

BEYOND THE WORKPLACE— CANADIAN LABOR'S SOCIAL AGENDA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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