



UNION LEARNING

CANADIAN LABOUR EDUCATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

JEFFERY TAYLOR



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THOMPSON EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING, INC.

Toronto

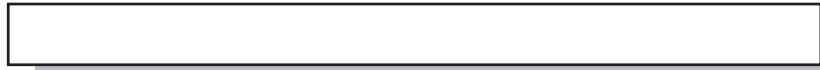


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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth-first century, over one hundred thousand Canadian workers participate annually in educational programmes conducted by their union or the broader labour organizations to which their unions belong. It is estimated that union-based education is the most significant non-vocational education available to working people. Walk into a unionized hotel with conference facilities anywhere in Canada on a Saturday or a Sunday and there's a reasonable chance that you will find labour education on the day's activity board. If you step into one of the workshops taking place in that hotel, or if you visit one of the labour movement's own educational facilities, such as the Canadian Auto Workers' Port Elgin Family Education Centre, you will witness a special type of adult education in which participants are engaged in learning primarily in order to contribute to the greater good of their union and the broader labour movement. Participants in a union education class are there for various reasons. They may be there as a result of having accepted a voluntary position, such as that of shop steward (workplace representative for their union); because of their membership on a union committee; because, as experienced union activists, they seek to deepen their understanding of labour issues, such as labour history or workplace harassment; or because they are learning to be peer instructors who will later teach and/or facilitate their own courses. Furthermore, you will see that the learning taking place in these sessions starts with the experiences of the participants and proceeds, through active interaction, between those experiences and the course material. If you accompanied these people back to their workplaces, you would observe the extent to which their one-to-five days of labour education has deepened their personal understanding of the relevant issues and, more importantly, has contributed to the welfare of their fellow workers.

People involved in labour education—whether they are course participants, course leaders, programme planners or elected union leaders who provide overall programme direction—know little about the history of this crucial area of union practice, however. Those most interested in the subject, such as the members of the Canadian Labour Congress's National Education Advisory Committee, might know bits and pieces of the history as a result of conversations with movement elders such as Larry Wagg, but they would be disappointed if they went searching for a written overview. Furthermore, most Canadians with an interest in adult learning don't know much about labour education, don't care about it, or just ignore it. But in the heyday of liberal adult education in the 1940s and 1950s, labour educators were among the leading adult educators and



most adult educators recognized that labour education was an integral part of the adult education movement of the day. However, in the intervening years, beginning in the 1950s, adult education in general became more professionalized and individualized while labour education continued to keep alive the spirit of socially engaged education that was the dominant feature of the mid-century movement.

This volume seeks to uncover the heritage of Canadian labour education, to provide interested readers with a basic narrative of the subject and to offer an interpretation of its development. Little has been written about this aspect of Canada's history; labour historians have ignored education, while educational historians have ignored labour-related learning. Previous accounts have focused on the experience of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), but other topics, such as the internal development of union education or the origins and growth of post-secondary labour studies programmes, have been left uninvestigated. What follows is a general history of labour education in English Canada from the WEA's founding in 1918 to the turn of the twenty-first century, with an emphasis on the years after 1940.

Given the dearth of literature in this area, this volume cannot offer a comprehensive history. There are gaps, and many topics are given only cursory treatment. Most notably, the focus is on Canada outside of Quebec, although the discussion touches on Quebec to some degree. As with other areas of Canadian history (including the closely related area of adult education), the Quebec experience is sufficiently different to merit a separate treatment. Others, I hope, will pursue further research in the area and expand, enhance and contradict what is written here.

This book is organized as follows: The balance of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of basic concepts in labour education and to a brief historical overview of Canadian workers' education prior to 1918.

Chapters 2 and 3 cover the years from 1918 to 1956, chronicling the rise and decline of the WEA, describing the nature and range of union education prior to the formation of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and illustrating the sporadic involvement of universities in labour education. While labour education was slow to develop during the first twenty years of this period, the growth of new industrial unions and increasing government involvement in industrial relations from the late 1930s onward meant that there was a need for trained union leaders and activists. The WEA initially provided much of this education, but its efforts were eclipsed by the development of internal union programmes beginning in the 1940s.

Chapter 4 traces the development of labour education from 1956 to 1972, including the programmes of individual unions, the CLC system of week-long and weekend schools and the Labour College of Canada. The permanent educational structures established by labour organizations during this period corresponded to a relatively stable period of capitalist development, marked by

economic growth, low unemployment and a firm collective bargaining system in which labour had a legitimate legal standing. Although some links were made between labour organizations and universities, post-secondary educational institutions remained largely aloof from the labour movement until the 1970s.

