



Western Labour to Increase Direct Role in Basic Education

GRAHAM DOWDELL

The Canadian labour movement, particularly in the west and the north, is poised to increase its direct role in providing and coordinating basic education programs for working people. Whether through union initiatives or jointly with employers, the labour movement is seeking to raise the voice of working people to create more democratic and effective workplaces for the 21st century.

This was the focus of recent discussions by one hundred trade union leaders and educators who gathered in Calgary on November 2, 1997 for the conference *Into the 21st Century... Labour's Learning Agenda*. Coordinated by the Western Labour Learning Network (WLLN), the conference provided a regional focus and follow-up to the June 1997 National Training Conference organized by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) in Ottawa.

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Participants came from all parts of the region, including the eastern Arctic. They included a mix of the labour movement's political and educational leadership, as well as rank and file members keen to increase their union's involvement in basic skills upgrading.

The conference highlighted labour's involvement in some of the best basic skills initiatives across the region including the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour's (SFL) WEST Program, The Winnipeg Labour Council Communication Skills Project, the Vancouver programs of the Hospital Employees Union (HEU) and UNITE, SkillPlan, and the UFCW Training Centres. Of particular interest to participants were those programs that explored peer instructor options, in some cases in partnership with community colleges.

Nancy Riche, Executive Vice President of the Canadian Labour Congress, challenged labour in her keynote address to make literacy its Great Millennium Project and to develop a clearer statement of its vision of literacy.



Nancy Riche, Executive VP of the Canadian Labour Congress delivered the keynote address at the Calgary conference.

Audrey Cormack, President of the Alberta Federation of Labour, called upon labour to seek an effective balance between protecting the jobs of working people and recognizing the need for technological change.

Bob Hatfield, National Education Director for the Communication Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), stressed that labour's vision goes beyond the notion of literacy merely to “keep pace” with economic change, to one in which literacy is a tool for workers to create social and economic change.

Barb Byers, President of the SFL, outlined some of labour's core principles for basic skills training, including democratic

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control by learners, individual and collective empowerment and a stronger labour voice in project coordination.

Janet Dassinger, Director of the UFCW National Training Program, urged participants to move beyond "soft" government grants and entrench labour's learning agenda at the collective bargaining table with employer contributions to training trust funds. Other conference sessions focused on the importance of clear language in union and workplace communications and the development of follow-up plans within the respective provinces and territories.

The Western Labour Learning Network was established in 1996 by the six western and northern federations of labour, and the prairie region of the Canadian Labour Congress. Its primary objective is to increase information sharing among unions and central labour bodies across the region about basic skills upgrading programming for working people. The conference was funded by the National Literacy Secretariat and the labour movement across the region.

The final conference report, which will summarize many of the conference presentations, will be released early in 1998. For further information contact Graham Dowdell, Chair, Western Labour Learning Network. Phone: (204) 786-5055. *



Janet Dassinger, Director of the UFCW's National Training Program, far right, presented an overview of her union's newest training centre.

Alberta Enhances Apprenticeship Programs

BONNIE CARPENTER

Clint Dunford, Minister of Advanced Education and Career Development, has announced a number of changes which will enhance apprenticeship programs in the province. New programs will provide more options for apprenticeship training, improved financial support, and more ways to begin learning a trade. To make apprenticeship more accessible, the province intends to develop mechanisms to recognize prior learning, to give more opportunities to youth, and to make worker certification more flexible. The actions announced were in response to the apprenticeship and industry consultations held during the past year, part of an ongoing process to renew the vision for apprenticeship and industry training.

"The Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board proposed these actions to achieve specific goals, and I decided to implement the Board's recommendations immediately," stated Dunford. Public input will be sought on specific proposals for regulatory reform. In the interim, the Minister released details concerning the various changes. There will be more options for training. Most apprentices now take their in-class training in six to twelve week blocks of time. The development of options to supplement the traditional block-release could better match the timing of apprentices' in-class training and employers' ongoing work requirements. These alternative formats could include weekly instruction, individually paced learning, and distance or mobile delivery. This, together with improved financial support, should make apprenticeship a more viable option for apprentices and their employers.

Promotion of ways to begin a trade and to recognize prior learning will be increased. The Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board and Advanced Education and Career Development will promote a wider understanding of the many ways to begin trades-related learning. A greater awareness of options such as advanced standing in apprenticeship programs will encourage interest and participation in apprenticeship training. More apprenticeship opportunities for youth will be available through such programs as the high school based *Registered Apprenticeship Program, Careers, The Next Generation* and initiatives like *Skills-Canada Alberta*.

