

Part of Everything We Do

Integrating literacy into the Canadian labour movement

by **Tamara Levine**

What is literacy work? Is it only about organizing literacy programs for adult learners? Or is it also about looking at the organizations and systems we are part of to see who is included and who is left out? Can literacy play a role, beyond skill development, that could foster greater inclusion and participation?

Some unions and central labour bodies believe it can. We are beginning to rethink our approach to literacy and its companion, clear language. We are moving away from the project-based, grant-dependent approach in which literacy is appended to the regular work of the union, the 'caboose' at the end of the train. Instead, we are emphasizing how literacy and clear language can be 'part of everything we do.' I would like to share what we have learned from this shift.

The paradigm shift is a result of a growing consciousness that literacy work cannot be sustained, financially or programmatically, if it is marginal to the union. It marks a departure from a skills-based approach to one that involves literacy as a social practice, woven into the "threads of the tapestry" (Jackson) of what goes on in the organization as a whole.

Background

Since the mid-19th century, Canadian unions have provided education and training to workers and fought for public education, libraries and other social programs. Union-based literacy was a natural extension of this role, blossoming in the late 1980s and 90s through local labour councils and provincial and territorial federations of labour. In the 1990s, the Canadian Labour Congress and several national unions undertook literacy projects to raise awareness, develop collective bargaining strategies, produce resources and train labour literacy advocates.

The emergence of literacy as a union issue coincided with the legitimization of social unionism, moving beyond traditional 'bread and butter' issues to look at how unions could play a more meaningful role in creating a better society. Social unionism included an openness to the goals of union literacy "to help empower working people to take control of their lives individually and collectively" (Turk and Unda).

The 1980s and 90s was an era of upheaval in the workplace, a time of shutdowns, restructuring, privatization of public services, massive layoffs and displacement. In its midst, union literacy was a way to look out for the most vulnerable workers: those who had not had the chance to finish school and immigrant workers needing to learn English or French as a second language.

Structure and funding

While there was growing awareness of the need for programs to be 'worker-centred,' there was no standard model of what union-based literacy looked like. Some programs were negotiated to run in the workplace, others were provided through public education or union training centres. The way programs were structured and how they played out was based in part on their funding arrangements as well as on the political environments in which they operated. The patterns that emerged had far-reaching consequences for their ultimate sustainability.

The fact that many union programs were supported by provincial project funding—if, when, and where it was available—had a significant impact on how the work was done. For example, the developmental phase of securing buy-in and putting a planning process in place was often curtailed in favour of 'getting the program up and running,' shortchanging the painstaking work of entrenching the program into the lifeblood of the union.

In spite of many individual and collective successes, the precarious nature of the funding meant that when the political landscape changed, for example, in Ontario in 1995 and in B.C. in 2000, it was not only government funding for union literacy that evaporated. If literacy had not become an integral part of its business, the union was unlikely to sustain the work independent of external funding and support.

Literacy is a two-way street: a paradigm shift

In the past few years, unions have begun to shift toward an integrative model. This change came out of an increased awareness that "Literacy is a two-way street. It has to be just as much about how the

union communicates as it is about any program that someone else will use" (Dave Bleakney, Canadian Union of Postal Workers, in *Our Times*). In addition, the traditional reliance on National Literacy Secretariat funding was shaken with the increased demand on a static budget and changing federal priorities.

"Literacy has a role to play in changing unions by making them more democratic—more accessible to more members. It builds skills which allow members to make their demands heard in the union. And it puts pressure on the organization to ensure that communications and meetings are accessible and that key union documents can be read and understood. This creates a union culture truly accessible to all members...Literacy needs to be integrated into the structures, policies and priorities of the union or federation to be truly effective and to avoid being seen as an 'add-on' which can be cut in difficult times" (Burke p. 13).

The focus of earlier union literacy work was on the workers who needed training: the union had a responsibility to put literacy on the bargaining table and to support clear language so these same workers could understand union communications.

The combination of the project-based nature of the work and the influence of the dominant discourse on literacy carried some of the inherent dangers of the charitable model of 'us' taking care of 'them.' The us and them had less to do with skill differential than with how literacy was perceived by the union: literacy was not one of the union's traditional priorities (like wages, benefits, etc.) and crises (closures, layoffs, privatization, etc.). It was deemed worthwhile if external or negotiated funding was available. If not, literacy usually 'didn't make it' on to the union's agenda and was thus generally, though regrettably, expendable.

A new consciousness

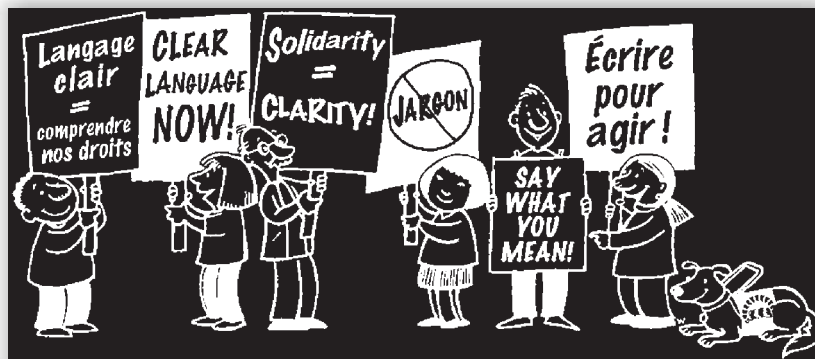
The new consciousness has to do with understanding that union literacy is also about us. It is about looking at how the union communicates in print, what its courses look like, how conferences are run, how collective agreements are written, and how new members are welcomed and included. It is about looking at the ways the union can unwittingly operate as a 'closed club' and how literacy and clear language could help make it more open and inclusive, and begin to close the gap between labour's avowed goals and their realization.

