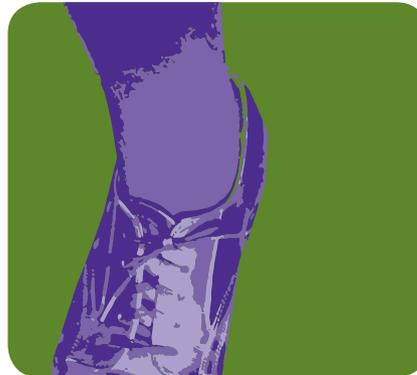
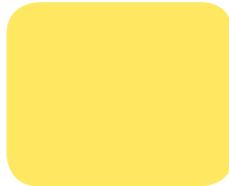


Transformations:

Literacy and the Labour Movement

Past, Present, and Future



Copyright © Workers Arts and Heritage Centre 2014

This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.



To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Written by Andreas Krebs

Section 2 based on *A Quest for Learning: The Canadian Labour Movement and Worker Literacy Education*

Book design by Dawn Buie

Typeset in Myriad Pro and ASAP

First printing 2014

ISBN 978-1-896786-51-3

Working class - Education - Canada

Workplace literacy - Canada

Literacy programs - Canada

Labour unions and education - Canada

Published by the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre

51 Stuart Street, Hamilton, Ontario L8L 1B5

wahc-museum.ca

Transformations:

Literacy and the Labour Movement

Past, Present, and Future

Written by Andreas Krebs

Edited by Suzanne Gallant

Book design by Dawn Buie

Acknowledgements

We thank the following individuals for helping to put together the information and history in this document:

Sylvia Sioufi (Canadian Union of Public Employees), Barb Byers (Canadian Labour Congress), Louise Miller (Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec), Laurell Ritchie (Canadian Auto Workers Union – now Unifor), Gail Carrozzino (United Food and Commercial Workers Canada), Linda Wentzel (Nova Scotia Federation of Labour), Tamara Levine (Canadian Labour Congress), Brigid Hayes (literacy expert), Sue Folinsbee (literacy expert), Elizabeth McLuhan (Workers Arts and Heritage Centre), Nancy Jackson (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto), Anna Larsen (Labour Education Centre).

We also thank the individuals listed below for sharing their experience, their stories, and for providing feedback:

Paul Moist (National President, Canadian Union of Public Employees), Anna Larsen (Labour Education Centre), Tamara Levine (Canadian Labour Congress), Brigid Hayes (literacy expert), Bev Burke (labour educator), Khaleelah McKnight (Labour Education Centre), Bushra Mir (Labour Education Centre), Tom Ciancone (CUPE 4400), Winnie Ng (labour rights activist and the CAW-Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy, Ryerson University), Monique Joly (Canadian Union of Public Employees), Normand Lévesque (RESDAC — *Réseau pour le développement de l'alphabétisme et des compétences*), Donald Lurette (adult education consultant), Judith Giguère (FBDM — *Formation de base pour le développement de la main d'oeuvre*), and Louise Mercier (Service Employees International Union, Local 800). Please note that some of these people are retired from their organization.

Section 2 of this publication is based on *A Quest for Learning: The Canadian Labour Movement and Worker Literacy Education* first published in 2001 with funding from the National Literacy Secretariat (Human Resources Development Canada).

The Canadian Union of Public Employees is gratefully acknowledged for the funding of this project.

Contents

Introduction	2
Many Ways of Navigating the World	4
Why Labour Literacy Education?	6
What Is Labour Literacy Education?	8
Literacy and Beyond	10
Literacy in Canada	12
Worker-Centred Education	14
Clear Language	22
History	24
The Early Days: The 19th Century to World War One	26
The Roots of Modern Labour Literacy: 1920 to 1970	29
The Flourishing of Labour Literacy Education: 1970s to Early 2000s	30
The National Literacy Secretariat: 1988 to 2006	32
Current Trends	34
Neoliberalism, the Anti-Labour Agenda, and Worker-Centred Education	36
The Neoliberal Agenda: “Shrink – Shift – Shaft”	38
A Culture of Learning	42
From “I” to “We”	46
Challenging the Status Quo	48
Precarious, Contract, and Part-Time Workers	52
New Technologies	53
Final Thoughts on a Culture of Learning	55
Next Steps	56
Conclusion	62
Glossary of Terms	63
Image Index	65

Preface

On behalf of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and as a long time proud literacy supporter, I am pleased to write this foreword for *Transformations*.

This updated history of literacy in the labour movement is a testament to the dedication and hard work of activists and staff, who have tirelessly supported literacy training for all workers for many decades.

This story speaks to the need and importance of literacy, its impact and benefits on learners, their families, their communities, and the entire labour movement. It's important that we keep the story alive by sharing the struggles of the past with today's workers, learners, and activists.

CUPE is proud to be a leader in the labour movement in advocating for literacy training. Literacy provides opportunities to upgrade skills and fuels activism. I have witnessed firsthand the transformation of learners who became more confident in speaking up, participating, and contributing in the labour movement and community.

Literacy is a powerful tool for social change. I hope this story inspires you and encourages you to pursue lifelong learning and to be an advocate for literacy.

In solidarity,

Paul Moist

National President

Canadian Union of Public Employees

“ We 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

“ Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-educate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.

César E. Chávez

Overview of Transformations

The goal of this document is to highlight the importance of labour literacy education and the benefits it can bring to workers, their families, their communities, and the labour movement as a whole.

1

Section 1 begins by introducing what we mean by labour literacy education, how it is different from institutional education, and how it is linked to a labour vision of literacy and the related concept of clear language.

2

Section 2 delves into the history of education within the Canadian labour movement. Over the last 150 years, labour literacy education has become a tool for working people to gain concrete benefits in their workplace, community, and the country as a whole.

3

Section 3 discusses the challenges facing labour and labour literacy education today. Beginning in the 1980s, neoliberalism has promoted the politics of individualism, turning everyday citizens against organized labour, a trend that only benefits private interests — the same interests that are responsible for shipping many jobs offshore, driving the corporate tax rate down, and fraying the social safety net.

4

Section 4 articulates a vision of how labour literacy education can lead to political and social transformation and challenge the neoliberal agenda. We explore how labour literacy education can help individuals, families, and communities lead better lives in the 21st century.

5

Section 5 concludes with some concrete steps that you can take to bring labour literacy education into your workplace. Whether you are a labour educator, a steward thinking about implementing a labour literacy education program, an activist trying to bring clear language into your workplace, or a union staff member interested in the history of labour literacy education, we hope you will find *Transformations* useful, informative, and above all inspirational.

Introduction



You're chatting with Sandra at the nurse's station trading stories about your teenaged kids. Her daughter Mason had her first date the night before, and stayed out way past her curfew. "That's kids!" you chuckle. The phone rings and Sandra picks up. "There's a patient down in emerg. She's about 60, in a wheelchair, named Beatrice. She's got a pain in her abdomen, you better get her to X-Ray."

That's how it is working in the hospital, intense work, always moving, but with some relaxing downtime mixed in. You head out from the nurse's station down the hall toward the elevator, and notice an unfamiliar sign ahead. The walls are covered with plastic sheeting, and some of the overhead ceiling tiles have been removed. You start to feel a pinching in your chest, and a lump in your throat. If you can't see your familiar signposts, and those coloured lines on the walls, are you going to be able to get Beatrice to X-Ray? It's been months since you've asked for directions, and you don't want to seem stupid in front of your co-workers...



In this example, Simon, a hospital orderly, uses the familiar signposts of the hospital — coloured lines and symbols on signs — to navigate his workplace. This is one of many ways to understand the world around us. Throughout history, many systems have been developed for communicating — the spoken word, visual art, maps, oral histories, pictograms, letters, numbers, and the coloured lines on the walls of hospitals.

Each of these systems has value and expresses specific ways that humans interact with the world around them, and with each other. But in a complex and fast moving place like Canada, understanding the written word has become essential for getting around, for communicating ideas, and for understanding the important things that affect our lives and work.

Simon is capable of navigating the hospital without help — so long as his familiar signposts are there. But

he has difficulty reading, which means that hospital renovations pose real challenges for him. He also has difficulty filling out his time sheet. And when he had a reason to put in a grievance against the hospital management, he decided not to because he was embarrassed to ask for help.

Simon's challenges with reading have nothing to do with whether he is smart or not. In fact, it took remarkable ingenuity to develop an alternate system to navigate the hospital, all the while hiding his reading challenges. But like so many people who have gone through the education system, Simon was told he was stupid his entire life. His family didn't speak English at home, which meant that when he started school he had to learn a whole new language. After struggling through school for years, he left high school early.

A negative experience with education can turn someone off of learning. That's why the labour movement has always been concerned with education in the broadest sense of the word.

There isn't a single way to understand the world, which means that there are always many ways to communicate about it. Labour literacy education understands this, and works hard to fight for better working conditions and learning opportunities. It enables and empowers us to not only to do our jobs better, but to improve our quality of life at home and in the community. And it provides us with the tools we need to understand how things like seemingly abstract changes to laws in Ottawa can affect our daily lives.

Many Ways of Navigating the World



More and more, science is recognizing that all animals — humans included — have rich and complex ways of communicating. We might think of our favourite method, speaking, as the most important way we communicate. But even between two individuals, communication can take many forms. The way you stand, whether you talk with your hands, and your tone of voice all communicate meaning above and beyond the spoken word.

And human societies around the world and throughout history have developed numerous ways to communicate spoken words to people across time and space. The Haudenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois, design

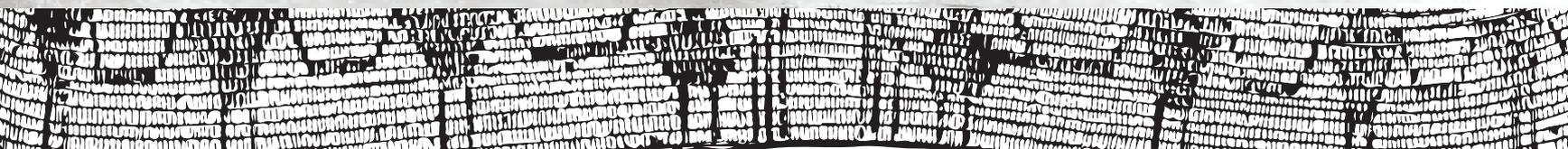
beautiful belts embroidered with wampum shells to record important events and commemorate treaties. Different patterns and colours of shells denoted different ideas, which could be interpreted — or read — by anyone acquainted with the system.

