

**UNIONS AND LEARNING IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY**

Bruce Spencer (Ed.). (2002). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 180 pages.

During the last three decades the global trade union movement has taken a beating. Weakened by privatization and deregulation, trade unions found themselves out of the loop as corporations discovered workplace learning and realized that they didn't need unions to help create the learning organization.

Spurred on perhaps by the newly emergent anti-globalization movement, workers and their unions are beginning to fight back. Bruce Spencer, who has done yeoman's work to keep Canadian adult educators thinking about how important trade unions are to the building of the just learning society, has gathered sixteen essays by union activists and academics that span the globe. All of them are passionate partisans for the trade union movement, yet the book is painted in sepia tones with splashes of colour dashed here and there.

Spencer opens the text with a lucid introduction to the key concepts of trade union education. Many exciting developments and projects in the global union movement are introduced as Spencer reviews each of the five sections of the book: "Perspectives on Provision," "Learning at the Local Level," "Building the Union," "Current Challenges" and "Future Reflections." Each section contains useful information about what unions are up to, written clearly without too much theoretical overlay. This book contributes well to the problems the international trade union movement is having as it wriggles out of the gloom of the 1980s and 1990s, which I will highlight here.

The beleaguered trade union movement has had to focus attention on the formation of its leadership. While there has been a "paucity of this training" (Nesbit, p. 51), the professionalization of trade union education has proceeded at the expense of both grass-roots education and political action (Stirling Ch. 2; Cooper, Ch. 3). Cooper's case study in Chapter 3 of Ditsela in South Africa illustrates well the way that unions were used as "stepping stones to the corporate world and the government" (p. 45), as the union movement moved from opposition to power in a new climate of free market thinking. As can be seen in the Laurendeau/Martin case study of Quebec's College FTQ-Fonds (Ch.10) and Fernando Lopes's study of Programa Integrar in Brazil (Ch. 11), union educators and theorists now advocate a rigorous intellectual education for today's union leaders. They need, above all, to have a very sophisticated grasp of the trans-national nature of the new unionism (Miller, Ch. 12). This will aid leadership in rising to the challenge of gaining employee representation in multi-national corporations—not an

easy task. The ascendancy of the free market ideology co-exists with an end of politics mentality. We are all individuals now, and the workplace training industry focuses on the skill development of individual workers.

Spencer notes that in order for the union movement to rise from the ashes, it must necessarily accomplish two things: it has to train organizers and organize new constituencies. In our post-Fordist world, corporations are doing all sorts of things to individualize their work force. Thousands of immigrant women work at home in the Canadian textile industry, requiring considerable imagination to organize, and unions haven't organized McDonald's yet. Kent Wong, in Chapter 6, describes an innovative organizing campaign amongst immigrant workers in Los Angeles, a focal point for the U.S. labour movement, where in 1999, 74,000 home health care workers joined the Service Employees International Union. Wong also shows how popular education, very popular indeed in the trade union movement's pedagogical practice (see Gunilla Harnsten and Lars Holmstrand's discussion of "research circles," Ch. 7), developed the campaign for the April 2000 strike of the L.A. Justice for Janitors Campaign. Widenor and Feekin, in Chapter 9, provide us with interesting examples of organizer training in the USA and Australia (the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute and the ACTU's Organizing Works). They highlight the important relation between organizer training and the culture of organizing within unions, and warn that unions had better figure out how to retain organizers over the long haul. A whiff of pessimism lingers around their discussion: are the unions organizing efforts enough to "arrest the decline in union density in either country?" (p. 110)

Keith Forrester (Ch 13) tries to come to grips with a troubling problem for trade unions and their educators in Britain: the paradox of the ascendancy of workplace learning and the decline of trade unions. According to Forrester, workplace learning is clearly the product of post-Fordist companies making knowledge acquisition and constant innovation the "key component of the new workplace" (p.140). This shift to the workplace as a learning site erodes the distinction between trade union as opposed to workplace, education, training and learning activities. But unions have been making an effort to get in on the learning act on their own terms. UNISON, a large British union, has created its own Open College, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation has created the Steel Partnership Training, and several civil service trade unions organized Learning through Life. Each of these initiatives provides significant learning opportunities for its members. Forrester approves of these developments but cautions that "development of partnerships" (p.146) may indicate a "shift in union governance towards more centralized structures (and control) and away from local activism and as a shift towards individual services rather than a collectivist approach" (p.146).

While Spencer holds on to the idea that unions are collective social movements, it seems more the case that trade unions have really been an integral part of the system of money and power, reflecting Michael Newman’s Habermasian-inspired idea (Ch.15). Some unions are doing innovative things and there are excellent examples around of participative methodologies. There just aren’t many examples of trade unions moving against the logic of the marketplace. Ironically, the international trade union movement has not succeeded in placing the themes of the changing nature of work, its increasing lack of availability for huge numbers, and the struggle for workers’ democracy in larger public spheres for citizen deliberation. But Spencer’s book is an attempt to inform this larger public sphere and contribute to a much-needed debate.

Michael Welton  
Mount Saint Vincent University

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