

TRAINING FOR LABOUR'S PROFESSIONALS

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Unions occupy a pivotal position within the economies of most industrialized countries. Although the unionized workforce is often less than 50%, union involvement with technical and social change in industry and society is highly influential. Within unions, full-time officials and staff are the union movement's key administrators, managers, and organizers, and their numbers are increasing—at least in Canada, Britain, and the USA. As unions grow in size, address more complex issues, and services to members expand, more officials and staff members are needed.

Union full-time staff and officials have an ever-widening range of responsibilities which fall mainly into three broad functions: servicing and representing union members, organizing and recruiting new members, and representing and promoting the policies of the union. Union officials are also expected to keep up with technological, economic and legislative changes. For example, recent developments in office technology and the transformations in industry and employment brought about by economic globalization have

necessitated changes in officials' working practices. These changes add to an already excessive workload and many union officials and staff risk burning out trying to meet their heavy job demands.

Union officials can be regarded as the labour movement's professionals. Conventionally, professionalism indicates possession of unique forms of expertise acquired through formal education and training. However, union leadership is perhaps the only major profession for which there is no established and recognized sequence of professional training. More recently, others describe the training of union officials as an ad hoc, unsystematic process at best and observe that many labour leaders acquire their leadership skills by the "sink or swim" approach. Further, a recent study of British trade unions found only a few that had developed a strategic approach to training, in which there is an attempt to specify the objectives of training policy, identify officers' training needs, and provide a system of release and cover for officers involved in training. Although some steps have been recently taken to remedy this, most

union officials still appear to learn by doing, without much help or encouragement from anyone, and without any formal training. This article explores why.

LABOUR EDUCATION

Various studies variously discuss the general provision of labour education, its goals and approaches, and the values and ideologies that underpin it documented (e.g., Dwyer, 1977; Holford, 1994; Taylor, 2001). Although labour movements worldwide conduct and monitor training for their members and officials, reports are rarely published. As well, studies of training tend to be contained within broader discussions of union officials' roles and functions. In fifty years, only six studies have focussed specifically on union officer and staff training.

These studies show that, unlike other professions, trade union work does not require much in the way of formal academic education or credentials. Instead, criteria for full-time staff indicate that a commitment to the union and a proven record of relevant industrial experience count far more than any formal or professional qualifications. Still, the formal educational attainment of union officials appears to be increasing. In 1948, only 9% of union officials had any formal post-secondary educational qualifications. This figure then grew progressively to 20% in 1972, 44% in

1982, 62% in 1990, and 75% in 1994. As one participant in a recent conference of international labour educators put it, "It'll soon be impossible to get a job as a union full-time official in Britain unless you've already got a degree."

Nevertheless, it appears that rather than receiving job preparation through formal education, most union officials still acquire the necessary expertise through "lay apprenticeship". They build on years as lay activists acquiring negotiating, political, and public-speaking skills and a detailed knowledge of the union's constitution, rules, and administrative procedures, and the relevant industrial consultative and bargaining machinery. While some unions require prospective officials to pass an examination, there is no generally-accepted corpus of theoretical or practical knowledge, no standard training for entrants, and no professional qualification for trade union work (Kelly & Heery, 1994).

FINDINGS

The study produced several key findings. First, as in other countries, Canadian unions usually recruit full time staff from within their own ranks, and occasionally hire staff from sister organizations. For the services of more specialist staff—those with media, health and safety, legal, or computer expertise—unions are more likely to step outside of

their ranks and recruit those who have been more professionally-or academically-educated.

Second, additional training for union officials and staff is minimal. If resources permit, new officials are sometimes temporarily "teamed" with a more experienced official—perhaps one retiring from similar work for specific tasks—to attend arbitration hearings. More often, unions regard their education provision as better targeted to lay officials rather than permanent staff. "We expect the full-timers to either know the stuff already or catch up as best they can," said one national education officer.