Chapter 5 chronicles the impact on labour education of certain shifts that occurred during the 1970s and early 1980s. After 1972, governments and employers responded to international economic changes by pursuing policies and practices that eroded workers' incomes and attacked the limited workplace rights that had been won over the previous three decades. In addition, the face of labour changed, as women, public-sector workers and others made their presence felt within the movement. In addition, this chapter surveys the early years of the CLC's Labour Education and Studies Centre, which was financed with an unprecedented federal government grant. This chapter also charts the emergence of labour studies programmes in universities and community colleges, and the uneasy relationship that continued between trade unionists and the academy.

Chapter 6 covers the last fifteen years of the century, during which union educators began to rebuild a labour education movement that placed as much emphasis on organizing and mobilizing workers as on training activists for steward and leadership responsibilities. The scope of labour education also broadened as unions became more directly involved in workplace training. A number of collaborative initiatives with colleges and universities during the 1990s suggested that the historic divide between unions and post-secondary educational institutions might finally be closing.

Basic Concepts

Union education, labour studies, labour education and workers' education are terms that are used in North America to refer to various types of informal, non-formal and formal educational activity among members of the adult working class. The terms are often used interchangeably, leading to some confusion. Union education refers to educational programmes conducted by labour organizations (unions, federations, labour councils, congresses) for their members. Labour studies refers to post-secondary courses and programmes that focus on labour and the working class and includes subjects such as labour history, labour law and the sociology of work. Labour education encompasses union education, labour studies and other non-vocational courses and programmes offered for trade unionists by educational and other social institutions. Finally, the term *workers' education* includes non-vocational education for all workers, whether or not they are union members.

Informal, non-formal and formal education, meanwhile, are different forms of adult education. Informal education is the everyday learning that we all engage in from time to time. In the case of workers' education, for example,



participating in collective bargaining or a strike (either as participant or observer) or simply experiencing a workplace as a waged or salaried worker can result in informal learning if, in the process, one acquires and retains some knowledge about the process or event. Or, alternatively, a group of workers talking about labour or workplace issues in an unstructured fashion is an example of informal workers' education. Narrower forms of adult education are what students of education call non-formal and formal education. The former refers to non-accredited education, such as short courses or lectures offered by various organizations. The structured programmes offered by labour organizations fall into this category as do non-credit labour courses and programmes offered by colleges and universities. The latter, meanwhile, refers to credit programmes offered by accredited educational institutions. Within workers' education, these are accredited labour studies programmes at colleges and universities.

Historically, workers' education encompassed all of the structured or semi-structured non-vocational learning that adult workers undertook. The term originated in the United Kingdom, where it can be traced back to the efforts of reform-spirited employers and professionals (lawyers, medical doctors and clergy, for example) to teach workers basic literacy and numeracy in the early years of industrial capitalism at the turn of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, there was a workers' education movement in the United Kingdom providing liberal, non-vocational education (humanities, social science and cultural subjects) for members of the working class. The leadership of the movement was provided by a mix of employers, professionals and skilled workers who were motivated by the desire to ensure that workers improved their understanding of politics, society and economics. It was hoped that the workers would, as a result, exercise their civic responsibilities in a responsible way (which meant, at least in part, supporting electoral rather than revolutionary politics). The (British) Workers' Educational Association was formed in 1903 to organize the provision of this education through collaboration with universities. Dissidents in the movement, who supported "independent working class" education with a socialist perspective, eventually split from the WEA to form the Plebs League and the National Council of Labour Colleges. These organizations were completely under working-class control and free of employer and professional influence, including university collaboration.¹

The workers' education movement in the United States dates from the Socialist Party's 1906 formation of the Rand School for Social Science in New York. In the spirit of the British Plebs League and the National Council of Labour Colleges, the Rand School was designed to provide workers with a critical liberal education that would equip them with the skills to build a new socialist society. The Rand School also provided educational services for the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America until these unions established their own pioneering educational departments late in the 1910s. By the 1920s there was a flourishing

workers' education movement in the United States, with a network of independent labour colleges operating across the country. The Affiliated Summer Schools of Women Workers in Industry and the Women's Trade Union Educational League attended to the specific educational needs of women workers, the Workers' Education Bureau of America ((WEB; formed in 1921) coordinated union-centred educational activities and a number of university extension services added workers' education to their programmes. All of the participants in the American workers' education movement of the early twentieth century agreed that the purpose of their endeavours was to contribute in some way to social action. University-based educators were closer to the British WEA in arguing that an objective assessment of subjects in the classroom would lead worker-participants to some type of undefined social activity, while those in the labour colleges and the unions maintained that the purpose of workers' education was to contribute to the creation of a new democratic, egalitarian and worker-friendly society.

