

CUPE POLICY STATEMENT  
ON UNION EDUCATION

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*On the front line:  
Building power  
through union  
education*



*CUPE National Convention • Vancouver, November 19-23, 2001*

***W**e should never lose sight of the fact that worker education is a subversive activity, that it can change the power imbalances in our societies. It's subversive not just because it shares information democratically, but because of the change that education can cause in individuals making them unwilling to simply accept their place on the "social ladder."*

(Former CLC President Bob White speaking to the Educ-Action Conference, April 1997)

## WHY A POLICY STATEMENT ON UNION EDUCATION?

In these times of growing corporate power, union education is key to building union power. The power to defend our rights as workers, to protect the services we provide, and to build caring communities.

Our union education program has changed dramatically over the past ten years. But it needs to continue to change to give our members, leaders, activists, local unions, district councils, divisions and every other part of our union the tools we need to build even greater strength.

This policy statement is meant to:

- Stimulate thinking and debate about CUPE's education program;
- Set some priorities for the next two years to help us meet the challenges we face; and
- Build understanding of the connections between union education, union action and union power.

## UNION EDUCATION MEANS UNION POWER

Union education helps us develop the tools we need to defend our rights. But it is also the place where we share our experiences and develop a critical analysis about what's going on in the workplace, our society, and the world. It helps us make connections so that we understand better why our employers act the way they do, and what is behind government decisions.

Union education puts our individual struggles into context and shows us that we are part of larger struggles and movements for change – that we are not alone. Through union education, we learn to strategize together, to fight back together, and win.

Union education is often the only formal education workers have access to after joining the workforce. It gives us the skills, knowledge and confidence we need to grow and live fuller lives.

Many CUPE members say that union education is the best thing about our union. It gives us hope and moves us to action.

## **CUPE'S EDUCATION PROGRAM TODAY**

### **CUPE education for the Year 2000**

- 529 “certificate” workshops  
(plus mobilization workshops and joint training sessions,  
for example, on workplace harassment)
- 342 facilitators (staff and members)
- 15,000 participants

### **Most popular workshops:**

- Stewarding
- Bargaining
- Financial Officers
- Health and Safety
- Retirement Planning

Workshops are sponsored by the national Union Development Department, provincial Divisions, District Councils, sectoral committees, bargaining councils, and individual local unions.

They happen during evening, weekend and weeklong sessions, conferences, as well as with individual locals, committees and councils who are preparing for a specific round of bargaining, a strike, a campaign, etc.

Our current program reflects the concerted efforts we are making to reach out to members and involve them directly in everything we do. We don't believe that union education is separate from the day-to-day work of our locals, or our day-to-day struggles in workplaces, at the bargaining table, in the legislatures, in communities, and in the streets.

When CUPE members attend education programs, they understand the struggles better and feel motivated to get involved. When our union activists and leaders attend, they feel better equipped to lead the struggles they're involved in.

## **CHANGING WITH THE TIMES**

CUPE's education program has changed dramatically since the early days of our union.

It has changed to reflect the changing face of our union and to reach out and involve our diverse membership. We have designed workshops to address specific issues like homophobia and racism, and started to integrate equality issues, race, class and gender analysis into the content

of all our workshops. As well, more members and staff from equality seeking groups are involved as facilitators. We are currently running a national literacy project, “Making Literacy a Union Issue”, aimed at building literacy awareness and expertise at all levels of the union. And some CUPE locals have negotiated excellent workplace training programs funded by the employer but operated jointly by the union and the employer.

Our workshops have also changed to reflect the education community’s growing understanding of adult education and popular education techniques. Now, workshops are a place where members share their wealth of expertise and experience. Participants develop a collective analysis, rather than coming to listen to a lecture by an “expert”. “Facilitators” (instead of “instructors”) facilitate learning in a “learner-centred” approach that invites participants to take responsibility for decisions, actions and consequences. And the techniques used in our workshops take into account all the ways our members learn and the different educational backgrounds they bring to the room.