The funding crunch

Since 1988, the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) has been an important source of support for union literacy: labour was seen as a key stakeholder in the workplace, critical to raising awareness, bargaining support, and convincing reluctant employers of the value of literacy training for workers. In the early years, with an ample budget, uncharted waters and a visionary NLS project officer, there was room for unions to receive funding for literacy projects like awareness campaigns, curriculum development, conferences, and organizational needs assessments. With funding for delivery uneven or unavailable, however, the step of implementing programs was often an insurmountable challenge.

Compounding the situation were the limitations of project funding, with its emphasis on products rather than the more 'messy' processes of social development and organizational change through literacy. Project-based support often resulted not only in breaks in staffing and continuity, but in a lack of organizational engagement to the literacy work. (In spite of these limitations, there were some excellent results; it is unlikely that much of the literacy work of unions would have happened without the support of the NLS.)

In recent times, with escalating demands on the NLS budget, combined with provincial cuts to workplace literacy and increasingly cumbersome application and reporting processes of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, limited funds are much harder to come by.



The role of the Canadian Labour Congress

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) was a relative latecomer to literacy. With NLS funding, the CLC Workplace Literacy Project began a number of initiatives in 1996 in keeping with its role as Canada's central labour body. These included publishing a newsletter and 'how to' resources, developing and

delivering courses in union-based literacy and clear language, and launching the CLC Literacy Working Group of union and federation representatives to share information, resources and strategies.

More recently, the CLC has begun to focus on integration; with varying degrees of success, it is becoming a 'way of doing literacy.' Here are some examples.

Including literacy at a CLC Education Conference

Literacy had to work hard to be on the agenda at the 1999 CLC National Education Conference: there was little interest expressed when unions were first surveyed. Only when NLS funds were offered as travel subsidies for literacy activists did the organizers agree to include literacy in the program. This is a useful example of how NLS funds have effectively kick-started an important initiative.

Two workshops and a literacy forum were planned with the hope of attracting 30 to 40 conference delegates. These events proved to be a turning point when over 80 attended the forum. The result was that interest was ignited and literacy subsequently infused the workshops, the President's address and plenary sessions. A labour leader who attended the forum saw literacy in a new way: "I used to think literacy was about reading and writing. Now I understand that it is a political act." His union went on to develop a literacy initiative focused on integration and on how to communicate with its members more effectively.

Clear language

Unions initially saw clear language as a way to reach members with limited literacy skills. When the CLC published *Making It Clear: Clear Language for Union Communications* in 1999, a new message began to emerge: clear language is about all of us. "Clear language offers us a great opportunity," says Barb Byers, CLC Vice-President. "We wonder why our members aren't involved. Rather than assume it's

because they're apathetic, why don't we take the opportunity to look at ourselves?" (Levine p. 29)

Trade unionists understood the politics of class, that clear language was a way to counter the power of elites and their language of exclusion. It was becoming clear that the way to get literacy into the 'innards' of the labour movement was going to be through clear language.

Strategic planning and integration

In 2002, the CLC Literacy Working group (LWG) began a process of strategic planning and integration. One of the themes of this work was 'organizational change,' which had also emerged as a strong recommendation of the evaluation of the CLC Workplace Literacy Project being carried out at the same time.

To advance the integration theme, veteran labour literacy educator Jean Connon Unda was hired to work with the LWG on strategic planning, to collectively develop our understanding of the process of integrating literacy and clear language into the labour movement. The tide, at least among some members of the CLC Literacy Working Group, began to shift into integration mode.

Resistance and challenges ahead

At the CLC, there has been progress on integration. The CLC has

- allocated increasing levels of CLC funds to the Workplace Literacy Project;
- begun to include literacy and clear language awareness in the development of labour education courses;
- trained CLC staff, from the mailroom to the president, in clear language awareness;
- partnered with the National Film Board to create a film on clear language;
- documented what it has done to integrate literacy and clear language; and
- adopted the CLC constitution, rewritten in clear language, at the 2005 triennial convention.

There will no doubt be challenges along the way. The CLC Workplace Literacy Project is still mainly grant-dependent and thus vulnerable. Like all institutions, the labour movement includes some who will resist change because integration challenges how things generally get done. Efforts will need to be both sensitive and strategic in light of the crisis management and race-to-deadline culture of the organization.

We know that integration represents a cultural shift that will be both resisted and welcomed. As labour proceeds tentatively down the path of

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integration, it will be important to continue creating learning opportunities for the most vulnerable workers and persevere in developing, bargaining and supporting workplace learning programs.

At the same time, it is clear that an integration approach has the potential to bring positive change to a movement that not only is committed to social justice but also is increasingly conscious of the need

for relevance and renewal. We could be on a train that's bound for glory.

Tamara Levine coordinates the Workplace Literacy Project at the Canadian Labour Congress, where she works with unions to raise awareness, build capacity and encourage the integration of worker-centred literacy and clear language. She hopes this work will help to strengthen workers' participation in the union and the workplace.