The term *labor education* began to displace *workers' education* in the United States in the 1930s. In 1929 the American Federation of Labor (AFL) exerted its control over the WEB to ensure that trade union educational endeavours supported collective bargaining rather than attempts to change society. Moreover, the industrial organizing that flowed from the New Deal labour legislation created new mass labour organizations composed of members with no experience or understanding of the labour movement. The leaders, staff and rank-and-file activists in these new unions had to learn how to make their unions work and they had to understand the new legal environment in which they existed. Even though many of the leaders of the new industrial unions—in contrast to the AFL leadership—shared with the older workers' education movement a commitment to creating a new social order, their immediate educational need in the 1930s and 1940s was to get their unions up and running for the benefit of the union memberships. As a result, the dominant emphasis in the education of American workers shifted from a general workers' education to a union-centred labour education by the end of the Second World War.²

Canada had been influenced by the British example earlier in its history and by the American experience beginning in the 1930s. As will be documented in greater detail in the next chapter, the Canadian WEA (formed in 1918) began as a workers' education organization in the British mould and shifted by the 1940s to a hybrid of the British association (continuing the university connection), the American labour colleges and the emerging labour education of the new industrial unions. As the Canadian WEA's influence waned after 1950, education for Canadian workers followed the American pattern and shifted to union-centred education. Canada differed from the American example, however, in the extent to which unions relied on universities and colleges for their union education; Canadian unions were less likely to use the services of post-secondary institutions than were their American counterparts. In both countries, however, labour studies programmes grew from the late 1960s and early 1970s onward.



They were much more prolific south of the border, however, because of the more amiable relations there between the academy and the union hall.

This book is a history of Canadian labour education as understood by these definitions and by this brief history of the concept. While it is more accurate to use the term *workers' education* when writing about the early years of this history (prior to the early 1940s), I use the term *labour education* throughout for the sake of clarity and simplicity. With these definitions and this history in mind, let's look more closely at what labour education is about.

Union education and labour studies, though closely allied, have slightly different purposes that may occasionally conflict. Union education is concerned with educating union members to perform union functions and to support the goals and objectives of the union. The primary objectives of union education, however, may vary depending on the conditions facing the union. A union that is struggling to win collective bargaining rights in a tenuous legal environment—such as a North American industrial union of the 1930s or a black South African union of the 1970s and 1980s—may be most concerned with developing a group of activists committed to organizing workplaces in the face of hostile employers and governments. In these cases, education is mostly informal rather than non-formal, is geared to the basic needs of organizing, and is often linked, at least in a rudimentary way, to broader political questions. For a union that has won the legal right to bargain for a group of workers, and has therefore secured standing as a legitimate social organization in the eyes of the law—such as a North American industrial union of the 1940s or a South African union of the 1990s—the main educational objective is to train enough union activists to allow the union to function effectively in its collective bargaining role. At this point the union begins to establish some form of educational programme, with an emphasis on courses dealing with the various aspects of collective bargaining (shop steward training, bargaining, arbitration, labour law) and with establishing an effective union (parliamentary procedure, union administration, effective union committees). These *tools courses* are supplemented by *issues courses* such as labour history, economics and political action as the union becomes more established.

This distinction, while useful in identifying some important differences between these types of courses, may tend to suggest that mere training is happening in the tools courses while a more substantial education is taking place in the issues courses. In fact, most tools courses—historically and currently—contain significant treatment and discussion of a variety of issues related to the subject matter. Furthermore, the nature of the union will determine the degree to which broader issues are discussed in courses and the nature of those discussions. A union that is concerned only with servicing its membership through effective collective bargaining will focus on the nuts-and-bolts of bargaining and contract administration in all of its courses, while a union that has a broader social vision—perhaps, but not necessarily, related to support for



a political party—will connect workplace issues to broader social, economic and political forces. A communist-led union, for example, might have an educational programme based on Marxist social analysis, while a union with a leadership professing political neutrality might limit its education to the techniques of collective bargaining and union administration, supplemented by some discussion of broader issues based on liberal social science.

All union education, regardless of its political orientation, is characterized by a commitment to the development and furthering of the union's organizational goals and the objectives of the labour movement. These may range from ensuring that collective agreements are negotiated and enforced to supporting the labour movement's wider political and social agenda, which may mean supporting a moderate political party, supporting a revolutionary party or working with other social groups to pursue a common agenda. Whatever the objectives and goals, union activity is determined from the outset by the subordinate position that workers and their unions occupy in workplaces and society. This means that union activity—including union educational activity—is about challenging the dominant power of employers and their supporters on the one hand, and building worker and union capacity on the other.