The Incans developed a system of knotted strings, mostly for accounting, that enabled communication and record keeping. Egyptian hieroglyphs are another example of meaning communicated through symbols on a page (or sheaf of papyrus, or the wall of a tomb). Beyond the symbols that we are familiar with, the Egyptians also developed what is believed to be the world's first alphabet — a set of symbols that represent sounds made verbally.





G H I J K L M N



Why Labour Literacy Education?

We believe that labour literacy education is key to the labour movement's survival in the 21st century. Labour literacy education is a broad term that includes skills training, upgrading, literacy workshops, a commitment to clear language, and an approach to education that focuses on workers' needs.

Over the past 30 years, labour has been under constant siege in Canada and around the world. The political and economic forces collectively called "neoliberalism" have been systematically undercutting workers, privatizing public services, and making us — Canada's working people — bear unsupportable consequences.

Improving our understanding of large-scale political forces can also bring more people into a life of labour activism, and getting more unionized workers active in their union and their communities.

After all, a workforce that can read the world can see through the anti-union barrage in the media.

By embracing the cause of labour literacy education, labour can also make inroads into non-unionized workplaces, reaching out to non-unionized workers, including temporary foreign workers.

If we have participated in labour literacy education programs, we are far better equipped to respond to diverse challenges, to contribute to our families, to our communities, and to our unions. We are also better equipped to add our voices to the national discussion about the kind of world we want to create and the kind of world our children will inherit.

Ultimately, labour literacy education is about democracy, about enabling deeper participation, and about ensuring that our unions are more representative of the membership.



DIRECTIONS TO AMBULATORY SURGERY

- ⇒ You are on the 3rd Floor of the Hospital. Start at the **Blue Elevator** and take it down to the 1st Floor.
- ⇒ Follow the **Blue Tiles** to the Emergency Room.
- ⇒ Across from the Emergency Room, you will see the **Green Elevator**. Take it to the 2nd Floor.
- ⇒ When the doors open, the waiting room will be on your right.

Section 1

What Is Labour Literacy Education?

Labour literacy education is a broad concept that includes literacy, numeracy, basic skills training, and many other kinds of education. It always keeps the worker at the forefront of the education process, and it always starts from the worker's needs and goals.



“It’s not about helping. It’s about creating something together.”

— Sylvia Sioufi, CUPE Education Officer

Literacy and Beyond

Literacy is often thought of as just the ability to read and write, and something that a person either has or doesn't have — think of the way we often use the terms “literate” and “illiterate” as opposites. But this all-or-nothing view doesn't reflect that literacy is part of a continuum. In fact, people have many different literacy skill levels.

Furthermore, labour views reading and writing as more than just ends in themselves. Of course, if you are an avid reader, you understand that there is great pleasure in reading a novel. But there is far more at stake than simple comprehension of words on a page. Literacy is about both understanding and using printed information at home, at work, and in the community. Literacy enables us to achieve our goals, develop our analytical capacities, and fulfill our potential. Literacy is a way of navigating the world, a set of tools that can be used to unpack and decode messages in the media, and an understanding of how political and economic forces affect our daily lives.

Business and government often emphasize how literacy and training are necessary for a skilled, adaptable workforce, an efficient labour market, and increased productivity. They focus on skills training specific to the job at hand and are

less interested in transferable skills, or in how education affects the whole person — at work and beyond.

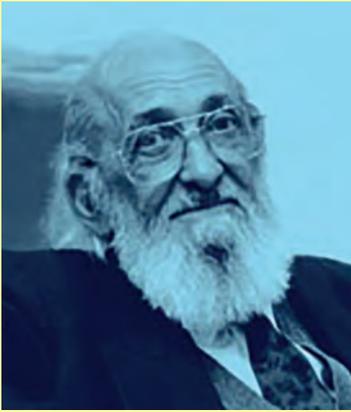
Labour doesn't disagree that concrete skills training is important. However, literacy training is about much more than improved productivity or fewer workplace injuries. Above all else, literacy is a tool for social change. When workers improve their literacy, we not only become better at doing our jobs, but we also become empowered to effect change at work, at home, in the union, and in our communities.

This is why the labour concept of literacy is often characterized as “reading the world.” Reading the world is attributed to Brazilian educational thinker Paulo Freire. For Freire, and for the labour movement, reading isn't just about following an author's lead from page to page, or blindly following instructions on how to fill out an injury report. Reading the world means teasing out how authority works through words: for example, understanding that when a newspaper columnist characterizes unions as corrupt institutions, he is pushing a particular anti-union political agenda, and the points he presents are unlikely to be based on fact.

“ There are many people who can read and write at a level we would say is proficient but it doesn't necessarily mean they have strong literacy skills.

Khaleelah McKnight
Labour Education Centre

Reading the World: Paolo Freire and Critical Pedagogy



Developed from many of Paolo Freire's main teachings, critical pedagogy turns traditional teaching on its head. Critical pedagogy is an approach to teaching: critical means that the teaching does not take the world at face value, and pedagogy is the theory and practice of teaching.

While the public school system has changed a great deal over time, for many years it viewed students as empty vessels who were to be filled with knowledge by the instructor. Critical pedagogy moves away from this approach to teaching. It sees learning as a two-way relationship between learner and instructor or facilitator.

Critical pedagogy helps learners to tease out inherent bias and underlying power structures in the world around them. It does not present learning materials in a neutral way. Rather, it provides analytical tools to students that enable them to

see the wider context around a given news article or government decision. This includes understanding how, for instance, mainstream media outlets reproduce white, masculine power through what may seem like mundane reporting.

Ultimately, critical pedagogy asks students to challenge what may be their own preconceptions about themselves, people around them, and the wider world. Through critical pedagogy, learners come to understand that everyone can make positive changes to their own lives, and to the lives of others around them.

To learn more about critical pedagogy, you can check out titles by Paolo Freire himself, particularly *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as well as books on teaching by Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Joe Kincheloe, and Shirley Steinberg.

Literacy in Canada

While many people take their own ability to navigate the world for granted, for many Canadians even daily tasks like reading a bus schedule or budgeting for weekly groceries can be difficult. According to the 2013 Survey of Adult Skills from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 32% of Canadians have difficulty with everyday documents like bank slips or job applications. A further 13% have a great deal of difficulty understanding any written text. And 4% of Canadians over the age of 15 couldn't participate in the survey because their literacy skills were so low.

There are a number of negative repercussions for the country as a whole when so many of us have difficulty performing tasks essential to active participation in our modern society.

Low literacy rates can be a roadblock to advancement in our jobs. When advancing requires taking on more responsibilities, such as making up a shift schedule, strong literacy skills are needed to get a promotion.

Employers also see the benefits of workplace education programs. Employers have reported better health and safety, increased profits, reduced absenteeism, improved labour-management relations, higher earnings, and better job mobility. According to the Conference Board of Canada, 79% of companies responding to a survey about literacy training in the workplace found that the training

improved productivity.¹ The same study reported that 85% of employers saw improved health and safety when they offered literacy training at work. One 2005 study claimed that a country's literacy scores rising by one percent relative to the international average could mean a \$32 billion boost to the economy.²

Low literacy skills also mean that members aren't always able to participate fully in their union. Assuming that their members have strong literacy skills can mean that stewards, administrators, and union executives don't always communicate effectively with members. People with stronger literacy skills often take reading and writing for granted. For instance, stewards and activists often post fliers or other written materials on public boards to communicate with their local membership — including fliers advertising literacy and skills training programs.

Finally, Canada's large number of people with lower literacy means that labour's message is not being effectively communicated to a wide audience. Most of the country's print dailies that cater to an audience with a lower reading level have a corporate agenda and are often staunchly anti-union. When workers with lower reading levels are constantly barraged with anti-union messages in their daily newspaper, it becomes more and more difficult to get labour's message of equality and solidarity into the national conversation.

1 *The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy Skills in the Workplace*, Conference Board of Canada, 2007

2 *Public Investment in Skills: Are Canadian Governments Doing Enough?*, Serge Coulombe and Jean-François Tremblay, C.D. Howe Institute, 2005

The OECD Skills Survey Recommendations

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) completed their most recent Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), also known simply as the Survey of Adult Skills, in 2013. It consists of a comprehensive sample of adults aged 16-65 in 24 countries in the areas of literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments.

Policy recommendations from the report are comprehensive and, if followed, would greatly improve the provision of labour literacy education in Canada. They include:

- Improve links between educational institutions and the workplace.
- Provide training for workers, and where necessary — for instance in small- and medium-sized businesses — provide support for this training.
- Make training relevant through including both employers and unions in the design of training programs.
- Ensure that training is attuned to workers' daily lives, both in terms of relevant content and flexible course delivery.
- Be sure that those with the lowest skills have access to skills training and are encouraged to participate in these programs.
- Make sure that adults understand the broad benefits of literacy and basic skills training.
- Be sure that information about training programs is accessible and easy to find, especially for programs aimed at adults with low literacy skills.
- Provide recognition, and when appropriate, certification for completion of a training program. This could vary from certificates of participation to the GED or technical certification in a given process.

Worker-Centred Education

Labour literacy education is worker-centred education, which is very different from traditional education. We all remember the grades, tests, levels, and learning by memorization from school. The experience of school learning has had a profoundly negative impact on some learners in Canada. Learning styles differ widely between learners, which means that some students in the education system didn't have their needs met while at school, and as a result aren't engaged in learning.

Traditional teaching approaches often take an "empty vessel" approach to learning. A teacher or other authority

figure holds the knowledge, and the learners sit in rows facing him or her, waiting to be filled up with knowledge.

Building on solid adult education principles, worker-centred education believes that the role of education is not to fill an empty vessel, but to kindle a flame within each learner, one that empowers them to pursue their goals and grow as workers, parents, and community and union members.

