

LINKING LABOUR STUDIES AND UNIONS: PAST LESSONS AND FUTURE VISIONS

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Labour studies programmes have a precarious place in Canadian colleges and universities.¹ In contrast to the United States, where college - and university-based labour educators are an integral part of the labour movement's own educational programmes, Canadian unions have mostly shunned universities and colleges as partners in educational provision. As a result there are very few post-secondary labour studies programmes in the country and the ones that do exist are fighting for survival as administrators demand that programmes deliver increasing numbers of paying customers or face the axe. But why should this be? The labour movement has always insisted that public education systems should serve the interests of working people, but the support it provides to labour studies programmes is tepid at best. The argument one hears is that unions believe in training their own members internally and are not interested in turning to "outsiders" for assistance. But what do we make of this position when most college and university workers are unionized and many are affiliated to labour councils, federations of labour, and the Canadian Labour Congress? Furthermore, at a time when colleges and universities are open as never before to possible collaborations with various partners through articulation agreements, recognition of prior learning and other avenues, one might expect the broader labour movement to seize the opportunity to work with their brothers and sisters in post-secondary educational institutions to create the widest possible learning opportunities for their members.

Post-secondary institutions and unions have enjoyed uneasy relations over the past eighty-five years. The arrival in Canada of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in 1918 marked the beginning of systematic attempts to provide trade unionists with access to university-level education. The original WEA model, inherited from the British parent and established in Ontario during the 1920s, involved collaboration between a local association (with trade union membership) and a university to provide non-credit, inexpensive evening classes to a working-class constituency. The local association was expected to do fund raising, solicit individual memberships and union affiliations, establish an annual or semi-annual programme of courses, determine course fees, organize class venues, recruit students, and generally do

whatever administrative work was required to mount a successful programme of courses. The university collaborator, usually using government money granted to support the WEA, was expected to supply and reimburse tutors from among its academic staff. The tutors were chosen on the basis of their subject-matter expertise and their ability to present an objective account of their topic. In practice, however, WEA tutoring attracted academic staff with some sympathy for workers and unions. Instruction was at a university standard, including reading and written work, although the WEA model differed from the didactic university practice of the period in that association tutors were expected to divide their class time evenly between lecture and discussion. Nonetheless, the instructional model was that of the authoritative university expert dispensing knowledge to worker-students, albeit tempered by workers' perspectives in the discussion portion of the course.

This model worked reasonably well in larger centres such as Toronto for the small minority of trade unionists who were interested in and prepared for university-level courses. Increasingly during the 1930s, however, WEA activists became aware of the limitations of this method and experimented with other techniques such as study circles connected to regular radio broadcasts on labour topics in order to reach a broader constituency. Furthermore, many of the new industrial unions that developed in the late 1930s and the 1940s turned to the WEA for assistance in launching education programmes. As a result, by about 1945 the WEA had a national labour education system in place that included short evening and weekend courses, study circles connected to radio broadcasts, visual education using film and film-strips, summer schools, occasional conferences and workshops on specific topics, and the traditional evening university-level courses. An incipient form of educational progression existed in what WEA activists called their "mass education strategy" whereby a union learner could begin by participating in short courses or study circles and eventually make his or her way into university-level courses.

Unfortunately for its future health, the WEA was too successful in providing a valuable independent educational service for rank-and-file trade unionists. By the late 1940s international unions and labour centrals were developing their own internal educational capacity and some considered the WEA to be a threat. Furthermore, there was a cold war waging in the Canadian labour movement during these years between communists and social democrats. The social democrats were in leadership positions in the main industrial unions and they set about to purge communists and their sympathizers from positions of authority in the movement. The WEA was an autonomous and politically neutral organization that succeeded through its ability to work with all factions in the politically charged labour movement of the day. For the anti-communists, however, this principled autonomy was the same as being a communist fellow

traveller. By the early 1950s, as a result, most unions ceased to work with the WEA and it lost its central place in union educational provision.