The net effect of these training "climates" result in a third finding: union staff and officials often feel more drawn to attending local and national conferences than to educational programs. Union staff reported that education was usually seen as an individual's own responsibility; those who identified a need for further education generally expected to incorporate it into their existing work schedules. This contrasts with training for union specialist staff. Here, unions were much more inclined to send staff on specific training programs offered by local educational institutions. There was, however, one common exception: many unions allow staff to participate in all or part of their regional "new representatives" courses. "We've found that an efficient way to introduce them to the union

structure and the sorts of things we do. It also helps them grow accustomed to the union culture...and our values."

This last point needs underscoring. As many union officers described, the key measure of all labour education—including that provided for officials and staff—is how far it strengthens labour organization. Respondents were articulate and thoughtful about how education could help. Several respondents were keenly aware of exactly what was needed. They noticed what was lacking: "There's just too much structural lag," said one officer, "We're forever reacting to employers' decisions and strategies...and never finding the time to develop our own". They also noted what courses could be developed. Indeed, unions offered a wealth of suggestions: language training; communication skills; issue seminars on 'globalization or the MAI [Multilateral Agreement on Investment]'; courses for official's spouses and partners; dealing with unions as organizations; management skills ("how to manage different bits of the organization... dealing with people, dealing with decisions, dealing with technology, that sort of stuff" as one female official put it); how to do research and write about it in a clear way; and how to use the internet as a research and advocacy tool.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

“People forget that union education is not just about raising individual awareness or increasing a person's knowledge; it's more seeing those goals in a more collective setting.”

"The last thing the union movement needs is a [expletive deleted] MBA."

Clearly, there are problems associated with developing such education and training within unions—entities that are part organization, part social movement. Full-time staff and officials are generally expected to subjugate their needs and interests to the organization and member demands. "I'd feel so guilty taking time off," was one national official's comment. "I know I'd benefit from more training but the members' problems must come first." Another explained, "Much of my time is spent developing working relationships, whether with the members or with employers. That's my responsibility...and I can't just leave that or hand off my problems to someone else if I want to go on a course."

Moreover, union officials often indicate ambivalence towards the purposes of union education. "Many of us maybe didn't do very well in school," said one female national official. "so why would we put

ourselves back in that situation if we think it's going to be like high-school?" Also, "you're admitting you don't know something when you're supposed to know everything," said another official. "You've run for this tough job in the union and why would you think you could do it if you didn't know everything?" And, the emphasis has to be right. Indeed, too much "book knowledge" is often seen as detrimental and in direct contrast to the highly practical orientation required for union leadership.

Several structural or organizational factors also affect the provision of education for union officials. The first is a union's size. Small unions have far fewer resources in general and can allocate much less towards labour education. As one woman regional organizer explained, "If you've got a region with only 12 officials and they're spread out across four provinces and two islands...freeing a couple of people up to go on a course is going to be quite difficult." The cost too can be prohibitive: "the amount of money we spend flying people around is enormous," explained one national education officer. Despite this, unions recognize the value of face to face meetings. "We've tried video-conferencing or cutting back on the number of meetings," said another official from the same union, "but nobody liked it. They said, 'This is our only opportunity for us to meet and get some important work done so don't go

screwing it up by only holding it once a year.”

A second factor involves a union's priorities. As noted above, education often takes second place to a union's other functions such as organizing, servicing members, or negotiating contracts. Because these latter activities are generally the more visible aspects of a union's work (and hence, where members judge union effectiveness) they receive greater prominence. Significantly, few unions allocate any specific resources to, or have policies on, employee training or appear to operate any system of performance appraisal—a common way of identifying training needs in an organization. "That's one of the things I'd like to develop here," said one national education officer, "but it has to work its way to the top of my priorities. There's only so much we can do."