Worker-centred education is designed to minimize power relations and flatten hierarchies. For instance, many programs train peer educators to facilitate education programs.

A peer educator is a co-worker who has been trained in worker-centred education. Since they share the workplace with other learners, they understand the issues that workers face in their environment. Peer educators can also show by example that they too went through the program and met their goals.

Some labour literacy programs use college instructors instead of peer educators. Regardless of the instructor's background, worker-centred education recognizes that transformation through training occurs for both learners and learning facilitators.

“ So it seemed natural the more and more I got involved in adult education, the more I believed in this learner-centred approach. Sharing, co-teaching — whatever you want to call it — it's about learning and teaching together.

Tom Ciancone
CUPE 4400



“ I think it's really important to understand where your learners come from. They have these amazing histories and life stories but I think a lot of the time it just gets brushed under the rug — we're going to learn this, we're going to learn that — but there's so much we can learn from them.

Bushra Mir
Labour Education Centre



Discover Learner Goals

Worker-centred education always begins by identifying the goals of learners, where they are having difficulty, and where they excel. This means that curriculum is not determined before the class starts. Instead, the facilitator has a number of tools he or she uses to bring learners into the process and to help them determine what outcomes they want to achieve through the course.

This also means that success of the course is determined by the learners themselves. There are indicators of progress and evidence of new skills. However, there are no tests, nothing to pass or fail — only an understanding that learners will get from the program what they put into it.

“ We really have to go with whatever comes up. So somebody says, “My landlord is not fixing the plumbing, we haven't had water in our apartment for two days.”

We have to go and look up all these materials, and look up the *Residential Tenancies Act*, and [determine] where do you go when you need to know your rights.

Khaleelah McKnight
Labour Education Centre



Start from Real Life

As workers, we learn through our real life experiences. For example, a learner may have difficulty navigating the public transit system. A bus schedule may become a key learning tool in the classroom, which enables learners to better use the transit system. Helping kids with homework, navigating the aisles at the grocery store, household budgeting, and building workplace skills are all subjects that get covered in a worker-centred education program.

“ I was a math instructor, and the typical kind of question there is: *how do you change a mixed fraction from a common fraction or how do you find the lower common denominator?* That's the kind of thing that's going to turn people away.

Whereas if your discussion is about: *did you get paid overtime last week, was your paycheck correct* — or something to do with your daily finances at home — that's the kind of thing that will draw people in — if it's got something to do with their real life experience, and not some theoretical thing that's just math.

Tom Ciancone
CUPE 4400

Share Coping Strategies

Worker-centred education also helps workers deal with difficult situations at work, such as how to stop harassment from a manager or fellow employee, or how to ask for time off for a family reason. Sometimes these issues are discussed in class, solutions are brainstormed, and then participants role-play the situation until the person who has the problem is satisfied that they will be able to handle it.



“ I remember one of the women workers came up to me after class and said, “Winnie, what does it mean when the manager keeps calling me 'pussy'?” Because what she understood is “pussy” refers to a cat, when actually there's a whole other layer of sexual connotations.

And after I explained it to her, her face turned so red, and she was in tears. [...] I felt maybe it's better not to know, you just merrily go along and don't know some of the swearing that's being impounded on you. [...] We were able to come up with an answer in saying, “No, don't call me that anymore.” And we got her to practice it in an affirmative way, and it took her a lot of courage to just say that back to the manager.

And you know in those two hours the class ended up providing a different way of engaging, a different way of seeing them as equals. And so it's in that process of learning that there's also a comradeship — a sense of solidarity that got nurtured.

Winnie Ng

Labour rights activist

CAW-Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy,

Ryerson University

Learn in the Workplace

Worker-centred education focuses on the whole life of workers and is not only “teaching to the test” or concerned merely with job skills training. This means that worker-centred education also concerns itself with worker lives beyond the workplace.

Many of us who aspire to furthering our education have tried night school. The pressures of commuting to and from a college after a long day at work, scheduling problems faced by shift workers, family obligations — not to mention the desire to have some social time or time to oneself — means that education outside of the workplace is a major strain. Worker-centred education takes this strain out by conducting classes in the workplace, and in many cases, at least partly during work hours.



“ With unions — when we’re negotiating contracts — it seems that we have to go to the employer and say, “We want professional development, and we need this, we want to learn.” And there’s no given that education and professional development and learning is part of the job! It should be because things are changing all the time — especially in this age.

I remember one experience in the 1980s teaching women in a textile factory, they worked their shift, they came to class for an hour and then they went home. They said this one hour was their time for themselves — because they’re working before, they’re working at home — but this was for themselves. Learning was actually a pleasure for them. So that’s the kind of thing that we would like to make universal, to make a given in every workplace.

Tom Ciancone
CUPE 4400

Determine Access

It's also important to consider who has access to the programs. For instance, management is denied access to information about learners and access to the learning environment itself. Their presence in the classroom can be a trigger for anxiety among learners, and means that they will have more difficulty reaching their desired outcomes.

But it may also be necessary to limit access to programs for union members as well. Power relations in workplaces like hospitals are very pronounced. On the one hand, doctors, nurses, orderlies, and cleaning staff all occupy different levels, and people on lower rungs of this ladder may not feel comfortable learning in the presence of higher-level workers. On the other hand, sometimes going through the program can be a great leveler and build empathy between co-workers or supervisors and workers. Ultimately, the union needs to decide whether to allow open access to a program or not.

“ In the hospital we had a couple of nurses who wanted to be in [our literacy] program. We said no, because they're our members' supervisors. We really wanted to create an environment where our members [hospital support staff] had the power, and if there's someone who every day at work has more power than you do, and they're in the class with you, it's not going to create that kind of environment.

Were we right or wrong? Maybe it would have built solidarity... We thought about it a lot, then decided that we weren't going to open it up.

There have been some [shared] classes, but they're not the literacy classes. They're communication, or computer classes — something less political.

Sylvia Sioufi

Canadian Union of Public Employees





A group of night cleaners were participating in a literacy class that their union had negotiated with their employer. The class took place in their downtown office building at 11 p.m., partly on work time, instructed by a co-worker who had been trained by her union. One night a participant named Michel came in with a bandage on his hand. When the other participants asked him what had happened, he said that he had cut himself on a rusty metal garbage can. His co-workers all knew about the problem with the garbage cans, as others had been hurt in recent months. Although they had raised the issue with their supervisor, nothing had been done.

Gisele, the instructor, understood the situation well, since she was also a cleaner on the same shift. She seized the opportunity to help the group find a way to deal with the situation, starting in their workplace literacy program. She asked Michel and the other participants about their experiences with workplace injuries, writing key words and phrases on the board. Then she asked them to write down these stories and share them with the group. Spelling patterns and verb endings were discussed. They talked about what they could do about the problem of the rusty garbage cans.

The clauses in their collective agreement dealing with safety on the job became a reading exercise. The group worked together to understand the difficult terms and rewrite the clauses in clear language. Together, they decided to write a letter to the health and safety committee to raise the issue. They would refer to Michel's accident, indicate how long the problem had been going on and suggest a solution: the replacement of the garbage cans. Ultimately, the letter was sent on behalf of the class.

Soon after the letter was sent, the rusty cans were replaced with new plastic ones.

This was a process that took place over several weeks, in between other learning activities. It included a number of literacy tasks, like writing about one's experience, reading sections of the contract, and composing a letter. It developed participants' skills, such as reading for understanding and spelling. But these tasks and skills came out of the reality of the experiences of the workers, from their real lives, and the process went beyond looking at an individual situation. It helped the group work towards an understanding of how decisions are made, and where change is possible, by dealing with the systems surrounding an actual incident. This way of learning helped the participants understand these systems better. It also engaged them in a process of how they could stand up for themselves to effect positive change.

In a traditional classroom, Michel's injury could have been ignored or not taken seriously. Or, it could have been dealt with as the problem of one individual worker, perhaps including some of Michel's experience and possible recourse into the content of a skills building literacy exercise. But by linking an individual situation to that of the larger collectivity — in this case, his co-workers and fellow union members — and their context, the way the system works is revealed. When the group learns about the system and where both its access points and the potential power of the collectivity might lie, the possibilities for how change might be effected become clearer.

Adapted from Tamara Levine, Workplace Literacy Project, Canadian Labour Congress. Just Labour, Vol. 1 (2002), 86–93

Clear Language

From management directives to collective agreements to photocopier service manuals, language at work is often extremely inaccessible. Many people who are tasked with communicating in their workplaces do not have much experience writing, meaning that internal union documents, as well as postings from the employer and the government, often fail to communicate effectively. Sometimes labour leadership can compound this problem by using obscure language they pick up from management.

The answer to this problem is the implementation of clear language in the workplace. If education is one side of the literacy coin, clear language is the other. Clear language calls for communicating both orally and in print in a way that all people can understand. It recognizes that people in power often use difficult language — whether they are conscious of it or not — to secure their own positions, and keep people without formal education from making themselves heard. This means that clear language requires

written communication to use shorter sentences and more familiar words. But using clear language doesn't mean reducing what can be communicated — far from it. Instead, it means being able to communicate the same important information to far more people.

More and more organizations are currently using clear language in much of their internal communications, but there is always room to expand this important practice. One place where clear language has been breaking through is collective agreements. Currently, many agreements are written in “legalese,” meaning that even people with strong literacy skills can't understand a document that has a big impact on their lives. Moving toward clear language in collective agreements can improve our understanding of our rights in the workplace, the responsibilities of our employers, and what improvements are needed. And despite some peoples' fears, clear language does not detract from the legal weight of a contract.

“ If you have to read something two, three, four times — you're just going to give up. And it makes you feel that there's something wrong with you. That's why the clear language work is so important, sometimes there's something wrong with the way the information is put together.

Sylvia Sioufi

Canadian Union of Public Employees



Example Collective Agreement

UNCLEAR

Article 19 - Holidays

19.01 (b)

As an alternative to three (3) days at Christmas as scheduled by the Employer an Employee who is a follower of a non-Christian religion may schedule, in lieu of three (3) days at Christmas, up to three (3) days at other times for recognized religious and/or cultural holiday observance purposes consistent with his/her bona fide religious and/or cultural practices. Such Employee must give the Employer written notice at least one (1) month in advance of his/her request to take such a holiday for religious and/or cultural observance purposes. It is understood, however, that the Employer retains the right to decide which of its programs shall continue to operate during Christmas holidays (as well as other times) and to schedule and reassign Employees to perform such work as is required and available.