The WEA's demise was a loss for Canadian labour education in many ways, including the link that it provided between post-secondary education and the nuts-and-bolts training in union activity that has subsequently become the province of internal union education programmes. Ironically, during the 1950s and 1960s the labour movement attempted to re-establish connections with universities but met with limited success. The 1956 National University-Labour Conference on Education and Co-operation, co-sponsored by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the Canadian Association for Adult Education, was designed to lay the foundation for future cooperation. Trade unionists such as Max Swerdlow, CLC education director, were anxious to enter into strategic alliances with universities for assistance in training instructors, developing instructional materials, and defining programmes of progression from one level of labour education to another. Universities, however, proved to be largely uninterested in union alliances during this period. Manitoba was an exception. Exploiting a healthy foundation of cooperation that had developed during the WEA years, trade unionists and sympathetic academics in Winnipeg launched the University-Labour Three-Year Certificate Programme in 1962. Instructors, teaching at a university level, were drawn from the community as well as from the ranks of university faculty.

In the absence of a sustained and widespread commitment from universities to cooperate with unions after the 1956 conference, the labour movement turned inward to provide the university-level instruction that many felt was necessary to equip leaders with the skills they required to function effectively. The CLC cooperated with the Quebec-based Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) to establish a Canadian labour college. After being spurned by two Ontario-based universities, the labour centrals were successful in convincing the University of Montreal and McGill University to partner with them in their venture. In 1962 the Labour College of Canada opened its doors for its first intake of students. Offering a traditional university-level social science curriculum in a seven-week programme, the college was governed by a board with representatives from the four founding organizations. By the 1980s the CNTU and the two universities had cut their formal ties with the college and it continued as a CLC organization offering university-level courses in a six-week summer residential programme supplemented by a popular distance education course.

The general context of union-university relations changed significantly during the 1970s. The expansion of community colleges across the country, funded largely by the federal government and with a mandate to provide technical training tailored to local community needs, provided a new venue for labour education. In addition, increased funding for universities coupled with

more critically minded and labour-friendly faculty in areas such as sociology, history, economics and industrial relations, provided the impetus for the development of labour studies programmes in some institutions.

Niagara College in Welland, Ontario was the first college or university in the country to establish a labour studies programme, which it began in 1969. John Whitehouse, with twenty years of labour education experience with the Textile Workers Union of America, was its first director. Six years later Humber College in suburban Toronto opened its Centre for Labour Studies as a joint venture with the Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto. The Humber centre, which concentrated on occupational health and safety training in its early years, flourished until the labour council severed its connection with the institution in the mid-1980s and partnered with George Brown College in downtown Toronto. McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, meanwhile, established its labour studies programme in 1976 amid tensions between the programme planners and the labour movement.

British Columbia colleges such as Capilano in North Vancouver, Cariboo in Kamloops, and the British Columbia Institute of Technology attempted to build links to the labour movement with mixed results. Capilano and Cariboo approached the CLC with separate proposals to establish a formal collaboration with the Labour College of Canada. Both were rebuffed. Capilano did launch a labour studies programme in 1976 with the participation and endorsement of the CLC. Almost immediately, however, the CLC withdrew its imprimatur because the college would not allow it to have the control over the programme that the congress demanded. Simon Fraser University, however, was willing to let the labour movement determine the content and nature of its labour programme, so the CLC Pacific office began working with it instead. The CLC did not cooperate with the Capilano programme again until the late 1990s.

The most successful example of university-labour cooperation during this period was the Atlantic Region Labour Education Centre (ARLEC), launched in 1972. Governed jointly by the labour movement, the federal government and St. Francis Xavier University, and supported by federal government funds, ARLEC provided advanced labour education at St. Francis Xavier's Antigonish, Nova Scotia campus. While some in the labour movement were critical of ARLEC's university and federal government links because of the conservative effect they believed they had on the programme, the centre was an important component of the labour education system in Atlantic Canada until the federal government withdrew its funding in 1997.