Within this context, there may be some room for instructors and participants to openly debate questions, but ultimately the educational programme and the course content are determined by the internal political dynamics of the union or other labour organization that is sponsoring the programme. Formally, most unions are democratically controlled, which means that union education is determined ultimately by the policies established by the duly constituted policy-making bodies of the organization. Informally, union education is subject to the rough-and-tumble politics that characterizes the labour movement. A union educator has to keep in mind the various political currents in the union, the immediate political context of a particular course or programme and, most important, the views of the union leadership who determine whether or not the educator has a job. Furthermore, the participants in union education programmes are not simply members of an organization being trained for better organizational effectiveness (though they are partly that), but are workers and union activists (or potential activists) with their own views and experiences. Historical and union context and the course facilitator determine the degree to which these are honoured and incorporated into the courses. As Australian educator Michael Newman has noted, union education consists of three contracts or relationships: one between the union and the educator, one between the union and the participant and one between the educator and the participant.³

Labour studies—labour education conducted in post-secondary educational institutions—differs from union education in that community colleges and universities exist to deliver a range of educational goods to people and, especially in the case of universities, to conduct basic research in the pursuit of knowledge. Furthermore, labour studies in these institutions is committed formally to impartial, open and critical education about labour in society while



union education, in contrast, is explicitly committed to pursuing the specific goals of unions and the more general goals of the labour movement. Community colleges, with a more applied mandate than universities, may offer labour studies programmes because they view the labour movement as one constituency among many that they should serve or because unions are viewed as a potential market for the educational services that they offer. There are in fact two audiences for post-secondary labour studies. One is organized workers, who may enrol as individual students or as a result of a formal arrangement between their labour organization and a university or college. The other is composed of students who are not union members but who enrol in labour studies purely as a result of interest.

Needless to say, conflicts may arise between unions and post-secondary institutions over the purposes of labour education. Canadian unions, in comparison with unions in the United States and the United Kingdom, for example, have made little use of post-secondary institutions to deliver their basic union education, largely because of a desire to ensure that control of the content and delivery remains in union hands. There has been more cooperation with respect to issues-type courses, such as labour history and labour law, which are similar in subject matter to the courses found in university- and college-based labour studies programmes. And many labour studies programmes have advisory committees composed of trade union representatives, who provide input into the nature and scope of the offerings. Regardless of the type of relationship that exists between unions and post-secondary institutions, conflicts arise over issues of control. Labour studies academics are normally committed to the labour movement and its values in a general way, and therefore these conflicts usually do not involve fundamental questions about the legitimacy or place of unions in workplaces and society (whereas in some other post-secondary programmes, such as industrial relations, students are more likely to encounter instructors and course materials that are hostile to trade unionism). Unions may want a particular point of view taught in a course or programme, however, whereas the labour-friendly academic staff may want the freedom to teach the material in an open and critical way without favouring one point of view over another in order to develop the critical capacity of the participants. For example, in teaching about workplace reorganization, the labour studies academic may want to introduce the participants to employer perspectives, the views of unions that are willing to participate with employers in workplace reorganization schemes and the perspective of unions that resist all employer-initiated reorganizations. The advisory committee member from the more militant union may object to one aspect of the course, whereas the advisory committee member from the less militant union may object to another part of the course.⁴

There are other types of non-formal education that are very close to labour education. Left-wing or labour-friendly political parties have historically conducted their own educational programmes that contain elements of labour or workers' education in that they focus on the place of labour and the working class in society. As important as these activities are, they are not labour education

in this definition, although this book contains occasional references to political education of this type. Furthermore, there are a number of institutions that support labour education for a variety of reasons. Governments, for example, may have programmes from time to time to support the educational activities of unions and kindred organizations. Publicly funded broadcasters and film companies may also support labour education, as may voluntary organizations in the field of education, especially adult education. But to reiterate, labour education is education undertaken by labour organizations and educational institutions about labour and the working class, and the most important and substantial part of labour education consists of the efforts of labour organizations to acquaint their members with issues that affect them as trade unionists and workers.