CLEAR

Article 19 - Holidays

19.01 (b)

If you are not Christian, you do not have to take the 3 days off at Christmas. Instead, you can choose to take 3 other days off for your religious or cultural holidays. You must give your Employer at least 1 month's written notice to ask for this time off. The Employer has the right to decide which of its programs will continue to operate at any time, including Christmas, and to schedule and reassign Employees to do the work needed.

Section 2

History

The labour movement has always valued education. However, that does not mean that the approach to education has always been as open as it should be to diversity. Early education efforts tended to focus mainly on skilled white male workers. Over the course of the 20th century this focus began to change as labour's practices shifted toward more inclusion and solidarity with all workers.

“Educate first, agitate afterwards”.

— The Palladium of Labour, 1883



The Early Days: The 19th Century to World War One



MECHANICS' INSTITUTES

The first organizations that could be understood to be dedicated to labour literacy education were Mechanics' Institutes. These institutes were reading rooms and salons that hosted lectures and lent books. First founded in Britain, they began to spring up in Canada from the 1830s on. By the end of the 1800s, there were more than 300 Mechanics' Institutes across the country.

However, the Mechanics' Institutes were primarily aligned with what we would consider the management class today. Few workers were involved, and those who were belonged to highly skilled trades. And while the institutes posed little threat to the class order, they did promote the idea that learning should extend to working people. This was essential to the spread of public education and public libraries, both of which were championed

by the labour movement.

CRAFT UNIONS

Craft unions were the earliest form of organized labour in Canada. They represented highly skilled workers, and were divided along craft lines such as cigarmakers, shoemakers, and printers.

Many craft unions placed an emphasis on literacy and often had one member read the newspaper aloud to their

workmates. They also began to open their own reading rooms in direct response to the Mechanics Institutes' refusal to meet the needs of working class men. There, members could borrow reading materials, as well as come together to hear lectures and discuss the issues of the day.

Craft unions placed education and literacy at the forefront of many of their struggles. For instance, the desire to have time to study and learn was among the main justifications for limiting the work day to 9 hours by the "Nine Hour Movement."

THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR: EARLY INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM

While craft unions limited their membership to the skilled trades, the union movement began to expand to include all workers in a given industry, whether skilled or not. Between 1880 and the end of the 19th century, the US-based Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor brought this new expanded view of the labour movement to the factories of Ontario and Québec. Soon, the organization spread across the country.

Through the literacy and educational efforts of the Knights of Labor, members could read books on social criticism, economics, and history, and listen to speeches from contemporary political

thinkers. The Knights were instrumental in, for example, setting up basic education courses in the late 1880s and early 1890s in Québec. These evening courses were targeted at workers 16 years of age and up, and were very popular, ultimately taking up 10% of the province's education budget. Given that school for children aged 6 to 14 was only funded publicly and made compulsory in 1943, this was a significant accomplishment. However, long working hours and poor conditions made it difficult for workers to attend evening classes — a difficulty that continues to this day. The schools were shut down in 1893.

The Knights of Labor began to crumble in the 1890s, with trade unionism once again taken over by craft unions affiliated with either the American Federation of Labor or the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada.

THE WESTERN FEDERATION OF MINERS

Just as the Knights of Labor were falling apart in the 1890s, the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) began organizing mining camps in the western United States and Canada. Mining camps were dismal places, with dangerous

working conditions, long hours, and few amenities. Mine owners often responded to rebellious workers with violence from police and private security.

As with the Knights of Labor, the WFM had education built into its mandate; its motto was "Education, Organization, and Independence."

Many of the miners it represented were from Northern Europe and desired to learn English. Members with strong literacy skills often read newspapers and other materials to their co-workers. Widows and other women taught literacy and basic skills to miners and to miners' children.

The WFM built some of the first hospitals, schools, and co-operatives in Western Canada, and often built reading rooms into their union halls. They also published newspapers, often in a variety of languages to serve their





INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

Founded in 1905 with a similar mission to the WFM, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or “Wobblies” became the most important industrial union in Canada prior to World War One. The IWW was distinguished by its members’ radical desire to overthrow capitalism. They organized poorly paid, transient workers in harvesting, construction, and general labour. They brought an extensive, vibrant, and elaborate system of informal

education to their workplaces, and published materials in many languages.

FRONTIER COLLEGE

Growing out of the Canadian Reading Camp Association, founded in 1899, Frontier College was the brainchild of Reverend Alfred Fitzpatrick, a socially conscious Presbyterian minister who wanted to bring basic education to Western Canadian camp workers.

Education was (and still is) brought to workers by “labourer-teachers,” who were

mostly university students sent to work alongside labourers during the day, and teach them literacy and numeracy in the evening. Frontier College still functions today, bringing literacy to farm workers and miners as well as to the urban “frontiers” of prisons, street youth, and people with special needs.

THE ANTIGONISH MOVEMENT

Founded at Saint Francis Xavier University, the Antigonish movement sought to improve the lives of working people in

The Roots of Modern Labour Literacy: 1920 to 1970

every possible way. Catholic priests were heavily involved in the movement. One among them, Father Jimmy Thompkins, was known to insist in the confessional that a penitent read a book rather than recite prayers — a very progressive approach for the time.

By the end of World War One, a wide variety of labour unions and other organizations had begun to bring literacy and education in general to the masses. This was in a time before public schooling. These organizations represented the desire of workers to educate themselves to improve their lives, and the lives of their families.

WORKERS EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION

The 20th century saw a number of labour-backed educational initiatives. In 1918, the Toronto Labour Council and the University of Toronto started the first Workers Educational Association (WEA) in Canada. WEAs were a late 19th century British invention that aimed to improve access to education for working people. Canadian WEAs were highly active in worker education and literacy, and they worked to get rid of the classism that marked the

British WEAs they were emulating.

WEAs spread across the country during the 1920s and 1930s, organizing reading groups, classes in economics, politics, labour issues, composition, and public speaking. The WEA even contributed to the production of a weekly CBC national radio broadcast on issues relevant to working people, The National Labour Forum, in the early 1940s.

WEAs were active in promoting education among a variety of labour groups. They organized Agricola Study Clubs to help farmers study politics and economics. They also provided educational assistance to unions such as the International Ladies' Garment Workers, the United Mine Workers, the United Auto Workers, and the United Rubber Workers. By the mid-20th century, however, WEAs began to be sidelined for being too far left, too academic, and too independent.

UNION CATHOLIQUE DES CULTIVATEURS

In Québec, the *Union catholique des cultivateurs* (UCC), forerunner of the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (UPA), began a distance education program in 1929, which ran until 1968. Course content was



published in *La Terre de chez nous*, a very popular periodical in rural Québec.

Courses were run through study circles in each parish, where a few farmers met weekly. A young person would read a page from *La Terre de chez nous* aloud, and the group would discuss the issue, how it connected to their community, and how to solve related problems.

The UCC helped a great number of young people maintain their reading level after leaving school and helped rural families organize, gain public speaking skills, as well as political and economic consciousness. The study circles contributed significantly to Québec's Quiet Revolution of the 1960s.

The Flourishing of Labour Literacy Education: 1970s to Early 2000s



The decline of WEAs saw a lull in labour literacy education in Canada. However, starting in the late 1970s, the Toronto Labour Council began to become more involved in education and literacy. A new wave of immigration to the city prompted many labour leaders to find ways to communicate with and help to educate a diverse membership.

The Centre for Labour Studies was founded in 1975 by the Toronto Labour Council and Humber College. Initially, it focused on teaching English as a second language (ESL) and literacy in the workplace. By the 1980s, the Ontario

government saw the benefit of their education programming and began funding basic skills training. This enabled the Centre for Labour Studies to transform itself into the Metro Labour Education Centre in 1987.

Through the late 1980s and 1990s, there was a growing awareness about literacy and adult education among the Canadian public and decision-makers. Two factors figured heavily in this renewed interest: the International Literacy Year of 1990, and a literacy survey undertaken by Southam News, then the largest newspaper chain in the country. The Southam News survey

found that 5 million Canadians, or roughly 25% of the adult population at the time were functionally illiterate. While the methodology was not perfect — falsely assuming that literacy is like a switch that can be turned on, rather than a continuum of skills — the results were still significant. They played an important part in the establishment of the National Literacy Secretariat, which in turn supported some of the new worker education centres' activities and literacy, numeracy, and basic skills training programs across Canada.



The Worker Education Centre was established in 1987 in Hamilton and delivered ESL and literacy programs in the workplace. The Ontario Federation of Labour also began a large and extensive program in BEST: Basic Education for Skills Training. BEST became a model for worker-centred education taken up in Atlantic Canada with the Effective Adult Skills Training (EAST) program and in Saskatchewan with the Workers Education for Skill Training (WEST) program. The Hamilton Worker Education Centre, BEST, and EAST delivered programs until 1999.

During the late 1990s, the Canadian Labour Congress worked to coordinate many literacy and basic skills programs offered at the workplace. Unions including the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), The United Steelworkers of America (USW), The Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP), the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the United Food and

Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) began developing their own literacy, English or French as a second language, and basic skills programs through the 1990s and early 2000s. These followed the principles of worker-centred education, and helped thousands of workers improve their literacy, job skills, confidence, and bring these improvements home, helping their families and communities.

The National Literacy Secretariat: 1988 to 2006

On March 1st, 1988, David Crombie, Secretary of State in Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government, announced one million dollars in funding for a new National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). Between 1988 and 2006, the NLS coordinated the funding of literacy programs delivered by a range of organizations, including unions.

Initially unions didn't accept funding for literacy programs with open arms. Brigid Hayes, a program consultant with the NLS from 1989 to 2003, remembers being perplexed at how difficult it was to convince unions to take federal funds to develop literacy programs.

