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## ***Plain Language & Worker Leadership: The Canadian Labour Congress Takes on the Challenge***

**Barbara Byers and Tamara Levine, Canadian Labour Congress**

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**PLAIN Conference, Toronto, September 26<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup>, 2002**  
***Plain Language & Worker Leadership:***  
***The Canadian Labour Congress Takes on the Challenge***  
**by Barb Byers & Tamara Levine**  
Canadian Labour Congress

Introduction to the Canadian labour movement:

- CLC represents 2.5 million members, over 30% of labour force
- worker-led
- self-financed
- the changing face of the labour movement:
  - shift away from industrial, manufacturing base towards smaller workplaces, service industry
  - now almost half of union membership is women, large numbers of workers of colour, 2<sup>nd</sup> language speakers
  - teachers, nurses are choosing to join the labour movement in recent years
  - need to rethink who our audience is, how we are going to reach them effectively
  - theme of not only organizing workers into unions, but “organizing the organized”.

The connection to literacy:

The labour movement has a long tradition of worker education, fight for public education, libraries, literacy, ESL. (Refer to *A Quest for Learning: The Canadian Labour Movement and Worker Literacy Education*.)

- focus on both union members, Canadian public: common good.
- ongoing theme of empowering workers to take control of their lives, individually and collectively.
- in the 1980's and 1990's, unions got increasingly involved in literacy work.

They recognized that there were large numbers of members who could not participate fully in the workplace, union, home and community because they hadn't had a chance to finish school or had come from another country and didn't have adequate skills in English or French.

With funding from some provincial governments, the National Literacy Secretariat and union funds, unions began negotiating time and a place for workers to learn. They developed programs in keeping with union philosophy: empowerment of workers, co-worker instructors, confidentiality, popular education. (BEST, WEST, EAST, LEAP, Quebec, etc.)

But there was something missing: while it was great that unions were involved in negotiating time for workers to learn and running programs, the labour movement continued to produce vast amounts of print material, sign collective agreements and be governed by constitutions, by-laws and resolutions that were inaccessible to most of our members. (Overhead: example from collective agreement, CLC's Economy)

- clear language is the flip side of literacy: it has to be a two-way street.

- clear language in the labour movement is more than technical approach: this is about workers having ownership of their lives/organizations, not about efficiency.

#### Case Studies:

CAW constitution

St. Christopher House collective agreement

SFL resolutions

CLC: labour education courses, convention resolution to rewrite constitution in clear language resolution, CLC Clear Language screen and binder, staff training.

#### Institutional Change:

- points of resistance: tradition, precedent, staff reps / elected leaders holding on to power, possibility of an arbitrator ruling in the union's favour if language is ambiguous.
- hope for the future: openness, connection to membership, in keeping with union philosophy, willingness to learn / unlearn.

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## **Barbara Byers**

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Barbara Byers, a social worker by profession, is Executive Vice-President of the Canadian Labour Congress. She has served as the President of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, representing more than 80,000 workers, and the National Union of Public and General Employees/Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (NUPGE-SGEU). Barbara has travelled the world extensively on behalf of the CLC and she is a champion of literacy and clear language.

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## **Tamara Levine**

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Tamara Levine has coordinated the Workplace Literacy Project of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) since 1996. Previously, she was the Regional Coordinator of the Ontario Federation of Labour's BEST program in Eastern Ontario. She has also worked in the federal government, where she helped set up the National Literacy Secretariat and was active in issues of health and safety.