

UNION LEARNING: CANADIAN LABOUR EDUCATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Jeffrey Taylor (2001). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc. 258 pages.

Jeff Taylor's latest book, *Union Learning: Canadian Labour Education in the Twentieth Century* is both accessible and studious, of use to the general audience and the full time labour educator. As a comprehensive study of university- and union-provided education, it methodically explains the philosophy, content, pedagogy and finances of programs big and small. It is also a warts (but not all) foray into the politicking that shaped the product. With workers' education all but ignored as part of adult education, this book is a timely reminder of the debt that the field owes to its progressive past.

The history of Canadian labour education in the twentieth century as portrayed here is cyclical. It begins in 1918 with the non-partisan, activist and consciousness-raising education of the Canadian Workers' Educational Association (WEA) that reached out to unions and universities. The WEA was pushed to the margins following the end of World War Two as business unionism prevailed and unions developed their own courses that emphasized the training of union leaders who could effectively represent workers in collective bargaining. Since the 1990s Taylor sees a return to the broad-based activist education as union-management cooperation erodes and as the re-emergence of workplace training becomes a central component of labour education. So while the middle of the book makes for sad reading, the author attempts to end on this optimistic note. That said, there is a feeling throughout of wasted opportunities and fighting over scraps while the corporations set ever more of the agenda. As an attempt to accurately document seventy years of workers' education, it is inevitable that it does not make happy reading for progressive types, but then it is not intended to be read out at union pep rallies.

With few exceptions, the university and union establishment come across as obstacles to the growth of consciousness-raising, grassroots education. Rather than reacting to this book defensively, progressive elements in the union movement can use it to document how the internal squabbling of workers has contributed to the current reality of workers being virtually powerless to challenge neo-liberal globalization. The case studies are a great resource for labour educators who are open to learn from past mistakes in order to nurture critical reflection and action.

This is primarily a reference book, but could also be used as a textbook in labour studies and adult education classes with the case studies providing ready topics for discussions in graduate courses. Taylor supplies the content

of the labour education programs and insights into the personalities, funding and ideology that decided the content. Although the scope of the study requires the author to restrict the level of detail, it is enough to establish sufficient background for engaging discussions on the merits of various programs and how to more adequately meet the educational needs of workers. For example, St. Francis Xavier University employed the Antigonish Movement's empowering activist pedagogy for highly conservative ends. The use and abuse of media technologies, from the WEA's involvement with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and National Film Board to the current on-line provisions, is another interesting strand that could be explored in courses.

Human Resource Development students will gain at least as much from this book as students of labour education, with the programs and historical context ready springboards for any number of assignments. For example, to what extent were the decisions of the Canadian Labour Congress compromised by their acceptance of government funds from the 1970s to its elimination by 1997? What has been the impact of union education on the evolution of Canadian HRD?

Despite the dry subject matter, Taylor engages the reader with his forays into the minutia. Anarchists will be heartened by the many examples of the corruption of power. Taylor is prepared to take a swipe at all and any he perceives as a barrier to consciousness-raising, bottom-up workers' education. The main targets of his criticism are the conservative union leadership from 1946 to the 1990s, but he also calls to task those who do not agree with his obvious enthusiasm for the role of new technologies in labour education. The reaction of then Canadian Labour Congress President Dennis McDermott to the unionization drive by part-time instructors at the Labour College of Canada in the early 1980s should shock all but the most cynical unionists. Taylor has tried hard to stay above these fights, writing himself out of the incidents, which is wise if he is not to be accused of settling scores and further fanning the flames.

Taylor clearly sympathizes with the Communist unions, but is no party hack. Towards the end of the book he reveals himself as a moderate pragmatist, calling for education that develops union leaders (tools training) and facilitates the emergence of grassroots activism born out of issues-based training. More than anything, Taylor wishes to rebuild the bridges between unions and academia, and goes into great detail in explaining why prickly personalities and the clash between academic freedom and union insistence

on control have resulted in many missed opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration.

As an historical resource, Taylor does a good job of placing educational developments that have occurred since the 1970s in economic, social and political contexts. However, it would have been helpful to have known this background for earlier decades. The subject matter could have been made more engrossing if Taylor had provided a fuller account of his ideal program and the philosophical underpinnings of his approach.

The purpose of *Union Learning* can be gleaned from its concluding sentences: "As a new educational movement takes shape in the Canadian labour movement today, union educators and leaders have seventy years of experience to guide them. There is no reason why the members they serve cannot expect the best possible opportunities for union learning" (p. 250).

Taylor has provided a firm foundation for a new era of Canadian labour education. Now we can see if past lessons have been learned.

Ben Salt

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland, Oregon