According to Brigid, three main issues were at stake in this initial push back. First, unions didn't trust the federal government to be an honest partner in programming. Second, many unions didn't think that literacy was an appropriate priority for the labour movement. They thought that the provinces, who are responsible

for education, should be fixing whatever problems existed with literacy. And third, she said that people in leadership positions in many unions were unwilling to admit their own low literacy skills.

Despite this initial hesitation, Brigid was successful in getting unions on board with literacy programming. This was partly because the government's own priorities were to take the delivery of literacy programming out of the hands of "experts" and put it into the hands of communities to develop their own programs that would be appropriate for their own memberships. Of course this is just what so many unions, and union-affiliated programs like BEST, WEST, EAST, and the Worker Education Centre did with the funding. The result is the worker-centred education approach championed by labour today.

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, during the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, the NLS budget continued to grow, and it continued to

provide key skill-building, networking, and knowledge-sharing services to community groups and unions who were providing literacy and basic skills education programs.

However, in the fall of 2006 during the first year of Stephen Harper's new Conservative government, all funding that the NLS was providing to community-based literacy programming was cut. This meant that many people who had spent the better part of two decades working toward a more literate Canada suddenly had far fewer resources to help people improve their literacy skills.

Most unions had not incorporated literacy into their ongoing programming, and couldn't continue the work without federal funding. Thanks to the hard work of a handful of committed labour staffers, labour literacy education programs continued where they had been most firmly entrenched, mostly in the CAW, UFCW, and CUPE.

“ I think that the National Literacy Secretariat was born out of that idea of citizenship and participation, and that if we’re going to participate fully as citizens — literacy needs to be a part of that.

Tamara Levine
Canadian Labour Congress

“ I was responsible for partnerships with business and labour [at the National Literacy Secretariat]. So I had a budget that I was supposed to spend — and so I was going around knocking on the door of people who had never ever thought of literacy as an issue in their own backyard. I often said I was like the Fuller Brush salesperson — going door to door trying to tell people, “Oh you should get interested in literacy.”

Brigid Hayes
Literacy expert



Section 3

Current Trends

Neoliberal policies have been reducing every aspect of life to market principles for more than 30 years. This shift has been, in part, justified by the media's concerted efforts to defame unions. An anti-labour agenda has formed, which has convinced many people that they have something to gain by turning against their fellow citizens.



Neoliberalism, the Anti-Labour Agenda, and Worker-Centred Education

Margaret Thatcher famously said, “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.” While Margaret Thatcher may have only been one individual, her policies — and those of her political allies like Ronald Reagan and Brian Mulroney — have had serious and long-lasting impacts on our society.

The increasing focus on individual responsibility, and the declining focus on the common good, has justified the massive cuts in services by governments since the 1980s. They’ve also shifted the tax burden away from corporations and the rich toward working people and the poor. They’ve done this with the help of the mainstream media, who have waged a well-funded and coordinated attack on progressive values — and the union movement who holds those values.

This attack has convinced many citizens that almost every social program is a waste of their tax dollars. And any organization that dares to challenge this view is silenced. Think of the way Stephen Harper’s Conservative government defunded progressive groups, from those working toward pay equity for women, to those providing safe family planning in developing countries. They also defunded labour literacy education in 2006, the same year they came to power.

We now refer to this worrying trend as “neoliberalism.”

Neoliberalism has sold itself politically with such catch-phrases as “the rising tide lifts all boats,” and by saying that economic benefits to corporations and the rich eventually “trickle down” to those lower on the economic ladder.

It also characterizes people in need of help as lazy and as abusers of the system. Ronald Reagan famously coined the phrase “welfare queen” to make poor single mothers a target of his socially conservative base.

The rise of neoliberal policies means that the government has begun to shift away from funding programs aimed at improving society as a whole and toward a model that sees individuals as cogs in an economic machine. It has also begun to inject market principles, such as “accountability” and profit into the delivery of social programs, including literacy training.

But since the labour movement is not dependent on government funding, it is one of the few progressive forces still active in Canada today.

Labour literacy programs are key to fighting back against this politics of selfishness. Financial decisions made by governments are very complex, but the media — and government

communications professionals — prefer to simplify the issue. They often paint budget cuts as “living within our means,” and link the government to the household. These arguments appeal to working Canadians’ values of financial responsibility. But the reality is that a government is not the same as a household, and cutting social programs is most often the result of shifting the tax base from corporations and the richest Canadians to working people.

Stephen Harper’s Conservative government cut all funding for literacy training when they came to power in 2006. This only provided the labour movement with even more motivation to fight for access to labour literacy education for every worker in Canada. Pushing for reinstatement of government funding for basic skills education is one way that we continue this fight.

Despair about the reality of neoliberalism must give way to determination. Understanding the big puzzle pieces of the current situation, and how they were put in place, is important for helping to build the future we want to see.

Standardized Testing

Neoliberal policies preach “accountability” — but decision-makers often define accountability in ways that undermine the delivery of social programs. When it comes to education, neoliberalism defines accountability as standardized testing.

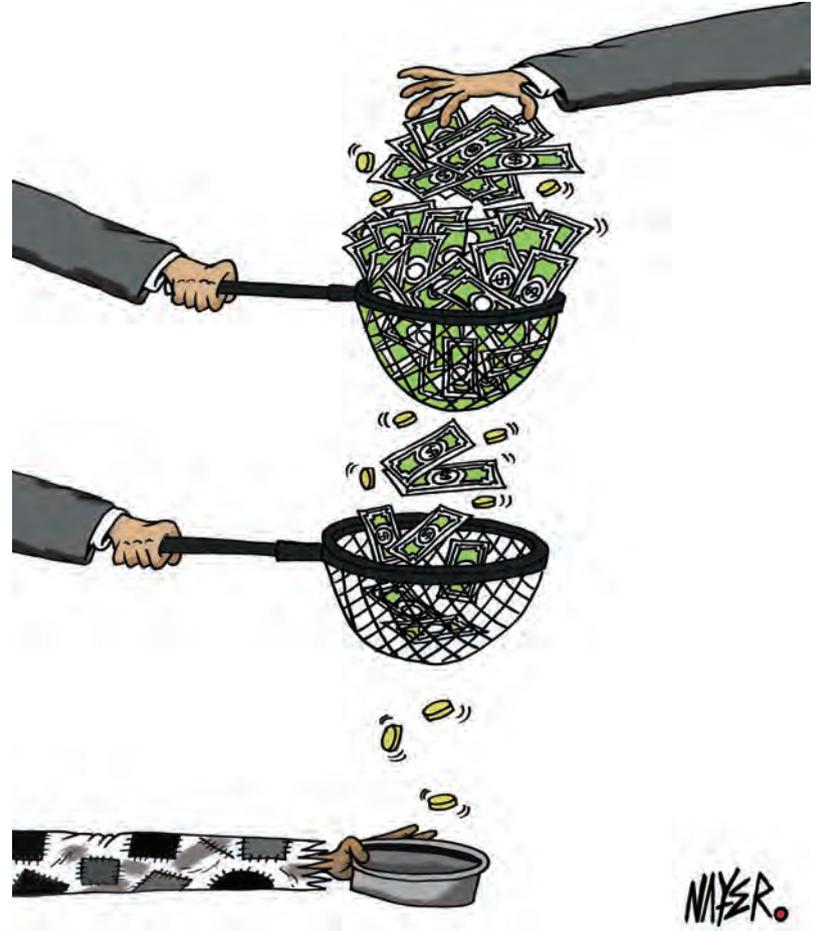
Standardized testing in any situation can actually run counter to the goals of education. And when applied to learners who may have had a bad experience in school — and with testing in particular — the results can be catastrophic. When the first thing a learner is required to do in a literacy program is take a test, all the feelings of shame and terror that accompanied him or her through school can come rushing back.

Beyond the personal impact that standardized testing can have, however, are also questions about whether it can actually measure the benefit of a given program. Literacy programs run for a number of weeks, during which learners often work together to solve real-world problems, such as writing letters to their employer to recognize the National Day of Mourning for Workers Killed and Injured on the Job, or role-playing a confrontation with a manager who is sexually harassing a co-worker. These activities, developed by the learners themselves, are unlikely to feed directly into a test that was not developed with the specific group in mind.

The Neoliberal Agenda: “Shrink – Shift – Shaft”

Shrink:

- Shrink **role of government** in regulating the economy, limiting its role as a counterweight to the power of the market (and in fact promoting its role in protecting the market and profit as the partner of business)
- Shrink or **lower / remove standards** for workplace safety and health, public health, environmental protection and human rights (deregulation)
- Shrink the **size of the public sector** (downsizing through cuts, fiscal austerity, privatization, contracting out)
- Shrink **services**, cutting taxes for the rich



Shift:

- Shift **tax burden** from the corporations and the rich to working people and the poor
- Shift from **good secure jobs to low-paid precarious jobs** (part-time, temporary, contract)
- Shift the **benefits of the economy** from the workers to business
- Shift direct **public service delivery of social programs** to private and voluntary sectors
- Shift **funding responsibility** from federal and provincial to local governments (downloading/devolution)
- Shift **control and ownership of public assets** to the private sector (privatization), from local government / community to transnational corporations (globalization)
- Shift **jobs and business** out of the country to low-waged countries; and then back to sections of the home country for a race to the bottom

Shaft:

- Unions
- Workers' rights
- Civil and human rights
- Democracy and society
- And especially the most vulnerable: the poor, the sick, children, women, aboriginal peoples, racialized communities and nations, and other economically marginalized group

Source: adapted from *United for Fair Economy* by Labour Education Centre.

“ Free trade meant a lot of closures in the industrial heartland, in Ontario, Québec, BC.

While unions were consumed with fighting Free Trade and then dealing with the aftermath — it was also an entry point for literacy because if plants were closing and workers were being laid off — what did that mean for these workers and where were they going to go next?

So that was where you could make a case for bringing literacy into the workplace pre-emptively — because you want your workers to be better equipped in the event of a layoff.

Tamara Levine
Canadian Labour Congress



“ In the garment industry — even prior to the US/Canada Free Trade Agreement — the whole neoliberal agenda started creeping in. And you have unionized workplaces, work's getting subcontracted out, and eventually work gets sent offshore.[...]