A third and powerful influence might be best described as relating to a union's organizational culture. As organizations central to the continuing struggle for social justice, dignity, and human rights, all unions hold democracy and tradition as core cultural attributes. Beneath those overarching features, however, each union's culture is unique. Each has its own way of "doing things," its own particular way of conveying its heritage through rituals, ceremonies, symbols, myths, stories, and physical artifacts. So, although unions differ enormously from each

other in coverage, size, political colour, and structure, they have their own cultures.

Regardless of these structural constraints, however, there are promising possibilities for labour education, if carefully designed. Australian labour educator Michael Newman notes two traits of a general union culture around education which transcend individual union differences. First, unions are "owned" and "paid for" by members and are financially accountable to them. Participants in union education courses thus demand obvious and immediate benefits from both the course and their instructors. A second factor lies in the concept of unity: "of being 'us' against 'them', of being unions against management, of being in a continual struggle to guard, promote and defend the interests of 'ordinary' people like oneself" (Newman, 1993).

Canadian labour educator D'Arcy Martin (1995) also speaks of the dynamics or "cross-currents" of union culture which, when thoughtfully considered, can help identify the supports and barriers for education that exist within unions. One key dynamic—the "oppressive/affirmative"—is the presence in unions of inequalities and hierarchies of power. Women officials, for example, often have significant presence at a local level yet are far less likely to hold a more senior or national post. (Interestingly, a study of women

and union leadership notes that all women, and especially minority women, request training programs more often than men. Is this indicative of attempts to address such dynamics?).

Another dynamic noted by Martin—"servicing/mobilizing"—is, as noted above, the ever-present need for unions to provide immediate practical help while also creating a climate for broader social transformation. This dynamic is often dichotomized into "business" versus "social" unionism. Busy officials, ever responsive to the demands of the membership, can always find reasons not to make time for reflection or planning. Yet the opportunity to engage in these activities is precisely what many officials claim they value from education courses. As one senior official who had traveled widely put it, "My experience having looked at a variety of unions in a variety of countries is that the ones that take a more proactive approach to education and make time for more strategic planning are the ones that can best deal with the problems of globalization."

Educational programs that take into account these dynamics can help unions implement a culture of learning at work—for *all* staff. Researchers of working life and education tend to agree about the kind of organizational culture that best promotes individual and organizational learning. For example, training can help unions

explore their own internal practices and how they might generate resentment and alienation. While discussing union culture, two senior women officials (from different unions) identified a discrepancy between labour's progressive rhetoric and conservative practices. For them, this tendency was "rampant throughout the union movement" and could often be seen in their unions' education programs which "privileged technical skills rather than fostered imagination or provided support." Thus, both labour educators and union officials seem to agree on the emancipatory possibilities of a more thoughtful kind of educational climate. As one longtime US union activist puts it:

A critical analysis and discussion of power, self-interest, and decision-making must happen within our own organizations as well. This is essential for all of us—staff, leaders, and members. When organizational structures are hidden or not discussed, people are disempowered. When our own organizational structures are not easily understood, people learn that they have to be 'in with the in crowd' to be involved in the union. This is one of the common ways that sexism, racism, and stagnation prevail in many organization. (Conrow, 1991)

CONCLUSION

Trade unions have always been faced with the necessity of adjusting to economic, technological, labour market, legislative and public attitudinal changes. Yet, as the pace of change is making these concerns more acute, the demands to modify union structures and policies to address such challenges are also accelerating. Throughout the world, labour movements are deeply concerned over how, structurally, they might face the enormous challenges brought about by economic globalization and what they perceive as a concerted attack to threaten their viability, weaken their influence, and cut back workers' rights.

