



WOMEN'S AND HUMAN
RIGHTS DEPARTMENT

SERVICE DE LA CONDITION
FÉMININE ET DES DROITS
DE LA PERSONNE

NO EASY RECIPE: BUILDING THE
DIVERSITY AND STRENGTH OF
THE LABOUR MOVEMENT
Feminist Organizing Models
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INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) Women's Committee set out a number of goals to tackle barriers to building an inclusive and progressive labour movement capable of truly fighting for equality. One goal was to "build a feminist model of organizing to increase the diversity of our movement and reach difficult to organize workplaces and communities."

A solid contribution to realizing this goal is found in the CLC **Women's Work: A Report**. This report, released on International Women's Day 1997, culminated a year-long project by the CLC to research and consult with women across the country about the impact of economic restructuring on women's work and women's lives. The report provides a comprehensive look at how increased job competition, downsizing, privatization, contracting out, increase in flexible labour sourcing and precarious nature of work is affecting both union and non-union women. Many women across Canada gave voice to the hardship, struggles and challenges facing them, such as lack of affordable childcare, increased stress, high levels of unemployment, low pay and mounting family demands. Women provided ideas and strategies for moving forward in building a stronger movement.

This paper builds upon the Women's Work Project and continues the process of exploring progressive ways of organizing. Therefore some of the recommendations have been taken out of the **Women's Work Report** and been explored in further depth.

This discussion paper is an attempt to provide a space for exploring what is meant by a feminist model of organizing. While for many women, feminism still does not mean being inclusive and welcoming to women of colour, it is becoming increasingly clear that for a "feminist" model to be successful, it must involve organizing in difficult sectors and build the diversity of the labour movement. It must integrate and be inclusive of race, class and gender.

Many unions are searching for a "perfect" model. However, we are not putting forward magic solutions or perfect models. Instead, this paper examines the underlying principles and strategies that are critical in organizing to increase the diversity and strength of our movement. These strategies are explored through case studies and interviews with labour/community activists. Experiences drawn from unions and community based organizations from the United States, Australia, India and Mexico will also be explored. The paper provides a glimpse of how unions and community organizations are making fundamental changes in how they organize towards building a diverse movement.

UNIONS BECOMING STRONGER THROUGH DIVERSITY

Women's Work Report

During the Women's Work Project, women consistently stated that we are not given information, not heard and not reflected in staff and leadership positions. There was a real sense that unions were not willing to share power and explore different ways to make the necessary changes to create the space for a diverse membership and leadership within the union. Lack of representation, systemic barriers to participation at all levels of unions and unfulfilled expectations were dominant themes raised.

The Report recommends that all levels of unions need to take up the challenge of understanding what role their own structures play in making women and people of colour frustrated, alienated and shut out. As one OPSEU/NUPGE activist from Toronto said in the **Women's Work Report**, "the white local leadership make you feel you don't belong there. The cultural aspect of white superiority is formidable. Being a member does not make someone part of the labour movement."

The following recommendations were made by the **Women's Work Report**:

Action Alert: Labour Unions, as employers, should develop more pro-active staff training programs, employment equity plans and lead by example.

Action Alert: Labour should recognize separate organizing among communities as an important internal organizing strategy and devise structures and resources to support such initiatives.

Opening the Door to Unions

When union leaders and staff are frustrated with the lack of membership participation in local meetings, or political campaigns, --- structure needs to be looked at. When the majority of members attending a women's activist course are consistently white --- structure needs to be looked at. When a local executive is elected with only a small percentage of women --- structure needs to be looked at.

The structure of our unions determines who becomes involved in the union, who gets to have voice and who is heard. It shapes members' participation in the activities of the union and the sense of ownership they feel towards their co-workers, the local, collective agreement, and the larger labour movement. Union structure fundamentally affects the

potential of building a strong organizing base that represents our diversity both internally and externally.

Some of the essential dimensions of structure that will be explored in this section are representation, participatory process, integrating an organizing model and unions' political culture.

Representation

Representation of the membership in positions at all levels is critical. But there are also problems if it is only one or two women or people of colour that have 'made it' to staff or leadership positions. There needs to be a real strength and participation of women, workers of colour and aboriginal workers at the rank and file and at all levels, otherwise workers who have 'made it' can become isolated in trying to push for a feminist and anti-racist analysis and organizing perspective in all the areas of union work. Rob Fairley, former president of CUPE Local 1, believes there is a danger when equity plans are separated from the day to day running and operation of the union because that is where the power lies. An integrated analysis is needed to build a stronger union which can move from compartmentalizing equality issues in one department or one staff person to the whole union.¹

As one staff person of colour said, "I am the only staff person doing this work - there needs to be alternative structures developed." Being the lone voice can be a frustrating and limiting experience when these representatives are expected to be the voice in the whole union for aboriginal workers, women, workers of colour or for gays and lesbians. Building a rank and file leadership base which is diverse and representative of the union is an important step in pushing for and ensuring integration. Women and workers of colour are marginalized when they are under-represented in staff and leadership positions. Their perspectives are sought only on the issues faced by their constituency and are not integrated in other aspects of union work.

At the same time, there are incredible expectations placed upon these people by rank and file members who are hungering for changes. Demands on these few people can become unrealistic in terms of the amount of progress that can be achieved and the pace of progress as well.