This is part of that whole phenomenon where industries that are primarily concentrated with immigrant workers, newcomers, racialized workers — were deemed as sunset industries, because they are a labour intensive sector within the manufacturing sector.

These are the workers who got restructured, their work got downgraded from unionized work to non-unionized contractor shop, to subcontractor's shop and it eventually becomes home sewers.

Workers saw all of this happening but with no resources and no capacity to unravel, to fight back or to resist.

Winnie Ng

Labour rights activist

CAW-Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy,

Ryerson University



Section 4

A Culture of Learning

Nous souhaitons discuter ici du caractère essentiel de l'éducation syndicale, y compris la formation à la lecture, au calcul et aux compétences de base, à la réussite du mouvement ouvrier au 21^e siècle, en réinstaurant dans ce mouvement une culture d'apprentissage.



Labour literacy education can have a transformational impact on learners, facilitators, educators, employers, and union leadership. The use of labour literacy education to improve literacy skills and involve members in their own educational development brings more people into the heart of the labour movement. It moves people from thinking in terms of “I” to thinking in terms of “we.” And it helps people to make the connection between what’s happening in their neighbourhood and decisions being made at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. This transformation is central to undermining the obsession with market principles that defines the current social, political, and economic landscape.





“ I taught at a manufacturing plant and there were committees that workers could join with their union, and they would have opportunities for training and education. Even though more than 50% of the workers were women, all of the committees only had male workers. Two of the women who took our literacy class decided to run for a position and they were elected! They went to a weeklong union sponsored session. I can't remember the topic but I remember how happy they were.

Later they told us, “If we hadn't taken this class we wouldn't have felt able to be part of the program.” They said they spoke up, they contributed to the conversation, and talked about their own experiences. It was like something had completely transformed for them.

Khaleelah McKnight
Labour Education Centre



From “I” to “We”



Labour literacy education has a tremendous impact on participants, both learners and facilitators. For someone who has had lifelong challenges reading and writing, improving their literacy skills means not having to hide their reading difficulties from others. They can overcome the obstacles that kept them from advancing in their job, from helping their kids with homework to engaging with important events in the world and in their neighbourhood. They gain confidence not only in their own abilities, but in their understanding of where they need help. They become able to ask for help, no longer afraid of others discovering that they have challenges reading or writing.

The experience of labour literacy education itself can also have profound results. For many participants, taking part in a labour literacy education program will put them into direct contact with a variety of people they may not have interacted with before. Many learners become aware of their own structural privilege for the first time through the experience of interacting with co-workers of different backgrounds.

Facilitators and teachers also come to be transformed through labour literacy education. Through the stories shared within the classroom, and the experience of role-playing difficult situations, facilitators learn about the issues faced by workers. They can also come to understand that even though they may have a higher level of literacy, their understanding of the world is not necessarily superior to that of those who are learning in the programs they deliver. Many come to realize that their understanding is just one among many, and develop a far greater respect for other ways of working, doing, living, and understanding.

This collective experience of working together in classrooms, and coming to understand that education opens innumerable possibilities, puts workers on the path from “I” to “we.” Through tackling tough issues together — both in terms of our own educational goals and the challenges we face in work and life — our sense of solidarity grows. More than any other initiative, labour literacy education has the capacity to produce lifelong labour activists.

“ I remember doing instruction for math at a BEST training retreat for peer instructors. I had people work together in pairs on projects. They were starting to do long division. In one group there was a problem because one person in the pair told the other person that they were doing it wrong.

It turns out there are many ways to do notation in math and the woman being criticized was simply using the Iranian method, and the man criticizing her was Canadian and had never seen this method.

Once this man understood that this was the case he was so upset with himself that he actually left the classroom and wasn't going to come back. He wondered how could he be an instructor if he couldn't empathize.

Believe it or not — with a lot of support — he did come back a couple of days later. And that was the advantage of having it in residence — if this was a one shot deal he probably never would have come back.

This man eventually became an instructor, he eventually became a BEST program coordinator, and he was an activist in promoting this method of peer instruction.

Tom Ciancone
CUPE 4400 Holidays



Challenging the Status Quo

The labour movement has a long history of doing good — and to build on this history, we need to welcome a culture of learning. A culture of learning means that within the union, power becomes more spread out. As more members gain access to education and improve their literacy, more members become actively engaged in the union’s business. Empowering members through education produces labour activists who are engaged in their union.

Increased engagement from membership will be an indicator of success of labour literacy education programs. Through our personal experiences with labour literacy education, we become more attached to our unions, which means that we have more at stake in the union’s daily activities, and that we are in turn more likely to get involved.

Coupled with 21st century technological change, as well as the very egalitarian culture of the millennial generation, a culture of learning has the capacity to present very concrete changes to the labour movement. Many unions are very centralized institutions whose structures more or less mirror the other big institutions that grew up in the 20th century: the state and the corporation.

The culture within a worker-centred labour literacy education program is one that minimizes power hierarchies. When we experience how increased capacities are awakened within ourselves through labour literacy education and associate these with the “flat” power structure inside the labour literacy education space,

we may begin to wonder why other systems don’t mirror worker-centred education.

When this questioning is combined with the network-based culture of young people who are early in their careers, and the technology that has enabled this network culture, the traditional structure of the union will face serious challenges in the 21st century and will need to continue to adapt in order to survive.

Change is always difficult, and there may be understandable resistance from many of us who are more comfortable with our current vertical structures of power, leadership, and committees within the union. To help ensure that these changes are implemented in a positive and productive manner, literacy educators, facilitators, and activists need to make the case to union leadership that education-led institutional change is the best way to ensure the relevancy of the labour movement in the future.

Ultimately, increased engagement can only make the labour movement stronger. The more advocates and supporters the labour movement has, the more people will begin to hear the positive message of solidarity that is so sorely lacking in the mainstream media. And the more the labour movement embraces the new, network-oriented institutional structures of the 21st century, the more capable labour will be to deal with the new challenges the future will present.

“ I still think back to these graduation ceremonies where families would be clapping enthusiastically as we gave out participation certificates to a bunch of workers who had completed eight weeks of introduction to computers, or eight weeks of basic numeracy or fourteen weeks of GED upgrading. And even if they fell one credit short of getting their GED, they were still invited to the ceremony with their spouse. They still got a certificate of participation, they would get the next course next time.

And it was so great to see our auditorium on Broadway in Winnipeg full of workers and their families, in some cases their kids, people getting their picture taken with the mayor for completing their eight week course. I can't help but think that because of these classes it was a more motivated workforce and CUPE Local 500 was far more relevant to these people.

Paul Moist

National President, Canadian Union of Public Employees



Learner Stories



“ My name is Kristi Nelson and I am the 2009 recipient of the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA) award for a Workplace Learner. I have worked for the City of Grande Prairie for the past 16 years, and on my learning journey they have supported me the entire way.

I was a teenage mother at age 16 and was told by one of my instructors in grade 10 that “My kind did not belong in her class room.” I dropped out of high school right then and decided I was going to work to support my soon-to-be new addition to my life, my daughter Mykayla. I realized soon after, my lack of education was not allowing me to do the things I wanted to career-wise. Determined to prove to that instructor that “my kind” did belong, I decided to return to upgrading at my local college. I worked extremely hard and I ended up graduating the same time that my high school class graduated in 1996 — after I had been out of school for almost a year.

I was working at the City as a summer student and continued to attend college as a Bachelor of Arts student until 1999 when I was pregnant with my second child, my son Keiran. I returned to

work at the City when he was 6 months old. At the time I was not a full time employee and I did not want to lose my position. The City of Grande Prairie was a great organization and could help me achieve the things I wanted to achieve by getting on full time with them. I worked for the parks department until 2002, and then was awarded a full time position in the fleet department as a parts pick-up and delivery person.

In 2006 I went to school to become a certified red sealed journeyman parts woman. I graduated from parts school in 2009. I continued to work in that trade until 2010. Then I decided that my passion was health and safety in the workplace. I worked in Human Resources with the City of Grande Prairie as a Health and Safety Coordinator.

I am currently at the University of Alberta taking online, in class and weekend courses to complete the Occupational Health and Safety Certificate program. I am working as a Community Enhancement Facilitator with Crime Prevention at the City of Grande Prairie.

My learning journey is far from over as I am a believer that “knowledge is power.”



“ My name is Terry Bennett. I left school at 15 years old and got a job in order to help out my parents and family of 12. I worked several jobs over the next few years. When I was 21 years old I got married. In 1977 I was hired by the City of St. John’s as a seasonal worker, and in 1984 I became a permanent

employee. I then became involved with CUPE Local 569 as a shop steward, and eventually a member of our executive. I’ve held every position over the past 25 years.

In 1997, I became involved in planning a workplace literacy program. Local 1289 and Local 569 set up the Workplace Self-Improvement Program. We offered “Writing in the Workplace” (60 participants); basic computer skills (160 participants); GED

courses for employees and family members (12–15 participants); and keyboarding (20 participants).

I completed my GED in 2005. It was a rewarding experience. In 2008 I had a stroke. After much rehabilitation, I decided to run for City Council in 2009. I came in second to the incumbent. I hope to run in the next municipal election.

CUPE National has great resources to help locals from across Canada start their own literacy programs. I would encourage all who do not have such a program in your workplace to get started!

Literacy is not just reading. It is all aspects of lifelong learning no matter how young or old you are. I’m 57 yrs old now and hope to retire when I’m 60. I am presently the president of our local and will always be a union activist and a literacy activist.

Precarious, Contract, and Part-Time Workers

Labour literacy education can be a very good way for the labour movement to reach out beyond union membership and to help empower workers in all sectors. Precarious, contract, and part-time work has exploded in recent years, with over 50% of workers in Toronto working for low pay and without benefits. Many workers in the lowest paying jobs, including the service and agricultural industries, are actually here on tenuous and temporary permits. They are heavily exploited by their employers. Some workers, such as live-in caregivers, have their passports confiscated, and don't realize that they have any recourse when their employer docks their pay or forces them to work too many hours.