An emerging and growing area of work is joint workplace education with employers. In these sessions, we deliver union workshops on the employer’s time with the employer covering costs. Topics include harassment awareness, stress, and professional development. In 2000, the union reached tens of thousands of members across the country through sessions like these. The harassment workshops, run jointly with CUPE’s Equality Branch, have

usually been organized in response to harassment problems in the workplace. Through these sessions, CUPE has developed an excellent reputation for our program to combat harassment in the workplace.

## **NEW CHALLENGES**

Society is changing in ways that present new challenges and threats to our jobs, our living conditions and our communities.

Increasing corporate power is having an impact on our workplaces. Our members are dealing with work reorganization schemes and ongoing pressure from privatization and cutbacks. The corporations who are pushing for privatization, deregulation and public sector cuts are working together globally, through trade agreements like NAFTA, GATS, and the FTAA. We, too, need to work with unions globally to stand up for our members’ rights.

Our members are bombarded by media messages that are pro-business, anti-union, and anti-public sector. Workers’ stories, and a worker’s perspective on stories, don’t get reported.

Public sector restructuring is changing the way our locals look and how they have to operate. Now we have mega-locals, locals spread across thousands of kilometers, and composite locals representing members with different employers.

And we have internal challenges to face.

Our membership, too, is changing and becoming more diverse. We need to do more to ensure that all workers – particularly equity seeking groups – are not left out of our union. Workers of colour and First Nations workers, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered workers, disabled workers, older workers and young workers need to have full access to our education programs. And participants in all programs need to come away with an understanding of how issues impact differently on different groups within the membership.

Another challenge is that not all CUPE locals are accessing our education program. Not all are investing in union education for both experienced and new activists.

How can we make sure every local in CUPE has access to our education program? How can we assist locals to identify and address the specific skills they need to defend their members' rights? How can we encourage more locals to invest in the education of newer members and activists and use education to build the skills of the leaders of tomorrow? How can we use union education to build solidarity within CUPE and within the larger labour movement? These are the questions we need to answer to make sure our locals all benefit from CUPE's education program.

## MEETING THE CHALLENGES

There are several things we can do to make sure our education program helps locals overcome the challenges we're facing.

### **Develop new workshops, programs and educational material**

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As our world changes, so, too, does the content of our education program need to change. Members are asking for workshops on issues like globalization and trade agreements, combating racism, pride in CUPE, new forms of work reorganization, aboriginal rights, non-violent direct action and civil disobedience, union based literacy programs, reaching young workers about their rights, etc.

We need to explore new ways of reaching members, for example, through theatre, art, video, film and internet technology. We need to develop skills and capacity in all these areas.

We need to build an even more participatory and action-oriented education program. And we need to make our program even more flexible by expanding the ways that we can adapt it to a local union's particular needs and circumstances.

All facilitators should undergo equity training. A module on equity issues should be developed for staff and elected leadership.

**✓ Continue to build greater inclusion in our union, and make sure we are reaching all our members with our message**

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We need to continue the work that has started to integrate equality issues into all aspects of our education program – workshop writing, resource materials, facilitator training, and workshop delivery. This includes offering courses in flexible formats such as half day and two day courses, the development of modules, and flexible courses tailored to reach out to more members.

We need to involve members from equity seeking groups and young workers in ensuring that our education program meets the needs of all members of the union.

We need to find better ways of ensuring that all our union activists and leaders gain a better understanding of the root causes of inequalities, and that they learn to identify systemic discrimination and how to address it.

**✓ Make literacy a union issue**

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Union literacy programs are key to ensuring that all our members can participate fully in union education, as well as face the demand for increased literacy skills at work, at home, and in their community. Literacy and basic skills classes can provide the upgrading these members need, and open the door to union education and/or other education and training.