There will be an increased flexible certification of workers. As technologies and industries change, some employers and employees have advised that parts of their apprenticeship program are not needed for the specialized work they do. Training in broad craft areas allows apprentices to obtain certification more quickly, and already exists in some Alberta trades.

Finally, industry advisory committees will be strengthened. Measures will be taken to achieve broader industry involvement and to encourage a cross-trade dialogue among the provincial apprenticeship committees. "These measures will encourage a faster training response to the economy's need for skilled workers," added Dunford. Work will now proceed on involving industry, the adult learning system, the K-12 system, communities and other groups in implementing these measures and on the forthcoming consultations on regulatory reform.

For further information contact Kathie Konarzewski, Communications, Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development (403) 422-4495. *

Project Investigates Basic Skills Training Issues

SANDI HOWELL

Workplace Education Manitoba initiated the *Linkage Project* in 1995, to ascertain where various stakeholder groups stood with respect to their awareness of, and ability to deal with workplace-related basic skills issues. The following article, the second in a series, highlights sector-wide and sector-specific issues resulting from interviews with 78 companies from six emerging economic sectors (as identified by the provincial government) of Health Care Products, Environment, Aerospace, Agri-food Products, Tourism, and Information & Telecommunications.

Issues Common to all Sectors

In general, few employers had an in-depth understanding of basic skills issues and their impact on the workplace. However, they clearly voiced a dissatisfaction with the basic skill levels of potential employees, particularly those recently graduated from universities, high schools and community colleges. While most companies prefer to hire individuals with adequate basic skills, many would assume some responsibility for training an employee who was considered to be valuable. Changes in the workplace appear to be the biggest motivator for initiating such training.

Defining specific objectives and determining whether or not they are met—both short and long-term—is a critical training issue. While overall company objectives are considered to be very important with respect to training objectives and perceived training success, few connections are drawn between company objectives and missions, and basic skills training objectives and outcomes. This usually means that basic skills outcomes are largely perceived in isolation and not as significantly contributing to company success.

The cost of training includes more than just the wages for the trainer and the rent on the location. More importantly for a lot of companies—small companies in particular—training costs include lost production, replacement workers, time required to set up training, and the time required for administration and coordination.

While employers expressed mixed feelings about government responsibilities for basic skills training, 40% felt that the government has some responsibility in this respect. Although not necessarily interested in government funding, employers did indicate a desire for short-term educational expertise, better skill assessment tools, short- and long-term evaluation mechanisms, flexibility in funding structures and a consistent, easy-to-find, reliable source of government information.

It should be emphasized that in all sectors, screening for basic skills has increased in recent years, with many additional employers declaring an intent to initiate this procedure.

As approximately 92% of the businesses in Manitoba are small businesses (defined as having less than 50 employees), it is appropriate to focus briefly on issues of particular concern for this segment.

Thirty-four small companies in Manitoba were surveyed across the six sectors. For small companies, the issue of production schedules was very important, as there are often no replace-

ments for those attending training and no funding to compensate for their absence or the loss of production. In addition, the costs of delivering training and the logistics of the time—and therefore the cost—of setting up training was an impediment to considering an initiative.

Sector-Specific Issues

In those sectors in which there is greater job specialization, there is a greater emphasis on training in general. In addition, companies with certification requirements tended to focus more on basic skill levels, obviously in response to the need to ensure certification success. For these companies, training objectives had a tendency to be more job-specific versus company specific. If basic skills were an impediment to job functioning and/or the attainment of certification, companies tended to initiate basic skills training. This was often related to workplace change issues such as restructuring and new markets.

In sectors in which there was little job specialization and little skill requirement in terms of recruiting, there was less training in general and a belief that it is easier to structure the company and its processes around lack of skill rather than to train workers. The companies in these sectors could often identify a lack of basic skills, but were reluctant to take this on as an issue.

A copy of the Linkage Project report is available from Workplace Education Manitoba Steering Committee (WEMSC) 505-138 Portage Ave. E., Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3C 0A1. *

ABC Canada Hosts Workplace Education Conference

At the beginning of December, nearly three hundred delegates from across the country gathered in Toronto for Canada's first national workplace education conference. Organized by the Workplace Education Centre at ABC Canada, the conference was aptly titled 'Moving Forward: A Forum on Workplace Education.' The event brought together representatives from business, organized labour, and government for three days of workshops, round tables, and presentations. It showcased the best of workplace education in Canada and offered presentations from almost every province and territory, from remote sites to urban centres, and represented a mix of perspectives from business and labour, education and government. Conference delegates hailed from every province and territory along with special guests from the US and the UK.