The irony of this period of relations between the labour movement and post-secondary educational institutions is that after decades of university aloofness, universities and colleges in the 1970s were finally signalling that they were willing and able to make their educational resources available to labour organizations and their members. But the labour movement, feeling self-

sufficient as a result of a major grant to the CLC from the federal government that allowed it to establish the Labour Education and Studies Centre, believed it could afford to rebuff the universities and colleges that were courting it. Indeed, in 1977 the CLC took the extraordinary step of circulating a set of guidelines to every college and university president in the country that stipulated that college and university labour studies programmes must operate under the control of the labour movement. More specifically, post-secondary programmes were to be managed by a committee appointed by the relevant labour council or federation, with responsibility for all aspects of the programme including instructor selection, the establishment of fees, and course content and materials. While sympathetic post-secondary educators cautioned union officials against insisting on this degree of control and that, in fact, the control they were demanding was illegal in some jurisdictions, their protests fell on deaf ears.

In retrospect, the 1970s were the glory days for university and college labour studies programmes, despite the labour movement's general hostility to public-sector provision of labour education. And it is unfortunate that firmer connections could not have been made, because it might have meant that labour studies programmes would be stronger today. In the past twenty-five years some new programmes have been established and others have disappeared. Currently many are enjoying a precarious existence.

The Capilano College programme in Vancouver continues to operate, although college administrators are demanding that it become self-sufficient. And Simon Fraser University recently established a credit-based labour studies programme to complement the non-credit labour programme that it has offered for some time. Athabasca University in Alberta, meanwhile, offers a unique distance-education labour studies degree and certificate programme to the entire country. Athabasca also partners with the Labour College of Canada to deliver a distance education course. And the University of Saskatchewan provides a certificate in labour studies through its College of Commerce. At the University of Manitoba, the University-Labour Three-Year Certificate Programme that began in 1962 was forced to close its doors in the mid-1990s when university administrators demanded that the programme pay its own way. But the university continues to offer a labour studies degree programme, which started in 1979, and is developing a credit-based certificate programme as a replacement for the old three-year programme.

The Ontario scene has changed significantly in the past couple of decades. Niagara College, the grandparent of college programmes, was forced to close recently because of declining enrolments. A similar fate caused the closing of labour studies at Ottawa's Algonquin College. McMaster University continues to offer degree and certificate programmes, while Laurentian University launched a new degree programme in 2000 with good relations with the local labour movement and a unique collaboration with Athabasca

University. And York University, Brock University and the University of Windsor operate degree programmes. McMaster and York have borrowed Manitoba's model of offering student placement courses in which students earn university credits for work done in labour organizations. George Brown College continues its collaboration with the Labour Education Centre of the Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto, in which it accredits the centre's labour studies certificate. The college is also developing its own diploma in labour studies and seeking articulation agreements with universities. Finally, Mohawk College in Hamilton recently developed a certificate programme in conjunction with local labour councils.

With the demise of ARLEC in 1997, when federal funding ceased, there is no indigenous labour studies programme left in Atlantic Canada. St. Francis Xavier University, which was involved in labour education from the 1930s to the 1990s, has apparently lost interest in this area of adult education. And Dalhousie University, which was involved sporadically in labour programming from the 1940s to the 1980s, is no longer in the field.

Besides these university and college-based initiatives, unions, activists and educators across the country are developing labour-friendly curricula for elementary and secondary students. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation has a project for high school students, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union is exploring labour studies material for elementary students, the Aspen Foundation in Alberta has developed modules for high school social studies courses, and the British Columbia Teachers Federation and the British Columbia Federation of Labour have produced a workbook for use in the K to 12 system. In addition, the Manitoba Federation of Labour developed school-based material on occupational health and safety in conjunction with that province's Workers' Compensation Board.