Recent changes to open up a few positions to women and workers of colour is only part of the equation. If fundamental changes do not happen in tandem, Charlotte Yates says "new leaders, even those who perform well in broadening the ranges of perspectives within the union, get drawn into established practices and relationship with members, which often discourage activism."²

This is not to say that the work being done to increase leadership representation should end but that a more comprehensive strategy is needed throughout the many levels of a union. The commitment for the current white male dominated leadership to open up the structures of the union and be willing to give up power is the major challenge to tackling the issue of representation from the grass roots level to top leadership positions.

The Role of Caucuses and Committees

The struggle by women, workers of colour, aboriginal workers, gays and lesbians and workers with disabilities to fight for the space to connect, strategize and push for structural changes has been an important development in building a stronger labour movement. Caucuses, committees, courses and conferences have been important self-organizing strategies within unions. They have helped build a base for women, workers of colour, aboriginal workers and other equality seeking groups. Irma Mohammed, Director at the B.C. Federation of Labour (BCFED) says the B.C. Summer Institute for Women, gives "women the space to be supported, to get courage and strength, feel powerful and to go back to their locals more empowered to make changes."³

These structures also strengthen and support members from different unions who may be going through similar struggles to improve representation, and political and educational work within their unions. These structures can also provide points of connection and access for community groups. For example, women's conferences have been spaces to learn from different struggles taking place by women in workplaces and in various social movements. Labour women and activists in the women's movements, gay and lesbian movements and other social struggles can connect on common experiences of struggle and educate each other on campaign ideas, different ways to organize and identify possible joint campaigns. This serves to build ongoing alliances between labour and community groups.

The issue of full representation needs to be integrated throughout the union so that members who have been traditionally excluded from participation do not get marginalized by only attending caucus meetings. A first step in developing a real commitment to improve representation would be to ensure that information is reaching all women and workers of colour. Otherwise, the results will be the same old people attending conferences and the control at the local level continues the pattern of who is traditionally represented and in power.

Union Political Culture

A critical analysis and discussion of power, self-interest and decision-making must happen within our own organizations as well. This is essential for all of us - staff, leaders and members. When organizational structures and procedures are hidden or not discussed, people are disempowered. When our own organizational structures are not easily understood, people learn that they have to be "in with the in crowd" to be involved in the union. This is one of the common ways that sexism, racism and stagnation prevail in many organizations.⁴ Teresa Conrow, Public Services International

Informal practices pervade all levels of union structure and process. Yet these practices reproduce who has power and who does not. This informal union culture has become entrenched in how most meetings are organized and structured, the language that is used; the use of furniture to convey hierarchy and power; and the use of firmly established rules of procedures. This culture sets up who are considered the "experts" which is normally white men and in some cases the white women who are the union staff or elected leadership. Many members are unfamiliar with the "established" procedures and Roberts Rules of Order. They are not used to public speaking, and making political speeches at the drop of the hat. For some, reading and speaking English may be a problem. Under these conditions, members become progressively alienated and distanced from the workings of the union.

Barriers

The political culture of a union is also reflected in the timing of meetings. Is onsite child care provided or are there child care subsidies? Are translators at meetings in locals where immigrant members don't speak English? Are materials written in clear language? Is union jargon explained? If these are not part of the union political culture and process, huge barriers are set up for women with young children, lower income members who cannot afford to hire a baby-sitter, immigrant members and women of colour from different cultures.

Informal yet important discussion and decision making often takes place over beers in the pub or hospitality room after evening meetings or at conferences and this, in effect, determines who becomes part of the political power within a union. As Miriam Edelson describes, "the culture of workaholism in unions excludes not only women with family responsibilities, but also anyone who wishes to be active in spheres apart from

"Present forms of union democracy are built almost exclusively around elections, conventions and constitutional protections. Reliance upon these formal democratic processes encourage low levels of participation and a sense of distance between rank-and-file members, activists and the union organization. Further, voting encourages individual activism at best, leaving out the important collective forms of action which reinforce a sense of solidarity with the union."

Charlotte Yates,
Associate Professor of
Labour Studies,
McMaster University

the union movements. Fitting in means total devotion to the cause - and you have to operate within this framework to be accepted."⁵

In unions where women are the majority, the 'normalcy of white culture' pervades the union culture. Those women of colour who try to participate are excluded from sharing the common day to day experiences of their white sisters.

Staff Roles

Union staff carry out a majority of the union's work. In that sense, staff reflect the political culture of the union. Who is hired as educators, organizers, service representatives and lawyers sends a message to union members about who is acceptable. It does not stop there. If the majority of a union staff is white and male, the way the staff work will reflect their position in society and experiences. It will affect how they relate to members, who they listen to and who they encourage to get involved in the union. For many members and workers who are unorganized and contact unions for help, the only point of connection is the staff of the union.

An emphasis on hiring women and especially women of colour can play a fundamental role in changing the relationship amongst members. Teresa Conrow states, "membership participation and new leaders will often reflect the races and sexes of present leadership. If there are few women and men of colour involved in an organization, few will come forward to become involved. Everyone's participation needs to be encouraged, but as leaders and organizers we need to be especially concerned with finding new leadership that accurately reflects the membership we seek to represent."⁶

Education programs need to be developed which will train white staff how to encourage the participation of women, aboriginal workers and workers of colour in all aspects of the union. As Hassan Yussuff, Human Rights Director at the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) remarks, "Do the staff see their role as building the workers of colour representation, providing mentorship and support to those members as well? We need to look at who we hire, what is our public message, who are we working with in alliance-building and who occupies leadership positions."⁷ These are some the critical questions to be asked to expose the political culture that has existed within the union for so long.