Several presentations dealt with the methodology for describing essential skills using either the American SCANS system or the Essential Skills Profile developed by Human Resources Development Canada. Debra Mair, Chief Researcher on the

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Essential Skills Research Project was able to give participants an overview of how this pan-Canadian research was developed and conducted. Carol MacLeod, *Carol Macleod and Associates*, and Lynda Fownes, *Skillplan*, showed how the profiling methodology can be used to describe the essential skills used in a variety of occupations. Karen Hammond, *AVC - Calgary*, gave some practical examples of how the essential skills profiles can be used to provide the foundation for needs assessment activities in a number of workplaces.

Evaluating the impact of workplace education programs was the focus for a number of presentations. Michael Bloom from the Conference Board of Canada discussed the findings of a recent Conference Board survey of employers which showed that the benefits of literacy training include "unleashing the potential of individual employees, cementing stronger labour-management relations, and moving the entire organization toward achievement of corporate goals." Colleen Albiston reported on a similar study carried out by ABC Canada, *The Impact of Basic Skills Programs on Canadian Workplaces*. Both pieces of research confirm that basic skills training is a sound investment for business and a sure way for employees to maintain employment and increase earnings.

Other sessions highlighted the number and variety of workplace education programs across Canada. For those delegates interested in program delivery, there was ample opportunity to hear about how programs in the North West Territory deal with distance and isolation or how programs in Saskatchewan approach small businesses. Workplace learning programs were featured in presentations and site tours by a number of well-known businesses—Cadbury, Molson Breweries, Bristol Aerospace, and Cominco Ltd., to name a few.

For anyone involved in workplace education over the last few years, the conference was proof that the field is a vibrant and growing endeavour. Whether practitioner or policy maker, *Moving Forward* was a tremendous opportunity to interact with colleagues and to hear about the work being done in other parts of the dominion. *

Coming Up

Literacy and Technology: Maintaining a Human Face

June 25-27, 1998, Montreal

This conference is the Centre for Literacy's 8th annual summer institute. For more information contact Dawson College. Phone: (514) 931-8731. E-mail: literacycntr@dawsoncollege.qc.ca

Workplace Learning: Strategies for Success

April 19-21, 1998, Milwaukee

This will be the third international workplace education conference hosted by the Centre on Education and Work. For more information visit: <http://www.cew.wisc.edu>, or phone: 1-800-446-0399.

Resources

Bloom, M., Burrows, M., Lafleur, B., and Squires, R. (1997). *The economic benefits of improving literacy skills in the workplace*. Toronto: Conference Board of Canada. (Report 206-97)

This report combines data from the IALS and a CBC survey of employers to reach some conclusions about the return on investment for workplace education programs. For more information see: <http://www.conferenceboard.ca>

Workplace Education and Training in Saskatchewan

The Workplace Education Consortium in Saskatchewan has a large and interesting web site on the NALD server. The site will be of interest to anyone who is interested in essential skills training in the province. <http://www.nald.ca/wecs.htm>

Canada's National Training Standards (CLFDB 1995)

The Training Standards are made up of seventeen statements that include all aspects of a training service—inputs and resources, processes and practices, and outputs and outcomes. Taken together, they describe the minimum standard for quality training services. There is nothing radical or revolutionary about the content of the standards. They speak to good instructional methods, qualified instructors, accessibility and accountability.

What is somewhat revolutionary is that they are the first such standards in Canada. Despite provincial jurisdiction over education and training, they are *national*—they are intended for application across Canada in order to increase and systematize the quality of education and training for all Canadians.

It is assumed that consumers will—with these Standards in their hands—know quality training when they see it and demand quality service for their investment in trainings.

Copies of the Training Standards are available from the Canadian Labour Force Development Board in Ottawa. Phone: (613) 230-6264 or Fax: (613) 230-7681.

Correction

Thanks to Charles Ramsey at NALD for pointing out that the instructions for subscribing to the Plain Language Listserv printed in the last issue were incorrect. The final l (L) in the instructions appeared as a 1 (one). They should have read:

Send this message to subscribe to the Plain Language Listserv:

To: Majordomo@list.web.net

From: (your e-mail address)

Subject: (blank) Message: subscribe language-1

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