Collaborations have worked best when both parties have been clear about and comfortable with their spheres of control. Universities have never been interested in teaching tools courses, which unions in Canada view as their responsibility. But unions, for the most part, have been uninterested in the educational offerings of universities. They have turned to universities primarily for research assistance and collaboration. Colleges, on the other hand, have offered a combination of tools and issues courses as a reflection of their institutional mandates. Hence, trade unionists have been more wary of these arrangements unless they felt they had sufficient control of the programmes to determine or at least co-determine their content.

What does the future hold for labour studies in Canada in light of this history? If the gulf between labour studies programmes and labour organizations continues, the prognosis is not good. But if a new vision of labour learning develops, the future could be bright. The experience of the WEA, ARLEC, the Manitoba three-year programme, and the Labour College of Canada

in its early years suggest that fruitful collaborations are possible. In the current circumstances, however, we should be thinking more broadly than traditional labour studies or labour education subjects. We should be constructing a labour learning agenda that links various public institutions with unions, labour councils, federations of labour and the CLC.

How might this happen? An individual union with a developed education and training programme would begin by reviewing its existing provision. Some unions, for example, provide traditional tools-type union education for their local leaders and stewards and workplace training opportunities through training centres or specific labour-adjustment programmes. Members of individual unions also attend CLC weekend institutes, week-long schools and the Labour College of Canada. With an understanding of the current state of internal education and training in hand, the union would then develop a long-term education and training strategy. One key feature of this strategy would be to establish principles and a framework for negotiating articulation agreements and brokered arrangements with colleges and universities to allow members to progress in their learning beyond internal union education and training. For example, the union might negotiate an arrangement with a university or group of universities to develop a labour studies credential for union members. The agreement might include recognition of prior learning for members' previous union education, the use of peer educators to offer part or all of the credential in the union's training centres, and the use of new learning technologies to make the programme accessible to all members regardless of geographic location or time constraints. Other arrangements with colleges or universities might include credentials in industry-specific skills, but taught according to labour's training values and the CLC's education and training protocol.

A renewed Labour College of Canada that was more closely integrated into the CLC's Education and Campaigns department, meanwhile, would provide national, cross-union coordination of labour's internal education and training programmes as well as its brokered arrangements with external providers. The college would begin by reviewing the relationship between internal union education programmes and its residential and distance education courses to ensure that they were complementary. It would also assist affiliates to integrate learning technologies into their programmes in a way that optimized learning opportunities for their members and to ensure progression from basic to more advanced courses in their own educational programmes. It would then review its own programme to increase the use of popular-education methods, peer educators and learning technologies. Finally, it would play its own brokering role with colleges and universities to ensure further opportunities for its own graduates in labour studies and other areas. It would also assist affiliates to broker their own arrangements either individually or in concert with other

unions. The college might even follow the lead of the George Meany Center in the United States by seeking credential-granting status and then negotiating its own articulation agreements with colleges and universities across the country and abroad.

Finally, college and university labour studies programmes would actively seek collaborations among themselves while working with local and national labour bodies. The recently negotiated agreement between Athabasca University and Laurentian University could serve as an incipient model. In this case, the certificate and degree labour studies programmes at both universities are completely blended from a student's point of view. Students may take courses from either programme in order to complete their certificate or degree requirements. In addition, Athabasca students have their prior union learning (internal union education as well as informal labour learning) recognized for credit. But college and university labour studies programmes should go further. They should play a mediating role between external labour organizations and their host educational institutions to assist in the development of collaboration agreements and systems of progression for a variety of learning opportunities. What about the union member who does not want to do labour studies, but wants to study computers instead? Unions and educational institutions should work together to ensure that this individual is able to make the transition from his or her workplace and union background, have his or her relevant learning recognized for credit, and pursue his or her studies in a worker- and union-friendly environment.

Ideally, there would eventually be a loosely organized system in place across the country that linked unions and other labour organizations with colleges and universities in a network that facilitated a range of learning opportunities for trade unionists. Then, the dreams that various labour educators have had over the past century about university, college and union collaboration could finally be realized.

NOTES

¹ Because of space limitations and the uniqueness of the Quebec experience, this paper focuses on labour studies outside of Quebec.