Changing How We Work

The Service, Office, Retail, Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC) provides an interesting example of how women can be fully involved. SORWUC was a small, feminist, independent national union based in British Columbia that organized mainly women bank workers. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the United Bank Workers section of SORWUC had more than 600 members located in 26 branches at the height of its organizing.⁸ SORWUC encouraged the grass roots participation of rank and file membership and developed alternative union processes to meet the particular needs of women bank workers. Conscious decisions were made to not have a large, highly paid staff. Instead, the goal was to enhance member's self-reliance and expertise. Members did their own bargaining and handled grievances. Organizers were women bank workers themselves with a strong commitment to the democratic participation of members. The union was committed to develop and open the space for leadership from the membership at every level of the union.

There are a few examples of how unions are currently exploring alternative processes within unions. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), for example, is undertaking a comprehensive evaluation of its structures and trying to change the union culture internally.⁹ This has been quite the task for a union with nearly 500,000 members and 2,600 different locals all over the country. CUPE is developing an "organizing the organized" approach local by local. The process by which they are evaluating and changing their internal workings has been an important first step in finding alternative models of organizing.

One of the objectives of the internal organizing approach is to mobilize members at the local level. The union solicited nominations for 24 of their members who would work in the program. In determining which members were chosen, criteria was used to ensure gender balance and racial representation with at least two representatives from all the regions.

The 24 union members underwent four days of a train-the-trainer program. These member organizers have gone back to their region, developed a strategic plan to determine which locals would participate and expand the number of member trainers in order to reach more locals. Member organizers are also responsible for support and follow up with those locals involved. Workshops are organized with locals who have expressed interest in changing to become more active. The trained member organizers facilitate discussions to identify issues faced by the local and help develop strategies for bargaining and organizing broader campaigns. Sandi Howell, staff person at CUPE, says the key success of this

approach is that the “union does not go into the local telling them these are the issues that you are facing but rather getting people to talk about the issues and being honest that there are no quick fix solutions.”

CUPE is also looking at different and creative ways to communicate to their large membership that does not solely rely on written materials. One strategy being explored is workplace “member communication trees.” This system parallels a phone tree with members communicating union information to fellow members. This encourages participation, accountability and leadership development from rank and file members.

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) is another union that is critically examining its own internal structures and the way that newly organized members can participate. The union is currently evaluating the structure of CUPW with respect to the diversity of its members, participation by new members and ways to strengthen the union. By examining who is active in the union, they have found that their traditional members who are postal workers fit into the current structures relatively well. However, other members which include cleaners, couriers, truck drivers and mailing house workers, warehouse workers, vehicle mechanics and emergency medical dispatchers, have found the current union structure is a barrier to achieving equality within the union.

Deborah Bourque, a National Vice-President of CUPW states, “if CUPW wishes to organize unorganized workers, if CUPW wishes to take back our industry and move the union forward, then we must be prepared to take the next step and empower these workers by giving them the necessary structures and service that will ensure equality within the union.”¹⁰ For example, new units of postal cleaners have always been put into existing CUPW locals. CUPW is now debating the value of combining cleaners units from the various locals into their own local or division. This potential change acknowledges the differences between the members in terms of sector and working conditions but it also recognizes that many of the cleaners are workers of colour and new immigrants who have had little voice in locals dominated by postal workers with a predominantly white leadership.¹¹ If the political will exists in CUPW locals to make the space for these new members and to encourage the voice of these members in their union, structural change will not be necessary. Failing that, new bargaining units will be placed in separate locals to ensure that they have the right to participate in the union’s decision making process, educational forums etc. This critical examination that CUPW is undertaking involves all of their members in adapting their structure to

strengthen the membership sectorally and collectively, and to ensure equality for new groups of workers.

The CLC National Anti-Racism Task Force plays an important role in challenging the current union political culture of the labour movement. The Task Force was established in 1994 at the CLC national constitutional convention. Its establishment was the result of many years of organizing at the local level by trade union anti-racism activists.

One of ways in which the Task Force has mobilized Aboriginal workers and workers of colour has been to use a model of regional organizing. During 1996, the Task Force organized regional consultations across the country to hear submissions on people's experience and struggles. This worked not only to involve union members but also to make the links with non-union activists of colour from many different communities.

The Task Force is committed to examining how racism undermines the strength and power of the union movement. It also looks at racism from a broader, social, economic and political perspective. This analysis makes the connections to what workers face in other parts of their lives such as housing, the legal system and immigration. By examining racism within this broader framework and visiting different regions, the Task Force brings together many people of colour and Aboriginal people in their own communities. This has led to grass roots networks being established for future work.

This process is a vehicle for people of colour and Aboriginal people to give voice to their own experience of racism within the labour movement and in society. It also provides the space to encourage Aboriginal workers and workers of color to give their input, strategies and share their vision on how to organize and build solidarity.

One of the results of the Task Force was the first Aboriginal/Workers of Colour Conference took place in September, 1998. There was a show of strength with over 400 Aboriginal workers and workers of colour attending the conference to organize around the recommendations that have come out of the Task Force process. The fundamental aim of the recommendations is to integrate anti-racism work at all levels of the labour movement ranging from research and organizing to changing internal union structures and process to encourage the active involvement and leadership of Aboriginal people and people of colour.

