stewards role in the workplace. At the March 1996 CLC Education Advisory Committee one National Education Director described the new steward's course as "in your face communication" to fill a void that was missing in their stewards program.

THE CHALLENGES FOR THE STEWARD AS EDUCATOR

Building communication into the labor movement is not a new idea. It has always been identified as a role of the steward but was either forgotten or never really supported. Today, that lack of support is one of the main challenges facing the steward as the key educator/communicator in the workplace. The leadership of local unions has to commit to support and sustain the activities of stewards on the shop floor. Executives must bargain for the elimination of communication restrictions on their stewards and negotiate time off the job so that stewards can undertake one-on-ones. In addition, the union Executive must provide training in communication and education skills for stewards and let stewards know that this function is as important as grievance handling.

Stewards' training and support will cost money and local union executives must commit to providing resources for training or negotiating union education leave clauses in which employers contribute money, on the basis of hours worked, into an education fund controlled by the union. Executives of the local must also provide stewards with materials, fact sheets, and newsletters to hand out to members in support of their arguments.

Finally, local union executives must not be afraid of encouraging stewards to activate, educate, and engage in one-on-one dialogue with the membership. Dialogue means two way communication and local union executives should not regard the process as a threat. We say this because the course produces a lot of excited stewards who in their enthusiasm "hit a brick wall" when they go back to their executive and local union.

Because of this "brick wall" and the politics of local unions, many stewards use this course as an opportunity to vent about poor relationships with their executives and/or full time representatives. It is the role of

the CLC instructor to focus the discussions on the positive aspects of building the local union through steward communication channels. More leadership training is currently being developed with this aim in mind. Local union leadership need to be more comfortable with the prioritization of education and communication. A new leadership course entitled *Building Local Unions* will undoubtedly espouse the incorporation of the steward-as-educator model and need for collective bar-

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BEYOND THE WORKPLACE— CANADIAN LABOR'S SOCIAL AGENDA

Not only did the Education Committee's discussion focus on reaching beyond the activist, there was also a collective desire to move labor education beyond the workplace:

"We want to move our vision for social change, justice, equality and solidarity from the workplace into our communities, where we live. For that reason, we want our vision to be shared with young people, equity groups, new Canadians, our members' families, community activists and other progressive groups in our communities. Trade union education must help our members to share responsibility and instill the power to shape our communities in our collective visions.

"Canadian trade union educators want to move the nature and principles of trade union education into all activities of the local union. Stewards must become educators. Local union executives must assist in creating opportunities for stewards to become educators. They must assist in the development of workers' representatives to educate members in the defence and promotion of the union and emerging issues. In short, the Canadian labor movement must promote and develop an 'education culture' within the union and the local."

The committee's discussion mirrored others that were going on in the Canadian labor movement. At the CLC's 20th Constitutional Convention in Toronto that same year, an ambitious Program of Action was adopted by the 3,000 delegates in response to ongoing attacks from the business community and political right wing. Part of the Program of Action included the creation of three current issue courses which outlined the three pillars of the CLC Action Plan. These courses would help provide union activists and leadership with an understanding of the corporate and government assault on our national medicare system, our social safety net, and the current jobs crisis we face. The course

gaining initiatives that support membership communication.

The biggest challenge facing the Canadian labor movement is connecting with our membership and making the union a meaningful part of their lives. Whether we're defending the union at the lunch table or systematically talking issues and union policy on the shop floor, we need to use every opportunity available to us to reach our membership throughout the country. ■

would also assist in developing community responses, legislative initiatives, and bargaining strategies in response to the corporate agenda.

Three 9-hour module courses were created by the CLC for use in the labor council schools. They are: *Sewing the Social Safety Net*; *Medicare—Some cuts Don't Heal*; and *The Job Crisis*. From the very start the Action Plan emphasized membership education on these issues, grassroots mobilization, and community involvement.

The degree of activity among affiliate unions, their locals, and the labor councils across Canada has been unprecedented over the past two years. Educational activity has gone beyond the issue courses and ongoing tool courses to include other educational activities such as petitioning, lobbying, public meetings and forums, protesting, coalition building, and, in a couple of cases, one day general strikes. Increasingly, the Canadian labor movement views these actions as education of the grassroots. Never before in the history of the CLC has education been more connected with the larger union activities of promoting social action and change.

While the level of educational activity around social issues has been raised to new heights, Canadian labor education has always been involved in the larger social, economic and political debates. And the commitment of Canadian unions to educating members on social as well as workplace issues has been a major factor in the growth of Canadian trade unionism during a period of international decline. For example, according to a 1990 survey of 880 participants of CLC Education programs, respondents felt that that the major impact of labor education was on how they did their union work and how they saw Canadian society. Other respondents commented on how labor education influenced them to become involved in local politics and community action. (Vector Public Education conducted the survey at the request of the CLC Education Services.)

As a society we would not have achieved a comprehensive national system of health care, the Canada Pension Plan, or a national unemployment insurance system had Canadian labor not been committed to a broad social agenda. But the addition in 1994, of specific CLC convention policy to direct educational campaigns and actions has forwarded the role of education programs as the mechanism for building social unionism. ■