However, as others have described, the crisis confronting the labour movement is not only rooted in globalization or the changing composition of the workforce but also in the way labour thinks through these challenges. For them, labour needs to redefine both its worldview and its organizational structures. In several countries discussion and resolution of these issues is seen as crucial for the revitalization of the labour movement—beginning to overcome what has been categorized as labour's "ideological stupor and organizational inertia." Unions must once again think ambitiously about orienting themselves more towards social unionism, shifting towards

organizing rather than merely servicing, and increasing internal democracy. Finally, because this necessarily involves union leadership development, it can be seen as an educational issue as much as an organizational task. As one experienced organizer put it, "the development of staff and leaders as educators is the missing link needed to support democratic decision-making, participation, and organizing by members." Indeed, a recent ILO study of trade union confederations from eight industrialized countries made a raft of suggestions, including one that specifically concerned the training of union staff: "with few exceptions, the confederations acknowledged the need for formal training. As the needs of members become increasingly diverse and the issues with which union officials must concern themselves become increasingly complex, investing in training for union officials is becoming imperative" (Olney, 1996).

Yet, unions do not always find it easy to take up these challenges or examine their own administrative practices critically. Despite the presence of some remarkably thoughtful and far-sighted leaders in Canada's union movement, the pressures of such work allow little time for reflection or strategic analysis. In addition, the reactive nature of much of union activity combines with an inherent insularity and traditionalism to hinder much education or training that might

challenge or question these tendencies. So, although the need for more training is generally acknowledged, questions still remain about what form it should take.

A roundtable discussion at a recent North American labour education conference raised similar issues: What types of education do union staff and officials require and need? What are the most appropriate methods to impart the necessary knowledge, skills, and qualities? How might the efforts of the various providers of labour education be more closely aligned? For the 50 or so labour educators who crowded into a Boston conference room, the answers to these questions revolved around several key challenges. First, the recognition that staff and official training and leadership development is a concern for the whole labour movement. Second, the necessity of viewing such education as part of a continuum of lifelong learning. As one participant put it, "We don't need more one-off approaches to training...[but] it should be ongoing. Union education should start with the rank and file, progress through steward training, help new staffers with their changed responsibilities...and provide continuing upgrading." In other words, the training for labour's professionals should build upon the existing strong tradition of union education for lay officials to better marry the different knowledge and

practical skills required by full-time staff whilst also broadening their understanding and developing their vision. A third consideration involved more practical details: should such education be necessarily linked to an academic qualification or some other form of certification? Should it be residential, utilize emerging technologies for distance and online learning, or be based on a combination of various approaches? Should it involve open- or more targeted- enrolment? Is it better to be union- or industry-specific or always involve people from different unions? To what extent should the curriculum be based around peoples' experiences and provide practical activities? How much new information should be provided...and what are the best sources? Isn't it prudent to explore and compare a variety of programmatic models?

The conference roundtable discussion evinced plenty of concern about these issues. Its participants also described a range of local activities and opportunities as well as some of the barriers. On a national level, several innovative approaches are already underway—witness Quebec's FTQ Collège, the academic programs linked to several North American universities, or the skills-oriented approach of the British TUC. What seems to be missing is systematic discussion of these issues or any analysis of the variety of approaches. An

overarching concern of the roundtable discussants was that not only must such a debate continue but also that any resolution of these challenges must remain within labour movements themselves. "These issues came from the movement, so the answers must also come from the movement," as one union educator put it. "It's all part of the struggle to build lasting change. In fact, leadership development should be the process of union transformation not the topic."

Unions possess an inherent dynamism that has ensured their continued survival through ever-changing times. One of their greatest assets lie in their personnel: the dedicated and hard-working staff and officials who perform the often thankless and mundane tasks of running the organization whilst also keeping its spirit alive. Clearly, the labour movement is not just sitting back waiting for change to occur. As current changes confront unions with problems and obstacles, they also show the way for new opportunities. Union leaders today act as much as administrators and analysts as they do as bargainers or spokespersons, and, as such, require training and support for those roles. In 1970, a study claimed that leadership training was one of the principal challenges facing the US union movement. As the authors then stated, "society has already entered a world in which common sense and general intelligence are no longer sufficient to solve most

problems facing large, complex organizations....Unions will find themselves at a disadvantage in dealing with organizations which have the needed information and trained talent" (Bok & Dunlop, 1970). Thirty years on, as the problems facing union leaders seem so much greater, so do the opportunities.

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