“Apathy is one price labour unions pay for concentrating more and more power and decision making at top levels and for functioning for many years as if unions were service organizations. Apathy results from a sense of powerlessness, is exacerbated by lack of information and of concrete, clear channels of involvement.”

Jamie Kass, CUPE
Ontario Women's
Conference, 1990

The Prairie School for Women in Saskatchewan is an exciting case of proactively involving new women. The committee that organizes the school is not an official committee of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL).¹² The Steering Committee and Working Groups are made up of union women but recruitment extends beyond the usual women leaders and official representatives. This inclusive and cooperative approach has garnered significant results. The 1998 Prairie School for Women succeeded in involving women, 80% of whom had never attended a women-only event. Clearly the approach of encouraging women not necessarily through informal structures and in more cooperative methods leads to the involvement and participation of new women in the School.

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India is another example of how union structures can work to build the participation and leadership of women. SEWA operates within a broad framework of trade unionism that is founded on principles from the labour movement, the women's movement and the cooperative movement. The union organizes workers who are hawkers and vendors, manual labourers and service providers such as agricultural labourers, construction workers, laundry and domestic workers and homebased workers. These women workers are the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable, who have no assets, little access to social services and little power economically and socially. In this context, SEWA has managed to organize over a quarter of a million women members since its inception in 1972.

Decentralized decision making at the grassroots level is very much embedded in SEWA's way of working. SEWA starts organizing with study circles, workshops and classes to raise women's awareness of their rights and the need to unionize. Central to this strategy is the goal of facilitating workers to take action for themselves. This way of working is much slower, but what is important in the process is that workers gain confidence in their own capacities. Women are able to understand and analyze their problems on their own instead of depending on others. Women are given the space to develop their own courage to take on their employer and become involved not only in their union but in their community as well.¹³

The empowerment of women from the grassroots has been central to the growth of the union. SEWA has demonstrated success in leading key organizing struggles to improve the working conditions of women and their families in the hardest to organize sectors of the workforce.

Representation and inclusion in decision-making are fundamental to unions' ability to provide a collective voice for all workers, build a sense of solidarity, and collectively fight the power of employers in the workplace.

Unions should review existing rules and practices which rob our membership and our organizations of the talents, views and experiences of Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour. Our hierarchies and "union culture" present barriers to the full participation of Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour. Breaking down these barriers will mean making changes to our constitutions, by-laws and the way we run our meetings.

Committing to Change

Unions clearly need to take a hard look at the many facets of union structure and understand what barriers are stopping the growth and development of the leadership from within the union of rank and file. The structure of a union can determine fundamentally **who** is sharing the table, **who** gets a plate and **who** gets fed.

Ultimately what is at stake is whether men and those in leadership positions are willing to share the power. An integral role a union can play in building diversity within the union, staff, committees and leadership is allowing the space to nurture and develop leadership that specifically focuses on women and workers of colour. As Hassan Yussuff says, "space occupied by white leadership needs to be vacated. There is going to be resistance and a lot of it, but ultimately this means people giving up their power in unions."

To Become Strong

- We need to critically examine who has not been participating in our unions and why.
- We need to examine how our unions can change the structures of our locals and processes to encourage workers' participation.
- We need to change who we hire as staff and how we train staff.
- We need to support an organizing approach that encourages grassroots participation of the membership and representation from the shop floor or workplace level to the local level and on up.
- We need to ensure that there are structures in place for separate organizing and leadership development of women, workers of color, Aboriginal workers, workers with disabilities and gays and lesbians.
- We need to ensure that significant representation is at all levels of the union.
- We need to ensure the participation of all members in the democratic organization of our unions by sharing the power at every level.

In order to broaden representation and inclusion at all levels of union leadership and work, unions must examine the culture of privileges, perks, hierarchies and euro-centricity which mirror aspects of corporate structures and have no place in organizations fighting for equality. Unions must ensure that aboriginal members and members of colour are represented on committees, delegations and at bargaining tables.

CLC Anti-Racism Task Force Report

EDUCATION AND TRAINING – AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

Women's Work Report

One of the main themes to emerge from the **Women's Work Report**, was the critical role education plays in developing union culture, in reflecting the equality agenda of unions, and in building the organizing ability of members. There was a recognition of the fairly recent developments taken by some unions to develop women activists' educational programs, anti-racism training and other equality awareness courses. At the same time, there was a strong sense of needing a truly integrated approach to education.

This proposed approach to courses would have an integrated analysis of how racism, sexism, homophobia and disability impact on workers whether they be occupational health and safety, arbitration or stewards training courses. In addition, leadership development programs, literacy, translation, and creative methods were put forward to ensure outreach to a diverse union membership.

The following recommendations were made by the **Women's Work Report**:

Action Alert:

Trade unions should develop new courses and revise existing labour education programs to reflect a stronger integration of gender, race, equality and class perspectives. The CLC Women's and Human Rights Department and the CLC Education Department can take a leadership role in this endeavor.

Action Alert:

A component on equality issues should be integrated into all union leadership and staff training programs. Different unions can pool resources and develop some collective actions.

Action Alert:

The education departments of different unions to look at pooling resources together and develop a model of offering labour education programs for both the organized and the unorganized in an ongoing and systematic fashion.