This issue is of great importance to the labour movement. Those of us working in precarious, low-paid work need literacy and basic skills training just as much as those fortunate enough to belong to a union. Bringing literacy education programs to underemployed youth, temporary foreign workers, and new Canadians struggling in low-paying jobs is one way that the labour movement can effectively reach out and help people in difficult situations. Such outreach could also help bring more people from traditionally non-unionized sectors into the labour movement and improve working conditions across the board.

“ I hate it when the term “unorganized” is used to describe workers who are not unionized — it makes it sound like they're just running around willy nilly. In fact, for some groups like the live-in caregivers I work with, it's illegal for them to be unionized in Canada. However they're incredibly organized! They put on the most amazing events.

And caregiver organizations are addressing literacy issues for their workers. Even though they're not in a union, they are organizing and using resources to make sure that the caregivers are getting what they need.

Khaleelah McKnight
Labour Education Centre



New Technologies

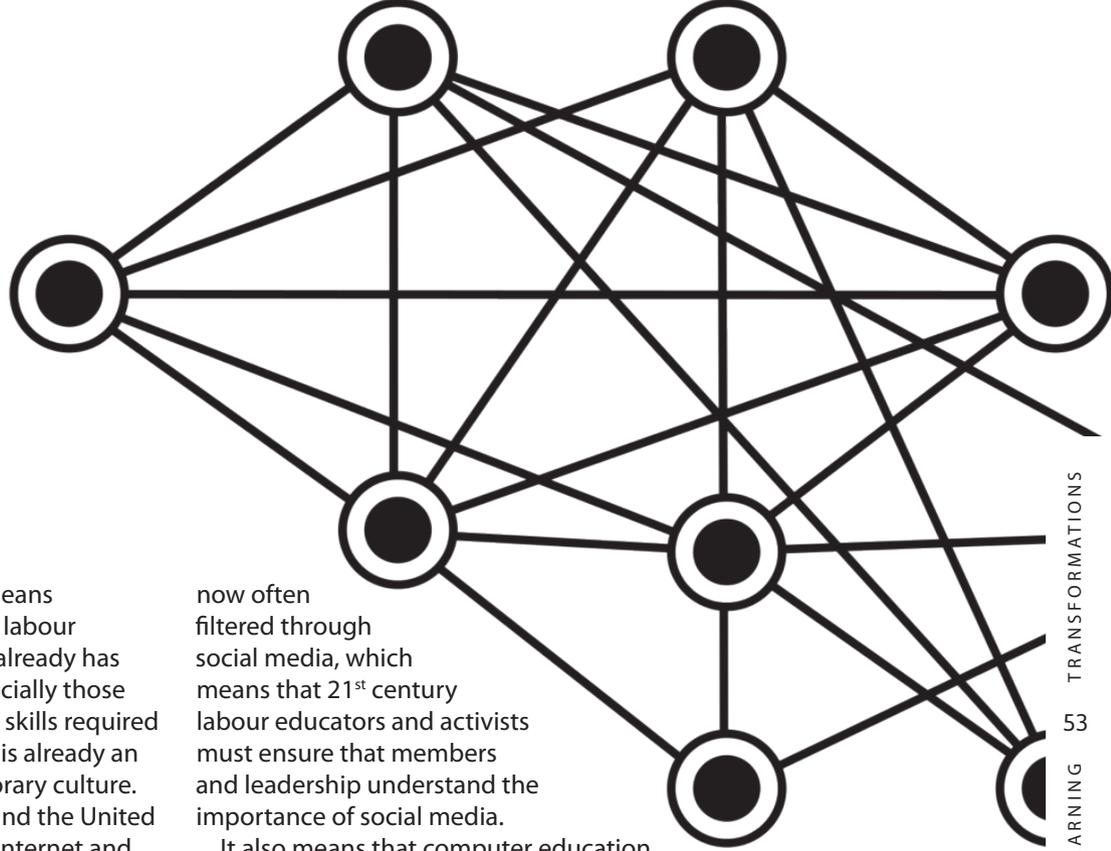
A culture of learning in the 21st century also means bringing new technologies to the forefront of labour literacy education. Labour literacy education already has programming focused on computer use, especially those computer programs that are directly linked to skills required in the workplace. However, computer literacy is already an essential aspect for “plugging in” to contemporary culture. For instance, labour friendly news in Canada and the United States is concentrated online. Navigating the internet and understanding where to find resources that mesh with a labour view of the world are essential.

But the internet has become much more than just a new means of broadcasting or publishing. It has played an essential role in the flattening of power structures and the creation of network-centric culture. Young people just entering the workforce have grown up plugged into all manner of devices. They have a very different understanding of the world and are unafraid to challenge authority — especially when it seems to go against their way of viewing the world.

As mentioned in Section 1, labour’s view of literacy and education is one of “reading the world.” The world is

now often filtered through social media, which means that 21st century labour educators and activists must ensure that members and leadership understand the importance of social media.

It also means that computer education will likely need to move beyond simply using computer software and applications. We need to start investing in and promoting a labour version of “hacktivism,” of training union members to be able to respond to the technological requirements of a wired world. Perhaps tools for membership who are interested in learning to code should be developed. Social media tools for community engagement and organizing should be understood, taught, and if necessary further developed. The labour movement should begin to ask itself how it can contribute its own vision of the future in a networked society — and understand that education is essential to articulating and proliferating this vision.



“ As a union we should be creating a culture of learning — and demanding that the employers create a culture of learning in the workplace, where it’s OK to learn throughout — there’s no shame in not knowing this — everybody knows something. And not getting into learning only when there’s a crisis — because you need this piece of paper, or because you’re going to lose your job.

Sylvia Sioufi

Canadian Union of Public Employees



Final Thoughts on a Culture of Learning

A culture of learning is essential to labour's continued relevance in the 21st century. It is also a vision for positive change in Canada through fostering growth and empowerment at the grassroots.

Labour literacy education empowers workers. It enables people who have struggled with literacy, numeracy, computer use, and other skills to begin to navigate their world with more ease. It brings access to new career opportunities. It means that people who have developed complex coping mechanisms, and complex stories to hide their difficulties, can finally open up and feel confident in their own capacities. And this confidence also means an understanding that asking questions does not signal weakness but enables further learning and growth.

These personal effects ripple like a shockwave out of labour literacy education participants, for both learners and

facilitators. Parents are suddenly able to help their children with homework, which improves a whole new generation's chances for better lives in the future. Workers become more aware of how decisions made in their communities, in provincial capitals, and in Ottawa can have direct effects on their lives. We become more likely to discuss these issues in our breakrooms, around the dinner table, and with friends. Empowered with new ways of seeing and navigating the world, we become more likely to engage in community projects, or to start our own initiatives.

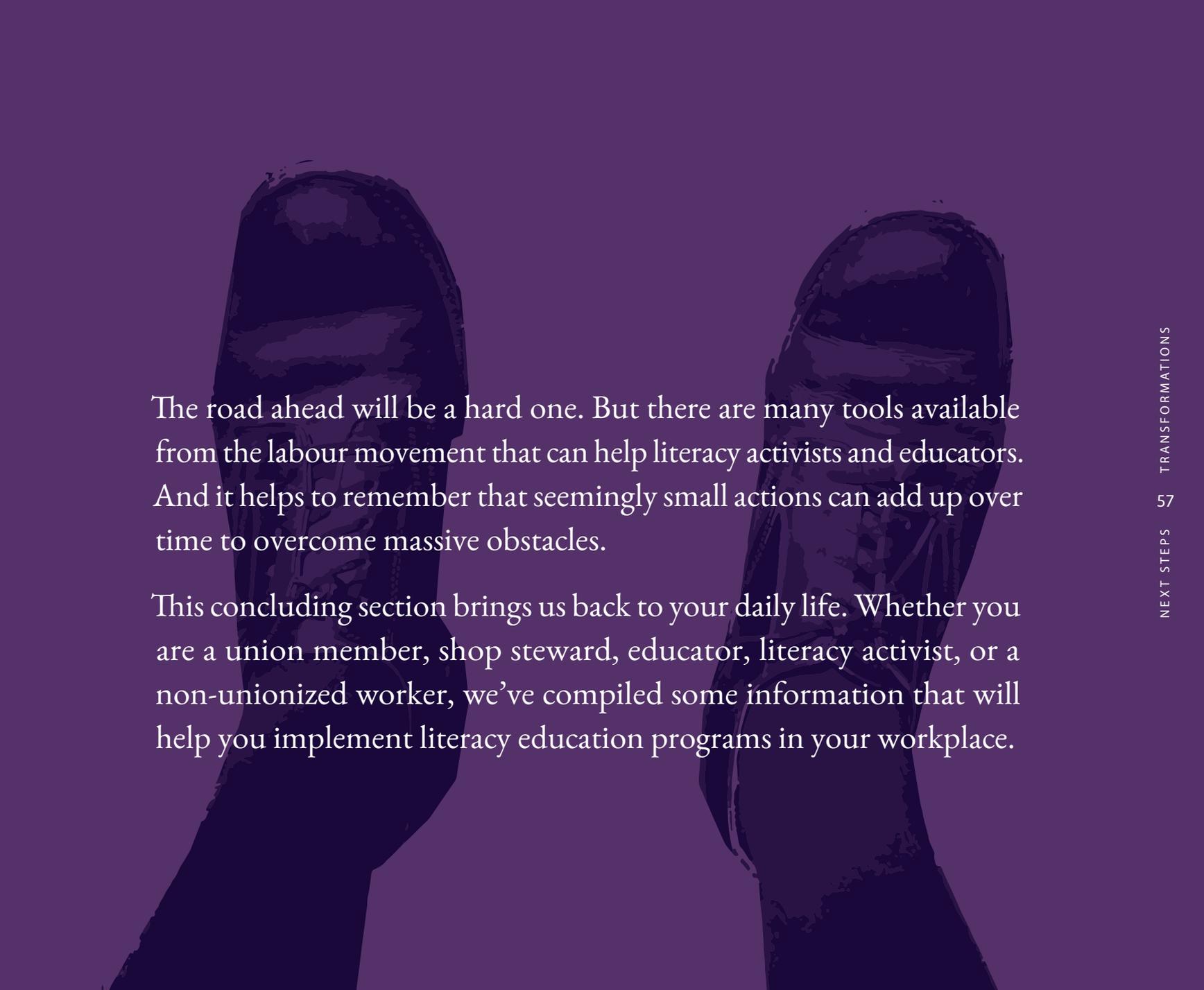
By empowering membership, the labour movement increases its access to new ideas emanating from membership that will bring positive change to our unions.