CUPE is in the second year of a national project to help locals negotiate and set up union-based literacy programs. Union education is one of the focuses of this project. We have already started work on new workshops that will help local unions put in place union-based literacy programs – workshops that will help us address the diverse literacy and language skills of our membership. Our literacy project will also help ensure that our education program and other CUPE programs (including the materials we produce) are accessible to members at any literacy level.

Integrating literacy into the work of the union, including union education, can help us reach beyond active members to those who don't yet feel connected.

**✓ Do systematic and regular audits of union education needs**

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Not all locals, committees, and councils are accessing our education program to meet strategic needs. For example, in some locals, attending workshops is treated like a reward with the same members being sent and others overlooked again and again.

Some newly organized locals are not receiving education when they need it the most when they're just starting out, getting organized, and preparing to negotiate their first collective agreement.

We will start doing “education needs assessments” for local unions, district councils, divisions, bargaining councils and committees. These needs assessments will identify what members are facing in their workplaces, and what particular kind of education would help strengthen our capacity to take on these challenges.

In addition to identifying education needs in the union in a more systematic way, we will start to systematically track use of the program. This will help ensure that education is meeting strategic needs in the union, and help us target specific needs as they arise.

**✓ Increase access through internet-based union education**

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Across the country, there are CUPE members who don't have access to our workshops. The reasons vary. In some cases, locals are too small or too isolated to attend union educationals. In others, local leaders and activists are just too busy balancing home, work and union activity to take time out of their schedules to attend a weekend or weeklong workshop.

Internet-based education can help bring education to CUPE members who can't attend workshops now. Our distance union education program will not replace face-to-face learning opportunities, but will provide a way for more members to participate.

While we know that many members still don't have access to the internet, we also know that internet access is increasing rapidly in Canada. We need to start putting an internet-based program in place that can grow as access increases.

In developing this program, we will draw on the expertise of CUPE members in the public education system who work in the field of distance education. We will seek their advice and assistance, both to adapt our programs and materials for internet-based delivery, and to train “distance education member facilitators”.

Our goal is to launch our first workshop on the internet by fall 2002. Current development plans for CUPE's web site will help ensure that it will be able to support a distance education program when we're ready to launch it.

**✓ Create a new national leadership program**

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We will expand our current education program by creating a national multi-week residency program for CUPE leaders.

Right now, members can attend local and regional workshops organized by CUPE or the CLC for a range of skills building learning opportunities. Nationally, members can apply to attend the CLC's Labour College, which brings together members from other unions to study in a more traditionally academic program. CUPE's new program will complement these existing programs. But the program will be substantially different, in terms of both process and content.

The national leadership program will be a place in our union where CUPE leaders from across the country can come together to learn: sharing experiences and strategies, while expanding their leadership skills. Through this program, we will demonstrate how union education can build CUPE's power as a union.

The program will cover such diverse but important areas as globalization, world trade, labour history, economics, politics, how social movements succeed, how to plan campaigns, racism, sexism, homophobia, aboriginal rights, human rights, government finance, poverty, discrimination against the poor and class discrimination. The program will be demanding, but very stimulating. It will reflect the specific context of CUPE members, as workers, community members and citizens.

It will build on the skills and expertise of the participants, as well as on the experience and knowledge of well-known guest speakers and skilled facilitators.

Details about the program, including curriculum, governance, administration, participant selection process, resources, location, etc. will be developed through discussions with regions, locals, bargaining councils and staff, to ensure it meets the needs of members in all sectors and regions.

CUPE National will organize the program as a pilot project in its first year. Participants will be selected from provincial and national leadership groups, in a way that reflects the diversity of CUPE's membership.

Recognizing the need to start building tomorrow's leaders today, special emphasis will be placed on recruiting CUPE young workers as participants.