"We've done a lousy job in educating our members. Unions are incestuous. We don't bring in new blood. With limited resources, we're constantly under the gun. There is no money to put into education. Education is the first to go. We're cutting off our nose to spite our face"

President,
Newfoundland and
Labrador Federation of
Labour - Women's
Work: A Report

The Fundamentals

Education and the type of training that is carried out with organized and unorganized labour are part of the foundations for building a feminist model of organizing. The foundation that can be laid for developing women activists, for training young organizers, for allowing the space to open up for leadership-building that focuses on workers of colour --- play a role in opening the doors to rank and file members, non-unionized workers and our community allies.

This discussion paper provides concrete examples of the ways in which different unions, workers' centers and other organizations have utilized education and training to build an involved and active membership, one that supports the leadership of women and immigrant workers and results in a dynamic organizing culture. An essential first step that must be made, however, is the commitment to reach out to those in our union who have never been involved before. These potential activists and leaders who have not been reached by our unions are also the ones who can become more alienated, individualized and afraid.

Empowerment

One of the most important outcomes of any union education and training is that workers leave with a sense of empowerment - that they feel they have the capacity to affect change. Union educators and activists identified this sense of empowerment as critical for women, immigrant workers and other marginalized workers. Education can also provide an important outreach strategy to organized and unorganized workers. It can build a sense of connection in a workplace, within a local or region, in fighting political struggles in the community, between women, aboriginal workers, workers of colour and in the broader labour movement. Whether education and training is used as a tool for empowerment, however, is the issue.

SEWA's Cascading Empowerment

In India where poverty, little social security, child labour, illiteracy, violence, lack of sanitation and water is the norm, the Self Employed Women's Association has grown to be a dynamic grassroots union with over 85% of the staff and leadership rising from the rank and file. Training and education are integral to organizing women, developing their skills and in facilitating their involvement in improving their wages and working conditions.¹⁴

Kalima Rose, a writer who spent 3 years researching SEWA, describes the union's education as a strategy which "focuses on cascading empowerment to women at all levels of the organization: the initially trained women go out with new information and train their sisters, who in turn train their family members, and so on."¹⁵ This training is directly linked to action and organizing which has given the women courage to overcome obstacles and develop a deep commitment to change.

Many of the women who later became union members were first exposed to SEWA through workers' education classes held by union organizers. Extensive research is done in an area to fully understand the types of work, wages, conditions of work and other issues facing women such as lack of childcare, access to clean water and health services. Then, organizers begin to analyze and plan who to target and organize.

The first step is to persuade women to attend education classes. Through these classes, unorganized, low-paid workers learn about legislation that grants them protection, regulations that limit their working time, statutory minimum wages and other rights.¹⁶ The education classes also serve as a meeting place for women to discuss problems, understand and explore their collective strength and to start demanding their rights from their employers. SEWA has used this approach, going from village to village, to organize thousands of women in many sectors. Incorporating an organizing approach to education is an integral part of the empowerment process. SEWA's approach is clearly linked to one of action and building collective strength.

Education Is Organizing - Organizing Is Education

Jan O'Brien, former organizer with the Communication Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) in B.C., also talks about the need to incorporate organizing in all the education that is done.¹⁷ In particular, she developed a training course for shop stewards at the Newspaper Guild to assist the rank and file to take ownership of individual grievances as much as possible. She explained, "there are many grievances that can be used as organizing tools. We have to ask: who else is affected by this grievance? what other actions could help this grievance? and how can we publicize this?" Incorporating an organizing approach in the education and training that is provided to workers helps build the capacity of workers to be a more self-reliant and active union in each workplace.

Another example of how organizing and education go hand in hand is illustrated in how the Casa De La Mujer (Women's House), in Tijuana, Mexico has developed their approach to the self-organizing of mainly women maquila workers.¹⁸ They have developed a new training program to train women workers as organizers. The program takes 10 women and guides them through three stages. The first stage is for the women themselves to go through organizer training led by Casa De La Mujer. In the next phase, each woman who has completed the training, outreaches to 10 women in their workplace. They give these 10 women information during 10 sessions based upon what they have learned. At the end of 30 weeks, Casa De La Mujer has 10 organizers and one hundred women informed and involved with their organization.¹⁹ Through this process, women are not only trained as organizers but get the opportunity to develop their own skills in training their peers as organizers. The program then plays an additional role of continuous outreach and in developing an informed and active group of workers in each factory. This provides the women with support to one another in the workplace and can potentially lay the ground work for union organizing drives.

The Workplace Project in Long Island, New York also uses education and organizing together to organize against exploitation on the job and work towards improving the wages and working conditions for the mainly non-unionized 250,000 Latin American workers. The people that the workers' centre deals with mainly work in the service industry (e.g. day laborers, domestic workers, cleaners, restaurant workers) as well as in factories. The Workplace Project has a Workers Course which is viewed as a tool to build a strong, democratic and participatory membership.²⁰

The Workers Course incorporates both an organizing perspective and a participatory learning approach. For example, in a class on discrimination the course uses drama to develop organizing strategies to keep workers from being fired.²¹ During the health and safety section of the course, instructors put blank pieces of paper all around the room and workers are asked to draw a mural of what is the worst hazard of their job. Women who work in Laundromats draw steam machines, landscapers draw blades and equipment, restaurant workers draw knives.²² The workers learn from each other about the dangers that workers are exposed to and the different types of jobs that people are doing. During the section in the course dealing with a denial of benefits in the workplace, the instructors conduct a mock trial.²³ They bring in people to play the judge and the employer. A worker volunteers to go through the process. Workers then discuss how to improve a worker's testimony, how to answer questions, and how to ask

better questions to the employer. Workers build their own skills, confidence and ability to challenge their employers and then share this knowledge with other workers through these exercises.