A culture of learning means confident people who will speak up for themselves and their communities.

Section 5

Next Steps

Labour literacy education has a long and proud history in Canada. Through the hard work and dedication of labour literacy activists and educators, worker-centred education has become a powerful tool in helping Canadians improve their literacy skills. But ensuring that we don't lose what we've built is a serious challenge. Current government priorities do not include literacy and basic skills training, and this undermines our fight for literacy programs in the workplace.



The road ahead will be a hard one. But there are many tools available from the labour movement that can help literacy activists and educators. And it helps to remember that seemingly small actions can add up over time to overcome massive obstacles.

This concluding section brings us back to your daily life. Whether you are a union member, shop steward, educator, literacy activist, or a non-unionized worker, we've compiled some information that will help you implement literacy education programs in your workplace.

1

Understanding Objections to Literacy Education Programs

There are a few objections to literacy education programs in the workplace that keep springing up no matter what the setting. Understanding where they come from can help you become a better advocate for workplace literacy initiatives. Putting yourself in the shoes of your employer can help you make a better case for the inclusion of literacy education programs in your workplace.

Employers do not always understand the importance of literacy education programs in the workplace. In fact, most people do not recognize that low literacy skills are a continuing challenge for many Canadians.

People in decision-making roles are particularly prone to ignoring the problem of low literacy skills. First, their literacy skills are often such an integral part of their jobs that they have a hard time imagining how someone could even function with low literacy skills.

Second, there's also the problem of flawed statistics that we see in many publications claiming that Canada has a 99% literacy rate.

Third, employers often consider literacy to be the public education system's responsibility. After all, why should they have to put their business resources toward educating workers when they are already paying taxes so that we can all benefit from public education?

Finally, employers don't always see the "whole person" approach used by worker-centred literacy as important to the operation of their business. They may see the necessity for training when it is required for employee tasks, but they are unlikely to be moved by stories of how literacy training can teach someone how to navigate a bus timetable or help their children with homework.

2

Countering Employer Objections to Literacy Programming

How to counter these objections? First, the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) statistics, while not being perfect, do offer an excellent counter-narrative to the 99% literacy rate myth. Remember, according to the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills, 49% of adult Canadians have lower than level 4 literacy skills (there are 5 levels). This means that they have trouble navigating the world — including the workplace — because they have trouble with literacy. The fact that nearly half of adult Canadians have low literacy skills means that it is very likely that some employees could use literacy education.

Second, it's important to underline that improved literacy doesn't just benefit the individual worker. Of course strengthening

literacy skills means people can do much more in their communities, such as helping their children with homework, or becoming more informed about local issues. But improving literacy also increases productivity and reduces workplace injuries. These are concrete benefits that reasonable employers will recognize as beneficial to their business.

Finally, you can link literacy to a specific workplace requirement, such as an accreditation program, or the introduction of new technology. Literacy programs can be included as part of these training programs, ensuring that all employees are moving forward in their careers, and reaching their full potential at work and in their communities.

3

Getting your Union on Board for Literacy Programs

Employers don't always recognize the value of workplace literacy programs. And they're not alone. Unions can also have challenges promoting this issue in their own locals.

Unions, and union leaders, often don't have the time to deal with these issues, since the majority of their time is spent dealing with members' current issues and concerns, bargaining collectively, and juggling family life. Many unions do make training and literacy an important part of their work, but not all. Sometimes, it is because of a lack of political will. But the main reason is resources and awareness. It is important to encourage union leaders to view training and basic training as a central role of unions.

When discussing the need for literacy programming in your workplace, be sure to remind your colleagues and the union representatives that literacy is the basis for participation in the union and in the workplace. It's a basic requirement for all further skills training, and literacy programs can be a benefit to many people at your workplace. Also, it's important to remember that people with low literacy skills often do not speak out in favour of literacy training because they are afraid of being ridiculed. As a literacy activist, your job is to fight for training for people who may not make their own needs known.

4

Starting a Literacy Program in your Workplace

As you begin to garner support for a literacy program in your workplace, you can also begin to gather resources together to help implement literacy programming. There are a number of organizations across the country that offer resources for literacy programs.

You can also check out www.learningin solidarity.ca that is chock full of resources to help jumpstart your labour literacy education program.

Remember, in the lead up to organizing a literacy program, there are some mistakes that are easy to avoid.

First, be sure that the information about the programming is produced in a way that is friendly to people with lower literacy skills. Putting up a poster on a noticeboard is one way that people with strong literacy skills unwittingly exclude people with lower literacy skills from participation. Verbal communication is always best.

Second, don't give in to demands for testing, whether standardized or not. If you absolutely

need to produce evidence that your program is working, use a portfolio or interview approach. Ensure that each participant's work is dated, and, with their permission, show the work to your employer or union leader. Collect goals of individual students — such as writing a cheque, or filling out a form at work — and then record their progress toward these goals in their portfolios. The improvements made by students are almost always very clear and easy to identify.

Finally, in persuading your employer that literacy and basic skills training are an important addition to your workplace, you can point to the benefits of improved literacy skills for the employer's priorities. Literacy programs improve productivity, profits, customer service, employee retention, and better enable us to keep up with new technology. They also decrease the likelihood of accidents on the job, keeping workers' compensation insurance premiums down, and reducing absenteeism.

Conclusion

Labour literacy education is a transformational tool that improves confidence, integrates community, and opens up opportunities in the workplace. Canada's labour movement has a long history of doing amazing work in literacy education. But in recent years, government policies have been undermining the gains the labour movement has made in literacy and basic skills training.

Whether you count yourself as a literacy activist, as an educator, or whether you just think that literacy is important, you can help renew the labour movement's efforts to enhance literacy skills for all Canadians. We hope that you have found this book informative and inspirational.

Check out www.learninginsolidarity.ca for more stories about the transformative power of labour literacy education, and for resources on how you can bring literacy education into your workplace. And keep fighting for the educational rights of all Canadians!

Glossary of Terms

Basic skills training: Education that helps adults to improve their reading, writing, numeracy, and other skills that are important for modern life.

Clear language: The principle of using language that is widely accessible so that more people are able to understand documents. It is particularly important when writing documents that can have a big impact on workers, such as collective agreements.

Culture of learning: A view that in order for the labour movement to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century, it must push hard for lifelong learning opportunities for all workers, and that these opportunities must include literacy and basic skills training.

International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS): An international survey of adults to determine how well they use printed materials in their daily lives. It was completed in 1994 and 2003.

Labour literacy education: An approach to literacy and basic skills training that focuses on the whole life of the learner, not just the requirements of a given test or certification.

Literacy: Literacy is the ability to comprehend text, and more broadly, to navigate the modern world which requires people to understand and use written information in their daily lives.

Glossary of Terms

Neoliberalism: An economic and political ideology that promotes a capitalist free market. Its values include individualism, freedom of enterprise, productivity and profit. This may be manifested as a mistrust of government, regulation, public services, social programs and unions.

Reading the world: The idea that reading is far more than being able to comprehend words on the page. Reading the world also means being able to understand how power relations work, and that many things that are not immediately apparent have an impact on our lives.

Survey of Adult Skills: The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) surveyed 165,000 people in 33 countries to develop a picture of literacy, numeracy, and computer skill levels. Also called the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the Survey of Adult Skills has carried on where the IALSS left off.

Image index

Sketch: Egyptian Hieroglyphic/Greek Alphabet translation table.....	4
Photo: Chiefs of the Six Nations at Brantford, Canada, explaining their wampum belts to Horatio Hale, September 14, 1871. Image shows (left to right): Joseph Snow (Hahriron), Onondaga Chief; George H. M. Johnson (Deyonhehgon), Mohawk chief, government interpreter and son of John Smoke Johnson; John Buck (Skanawatih), Onondaga chief, hereditary keeper of the wampum; John Smoke Johnson (Sakayenkwaraton), Mohawk chief, speaker of the council; Isaac Hill (Kawenenseronton), Onondaga chief, fire keeper; John Seneca Johnson (Kanonkeredawih), Seneca chief. Six Nations Public Library, available under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 2.5 CA license.	5
Bottom sketch: Wampum Belt, Edward Eggleston, A First Book in American History (New York: American Book Company, 1889. Courtesy the private collection of Roy Winkelman	5
Photo: Mary Ellen Nettle, literacy instructor, Labour Education Centre	9
Photo: Paulo Freire, Projeto Memoria	11
Photo: Cleaners, 1980s. Labour Education Centre	20
Photo: [Is184] A class at the F.R. Close Technical School, Hamilton. School of Labour Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, McMaster University	25
Photo: [Is188] Bertram’s employees – 1900 in front of shop on Hatt Street, Hamilton. School of Labour Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, McMaster University	26
Photo: [Is654] Cover of the Labour News, June 26, 1914. School of Labour Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, McMaster University	27

Photo: [Is038] Working at Cub Aircraft, Hamilton, January 1946.
School of Labour Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, McMaster University 28

Photo: [Is500] Women fruit pickers. **School of Labour Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, McMaster University** 29

Photo: Graduation, **Labour Education Centre** 30

Photo: Garment Worker, 1980s, **Labour Education Centre** 31

Bottom Photo: 1919 Winnipeg General Strike Rally. One of the Winnipeg Strike leaders, Roger Bray, addresses the pro-labour masses in Victoria Park in June 1919, **Winnipeg Free Press** 35

Top Photo: G20 Protest, Toronto 2010, **copyright Jackman Chui, used with permission** 35

Graphic: Trickle-down, **copyright Talal Nayer, used with permission** 38

Photo: Toronto Library Strike, **Labour Education Centre** 43

Photo: [Is414] Dofasco grinder poses with huge iron casting, 1924.
School of Labour Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, McMaster University 44

Photo: [Is022] Proctor and Gamble workers, pre-1914.
School of Labour Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, McMaster University 46