In subsequent years, CUPE National will review and expand the program to include more participants. We will explore providing financial support on a cost-share basis with local unions, bargaining councils, provincial divisions and other groups in CUPE that

want to nominate members for leadership training. Groups in CUPE might also be given the opportunity to participate in the program at their own expense.

To help cover these costs, local unions and bargaining councils will be encouraged to establish union education funds (see below) and bargain employer contributions to these funds. Groups that have established these funds will be encouraged to use them to finance participation in CUPE's national leadership program.

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CUPE's program will take advantage of the highly successful models and curriculum developed by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the Canadian Auto Workers, but will reflect the specific needs of CUPE members. Paid education programs in both these unions have had a remarkable impact on members, expanding their skills and knowledge to both take on fights at work and participate more fully in their union.

**✓ Bargain funding for union education**

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CUPE has had policy encouraging locals to bargain for paid leave for union education since 1977. Many locals have successfully negotiated language in their collective agreements in which the employer pays for time off for union business, including union education. Others have negotiated language for paid leave for jointly-controlled workplace training programs.

It has not proved easy to bargain paid leave for union education – this is not something employers want to see us do! But we need to make this a bargaining priority if we want to make sure members have access to the education they need to face the major challenges outlined earlier in this policy paper.

Other unions and some CUPE locals have done it. They have succeeded in getting employers to make significant contributions to union education funds that are controlled and administered by the union. We now have very large locals and bargaining councils in CUPE with the bargaining clout to take on the same fight. We must make a

coordinated and concerted effort to win employer contributions to CUPE education funds, controlled and administered by the locals and bargaining councils.

Locals and bargaining councils will be encouraged to use their funds to participate in CUPE's education programs and workshops, including our proposed multi-week national leadership education program (described above).

The funds could also be used to develop education programs to meet the specific needs of specific locals and groups of members. CUPE National will offer special assistance to locals that successfully negotiate education funds to help make these programs as effective as possible.

Our goal will be to establish a few very successful models of employer-financed, union-controlled funds. These will demonstrate what union education funds can accomplish, and serve as a model to assist other groups in CUPE in their negotiations for similar funds.

**✓ Continue to build and strengthen our member facilitator program**

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CUPE has had a policy supporting the use of trained member facilitators (first called Occasional Instructors (OIs), now called Occasional Facilitators) – along with staff instructors – since 1979.

Member facilitators bring a wealth of experience and skills to CUPE workshops – our program would not exist without them. Occasional facilitators are trained facilitators

who can speak from personal experience. As peers, they create a comfort level in a workshop; they are not perceived as “authority figures”.

We need to strengthen our commitment to recruit, train and support member facilitators so they can work closely with CUPE staff to meet the needs of the members in their workshops. We also need to continue efforts to recruit, train and support member facilitators who represent the diversity of the CUPE membership.

 **Do what we’ve been doing even better**

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This policy statement sets out a number of new educational initiatives that we will take in the coming years. But we also have to commit to doing what we’ve been doing even better. We must continue efforts to update existing workshops and materials to ensure they remain relevant to the needs of CUPE locals and members.

As part of our program to revitalize and update our existing program, we will reorganize CUPE’s union education certificate program. Our education workshops and courses will be grouped together in four streams: advocacy, leadership, personal development and humanities, instead of the current (and more traditional academic) approach of grouping courses into levels. Under the new system, members working through the certificate program will be

required to participate in certain core workshops, including equality workshops, to receive a program certificate. Of course, members currently working on certificates under the current program will receive full credit for the workshops they have already taken and these credits will count towards the new certificates.

## EDUCATION IS POWER

Like never before, our union must stand up for the rights of CUPE members and the gains we’ve achieved. Union education is a key component to building a strong union. We need to help our members develop the skills, knowledge and analysis to counter increased corporate power and what it’s doing to our communities and our workplaces. We need to develop new strategies to take on these challenges. We know that union education leads to union action. And union action means union power. That’s what we are building. And that’s how we’re going to win.