The Prairie School for Women, under the leadership of the SFL's President, Barb Byers, has pursued an educational program that is also very much aimed at building the leadership of rank and file women. The program particularly focuses on those women who have never participated in a women-only forum, young women, older women and also those who have not been very active in their own union.²⁴ One of the strengths of the school is that it provides a number of creative ways in which women are able to connect with each other. There is the more formal part of the school which has many workshops and discussion sessions such as "Shop Floor Militancy" but there are also workshops where women can take singing classes, tai chi or self defense. In providing different forums, women are able to explore different aspects of themselves and discover unknown skills. One of the underlying approaches that the school takes which Byers feels is very important is that "the school provides the space to allow women to make mistakes, explore issues and where rank and file women can make their voices heard in a safe environment."²⁵

Irma Mohammed echoes this with her experience organizing the B.C. Summer Institute for Women. She feels that the Summer Institute also helps to break down barriers between women and provides "a space for women to get together, learn skills and find solutions and strategies to take back and strengthen their own work."²⁶

Participatory Process

A critical evaluation of education and training programs must ask who are the instructors and how is the course implemented? Activists expressed the importance of how instructors were trained in delivering the courses. Having instructors that represent the workers that are being trained is also very important. Members need to see themselves reflected in the instructors as well as in the course materials. At the Prairie School, training of instructors is all part of the process of continuing the mentorship of women like apprentices; women are trained as facilitators and deliver workshops with those who already have the experience.

The use of popular education to find creative and alternative ways to have discussions about issues that women face in the workplace and in the community is also a very conscious decision

"Anti-racism education should not become a special interest or special problem. It has to be an integral part of any labour education or curriculum. That is the exploration - the challenge worth taking on. Changing consciousness is what we need to have true solidarity."

CUPE member,
Toronto - Women's
Work: A Report

by the organizers to increase participation. The B.C. Summer Institute also uses a participatory approach in its education program which has included interactive theater and story-telling. Instructors are trained with the perspective that they too will eventually train other women to run the courses as well. The role of instructors is to make sure that workers, especially those that have traditionally been excluded, are listened to. These approaches are used in order to ensure maximum participation, active learning and a forum where women can strategize as well.

The Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) is a Workers Centre based in California dealing with primarily Asian workers in garment, hotels, nursing homes and electronics. Stacy Kono of AIWA, says that popular education "is an approach that can draw out and connect women's stories and experience to an analysis of larger structures of oppression."²⁷ She believes that this educational approach has been very important in trying to tackle the fear which stops many from attending the classes. The classes have also served to build support between workers in an ongoing manner.

Integration

Issues that affect aboriginal workers, women, workers of colour, immigrants, gays and lesbians and workers with disabilities need to be integrated throughout all training and education. So, for example, issues such as health and safety, steward training, collective bargaining must also show how they can impact differently on those who have less power in society. At the same time, there needs to be space given for courses, conferences and workshops to provide for self-organizing amongst women and workers of colour which recognize the priority to strengthen these voices within the labour movement. This is a central priority for both the Women's Work and Anti Racism Task Force Reports.

One of the common mistakes that educational courses fall into is to put all issues affecting women of colour into one workshop and then leaving it for participants to self-select that workshop. Through this lack of integration, women of colour, immigrant women and aboriginal women become even more marginalized. The B.C. Summer Institute's theme this year was "Union Women, Common Struggles, Different Stories." The title reflects the differences between women but also that the struggles can be shared and solidarity can be built. The B.C. Summer Institute ensures that equality issues are integrated in all courses and that representation is integrated in as many panels and workshops as

possible. At the same time, there is also the space provided for caucuses for separate meetings as well.

The CAW Workers of Colour Educational Program and many Worker's Centers have, as a matter of course, built in a component which deals with the history of immigration in relation to Aboriginal peoples. This information on how immigrants and workers of colour have been used historically as cheap labour, scapegoated, and exploited in North America should not be relegated to anti-racism training or human rights courses alone. The integration and understanding how Aboriginal and immigrant communities, especially those of colour, have been treated leads to an understanding of the many issues workers of colour communities are facing now.

It also leads to a better understanding of how employers are able to divide workers in a workplace and how and why communities may be marginalized from mainstream society. It can also demonstrate how the media scapegoats Aboriginal peoples and immigrants when talking about high unemployment, crime and so-called abuse of social services. This builds a more fully integrated analysis for all members which can work to build a more united and revitalized labor movement.

Lack of integration of equality issues also has a large impact on who gets to participate when there are women's conferences, leadership training programs or other union initiatives aimed at building the participation of the rank and file membership. There has to be the commitment from unions to prioritize representative membership participation in attending education and training events. Winnie Ng, from her experience as an educator, talks about the importance of representation and participation of workers of colour: "it is not acceptable to have the presence of one worker of colour in a course to be 'set up' as speaking for all workers of color. We need numbers. We can no longer afford tokenism if we are going to commit ourselves seriously to rebuilding the movement." ²⁸

It is not enough to make sure there is at least one member of color or at least 30% women in a delegation. In making a commitment to change who gets to go, the types of materials, accessibility of language as well as issues of translation and interpretation need to be integrated in the education and courses offered. In order to be fully committed to bring into the labour movement those who have been excluded, the decision making of who gets to participate has to change.

To Educate and Organize

- We need education and training that incorporates an organizing approach.
- Education needs to be used as a tool for empowerment in building worker's capacity to get involved and feel we are agents of change.
- Education and training needs to focus on members developing the skills they need to get involved at all levels of the union and work within the community.
- We need education and training that builds rank and file involvement and leadership.
- Education and training needs to use methods such as popular education, participatory processes, theater, and other creative tools to provide the space for workers to get involved.
- Education and training by unions need to be used as a method in outreaching to non-union workers about rights in the workplace, human rights etc.
- Education and training can be used as a method of building alliances with a variety of constituencies and community partners for common political campaigns or strengthening relationships.
- We need attendance and participation of women, aboriginal workers, workers of colour, workers with disabilities and gays and lesbians to be integrated in all educational courses, training and union activities.
- Instructors must represent women, Aboriginal workers, workers of colour, workers with disabilities, gays and lesbians.
- Issues facing equality seeking groups have to be integrated in all union education and training.

UNIONS BECOMING STRONGER THROUGH ORGANIZING WITH COMMUNITIES

Women's Work Report

Women throughout the consultations across Canada expressed the need for a strong partnership between labour and community. This is crucial in the fight back against social program cuts, fighting the deterioration of working peoples' wages and working conditions and in ultimately building a movement that can challenge the divisive tactics of corporations and government.

The following recommendations were made by the **Women's Work Report**:

Action Alert:

Labour should continue its visible participation in public campaigns to improve the Canadian Labour Code and provincial employment standards legislation, such as the campaign of the Employment Standards Work Group.

Action Alert:

Labour should investigate the possibilities for a cross-country campaign to raise the minimum wage as a key priority of the Action Plan. Such a campaign would be a concrete follow up to the Women's March Against Poverty which called for an increase in the minimum wage to \$7.85 per hour in federal and provincial labour standards

Action Alert:

The labour movement must continue to work in coalitions to fight government attacks on our social programs and to push the debate about what kinds of programs we want and need, about what kind of country we want to build.

Action Alert:

Key women union leaders and activists at all levels should take the message to the shopping malls, to the schools and listen to what young people and women have to say about unions. We can also be creative in using street theater, music and videos about basic labour rights and the importance of organizing.

"We can go some way towards breaking down the perceived split between worker-union members in the workplace and worker union members in the community. In fact many union officials and union members are involved in community groups. If unions have more genuine rank and file activism and involvement these perceived divisions between workers and outside interest would break down."

Annie Delaney,
National Outworkers
Coordinator, Textile,
Clothing and Footwear
Union of Australia.

A More United Movement

Over time a separation has grown between what is called union activism and what is called community activism. This is a false separation. The approach that unions have taken in mainly dealing with members within the workplace and not seeing the connection to the wider community that they live in has been one of the debilitating factors in building a strong, active and diverse membership. The relationship between unions and community-based organizations can be fraught with tensions and miscommunication in decision making, strategy and ultimately control over joint political campaigns and coalition work.

Most often a union's work with community reflects the internal approach unions take to mobilize their own membership. For example, if a union has very little participation of members of colour in providing input and leadership in political campaigns the results will be limited. The campaign will, therefore, become weak in its lack of ability to connect with immigrant communities, workers of colour and First Nations communities. The natural networks and leadership of women and communities of colour that exist within unions and community will not be utilized. This leads to a further alienation within the membership of the union when members are not able to develop a campaign that reflects their own experience outside the workplace. Unorganized workers will have little basis to form a connection to the work of the union.

Democratic Process

A democratic and open process is essential to building campaigns that can lead to strong grass roots fight backs. Such partnerships that are rooted within the workplace and the community work towards building the basis for a more united movement. Annie Delaney, National Coordinator for Outworkers (term used for homeworkers), Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA), has been instrumental in building a large mass-based coalition to support homeworkers' organizing and to challenge retail corporations in the garment industry. Delaney states that "unions need key people in roles who can and are willing to work closely with community groups, be the information givers, meet at the agreed times and work to develop an open and honest working relationship."²⁹ For example, by translating complex labour legislative issues into plain language, Delaney was able to open up the process to gain support from "church leaders, students and other community members who lobbied senators in person and wrote letters which took a firm position on industrial issues."³⁰ Taking the time to plan; being open with groups about asking for

long-or short-term involvement with agreed upon goals; well planned briefings before and after actions as well as constant encouragement to involve new people were also large factors in building the Fair Wear Campaign.³¹

Miriam Edelson, through her experience working in a coalition to save Thistletown Regional Centre for Children in Toronto, also argues that ensuring democratic participation can make all the difference in building an effective campaign. The government's attempt to shut Thistletown down not only jeopardized jobs for the members of OPSEU local 547, it meant havoc for the parents and children who relied on the service and signaled the precarious future for mental health facilities in Ontario.³² Early on in the campaign, the union made the commitment to support the parents and not take over. Edelson says they "photocopied, telephoned, baby-sat and offered organizing advice. The parents ran the show, but we stood right by them."³³ In recognizing the need to involve the constituency that was most affected by the closure and build broader support, OPSEU co-sponsored a community meeting on services for children with disabilities.³⁴ This resulted in a broad, representative coalition based on a set of agreed upon demands. As trade unionists demonstrated in support for the survival of Thistledown and demanded better services for children, parents spoke out in defense of union jobs and continuation of services.³⁵

Coalition work and community campaigns can play an invaluable role in building the skills of union members in outreach, public speaking and working with community groups. In addition, these skills and confidence can help members and communities take on employers collectively. One of the results of the Thistletown campaign was to help build the Local and its leadership as well as links with the many people affected by the proposed closure of Thistletown.

Consistency is Imperative

One danger that unions often fall into is to only contact groups when help is needed. It has to be a two-way street. Ongoing work within communities leads to broader support for organizing drives, increased profile of unions, and more connection with non-unionized workers.

The B.C. Summer Institute for Women, for example, is organized by a tri-partite partnership between the B.C. Federation of Labour, Simon Fraser University and the Canadian Labour Congress. This relationship has led to a commitment that non-unionized women

from different communities are sponsored and able to attend the Summer Institute along with trade union women. The involvement of women from the community builds in the necessary dialogue, discussion and strategy about common struggles but also about differences between women.

The Nova Scotia Federation of Labour Women's Conference this year has also been thinking through how to make connections with women not involved in the labor movements. This year the union women participants have been asked to bring a young woman with them. This can be their daughter, neighbor's daughter, a niece, a friend's child, whoever. Ivy Foye, a Vice-President of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour, says the reasoning behind this approach is to, "expose trade unions to young women, provide information on how unions work, show the younger women what role the older women in their lives play in the labor movement as well as educating the students who are working about what their rights are in the workplace."³⁶ Involving community activists and non-union women in conferences and other union activities broadens the exposure of the labour movement in an ongoing way.

Putting Money Where Organizing Counts

Labour can play a key role in supporting community-based campaigns and work to build a broader fight-back by putting resources behind creative campaigns. One such effort, the "Bad Boss" Hotline Campaign, was initiated by the Employment Standards Work Group (ESWG) which is a network of community-based organizations, immigrant settlement agencies and legal clinics based in Toronto. The ESWG wanted to reach out to unorganized workers so that their voices could be heard in the fight back against the Ontario Ministry of Labor's attack on the Employment Standards Act. A confidential Hotline was set up at a local legal clinic so workers could call in, get help and let people know about their own experience. The ESWG had very little resources to extend the hotline across the province and finance a larger campaign. The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) expanded the "Bad Boss" Hotline province wide. The response was overwhelming: 2,000 calls were logged in the first three weeks that the provincial Hotline was set up.³⁷

The ESWG and the OFL coordinated a province-wide campaign bringing unions and community-based organizations together to get involved in the subsequent government hearings that took place. With the coordinated effort of labour and community organizations, town hall meetings took place in different cities, meetings were held

in immigrant communities and networks built for the fight on the proposed changes. Ultimately there was a joint fightback against the government's attack on the most vulnerable workers.

Initiatives such as the Women's March Against Poverty, jointly organized by the CLC and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), have also aimed to reach women from all communities and sectors. One of the most important parts of the campaign was the organizing in local communities and different regions across the country.

Large groups of women met on a weekly basis in Toronto. Meetings were made up women representing different unions, women with disabilities, immigrant women and women of color, young women and women who had never been involved in organizing with the labour movement or women's movement before. Immigrant women took charge of translating materials, distribution, outreach and organizing their own contingents in the march. Many of these women, given the space to take leadership and have real responsibility in the organizing, were very excited about the possibilities of building a broader movement. They saw themselves reflected in the local organizers who were coordinating the meetings and doing the outreach.

These campaigns can provide access points for women to get involved in issues affecting their own lives but through an organizing approach which brings together a diversity of women. One important task is to ensure from the outset that the voice of those affected are allowed to take leadership and be integral to the process of joint community and labour campaigns. This is an oft-repeated slogan but in reality, when we are under attack, union leadership and staff can take over. This undermines the strength of joint coalition work. The next challenge is to make sure there is follow through and ongoing commitment to build upon the groundwork that is laid during campaigns.

Stronger Together

- We need to break down false barriers between unions and community groups and integrate both in organizing campaigns, education and international solidarity work.
- We need to develop democratic and open processes in the way we work with our community allies.

- We need to ensure rank and file involvement in building the links with their own communities and their union.
- We need to ensure that those that we are trying to outreach to and get involved are allowed to develop leadership and that we work to build the skills of all workers, union and non-union.
- We need to build ongoing work and relationships with our community allies, not just in crisis.
- We need to recognize that learning is a two way street - we have a lot to learn from our community allies.
- The labour movement needs to give resources, take risks and fund creative and joint campaigns with communities.

“There is much discussion about organizing workers of colour and women and unions seem to be going after these workers but there is no discussion regarding the integration. What do you do with these workers once they are in the union?”

Hassan Yussuff, National Human Rights Director, CAW.

STRENGTH THROUGH ORGANIZING

Women’s Work Report

The **Women’s Work Report** outlined a multi-pronged approach for organizing more women, immigrants and women of colour in precarious workplaces. This approach includes finding ways to educate young workers about unions, the need for more women organizers and organizer training and identifying new creative models of organizing to tackle the changes in the labour force and types of work.

The following recommendations were made by the **Women’s Work Report**:

Action Alert:

Encourage personal stories of union members who will speak about their own experiences. Organize more forums, more social events where workers’ cultural performance in the norm rather than an oddity.

Action Alert:

The CLC should consult with heads of unions and solicit their support for the development of an organizing institute as a pilot project.