Historical Background to 1918

Informal workers' education has been part of the Canadian labour movement since the first significant stirrings of union organization in the early nineteenth century. Canada's first unions were local, city-based initiatives on the part of skilled and established journeymen craftworkers to protect their particular crafts against changes—such as wage reductions or apprenticeship erosion—that employers were beginning to introduce. These unions were organized around individual crafts. Carpenters, shoemakers and other trades each had their own union and membership was open only to skilled workers of the craft. By the 1830s and 1840s, local unions in a range of trades were a feature of cities and towns across British North America. Some of these early unions—notably the printers—used their collective strength to challenge employers. However, for the most part they served, first, as benefit societies to assist members through difficulties such as illness or unemployment and, second, to defend and extol the glories and traditions of their particular craft. Craftworkers took tremendous pride in their work, which was reflected in the craft banners carried in parades and in the banquets and other celebrations that were held in honour of stonemasons, cabinetmakers and other trades. Union-based education originated in these social activities. As workers spent time with other workers reflecting on their crafts and the value of their work, the idea of workers organizing in pursuit of their interests began to take hold.

The most significant organizations in the early nineteenth century with a mandate to deliver workers' education were the mechanics' institutes, which developed outside of the emerging labour movement. The institutes were born in the United Kingdom during the early years of the Industrial Revolution and were imported to British North America during the 1830s. By 1895 there were 311 institutes in Ontario alone, with others in the Maritimes, Quebec and British Columbia. Though designed to provide skilled workers with scientific and technical background for their crafts, the institutes were founded and administered by employers and professionals who wanted to ensure that workers



accepted rather than resisted the power relationships of the new industrial order. Workers were minority participants in the mechanics' institutes and resisted using them for the purposes intended by their founders. Nonetheless, it appears that some workers made use of the libraries, the course offerings and the lectures for their own purposes, and were critical at times of the employer and professional management of the institutes. By the end of the nineteenth century, the institute movement had subsided and many of the institute buildings became local libraries.

Canadian labour organizations expanded as Canada's industrial revolution took off after 1850, marked by the expansion of factory production and an increase in the number of wage workers. In the process, employers reorganized work in order to control job processes more effectively and to increase their profits. Workers responded to these employer incursions by revitalizing old unions and forming new ones. Older craft organizations, such as printers and carpenters, were joined by new occupations, such as machinists and locomotive engineers. What remained constant across these various unions was the notion that each craft should have its own union to defend its interests. All craftworkers were faced with dramatic changes in their livelihoods as employers attacked the very basis of their crafts by diluting apprenticeship requirements through the recruitment of untrained workers, lowering of wages and undermining the skill requirements for the craft by introducing new technology or by subdividing the work. Besides providing a mechanism to counter these employer offensives, unions offered craftworkers a means to retain a degree of dignity and respectability in an uncertain world. Indeed, craft unions used informal educational methods to cultivate alternative collective values to counter the individualist values that were promoted by employers and their supporters. National and international unions facilitated the exchange of information about craft conditions in various locales. Craftworkers, such as shoemakers in the Knights of St. Crispin, employed people to read or lecture to them while they worked. Some craft unions and trade assemblies (city- or town-based groupings of unions) organized lectures and lending libraries, with one printers' union having a thousand titles in its lending library in the 1860s and 1870s. And the first significant labour newspaper, the *Ontario Workman*, was launched in 1872.⁵

During the 1880s the Canadian working class produced its most significant mobilization of the nineteenth century. The Knights of Labor, born in Philadelphia in 1869, differed from craft unions in that it welcomed into its ranks all workers, regardless of skill, gender or ethnicity. The basic unit of organization was the assembly, and workers could join either a trade assembly (based on a specific craft) or a mixed assembly (including all workers in a given workplace or community). In 1886 there were about two hundred assemblies in Canada and between the 1880s and the 1900s a total of twice that many assemblies were formed in the country. While the earlier history of the labour movement in Canada had been characterized by craft-based organizations meant to defend specific groups of workers, the Knights were a social movement governed by a

central ethos or ideology. They were concerned with protecting and enhancing the nobility of human labour in the face of the growing inequality and poverty that seemed to be features of the new industrial capitalist society. They countered these developments with a workers' vision in which human labour was respected through a system based on democracy and cooperation.

As a social movement the Knights placed particular emphasis on educating workers about the organization and its purposes. Assemblies sponsored guest lecturers and established reading rooms. Furthermore, a network of labour newspapers—with names like *Palladium of Labor*, *Trade Union Advocate*, and *Industrial News*—developed to spread the word about the “labor reform” that the Knights represented. Self-taught working-class “brainworkers” and labour journalists contributed pieces to these publications that criticized the idle rich who benefited from nineteenth-century society at the expense of the toiling masses and proposed how workers could right these wrongs by electing worker representatives to parliament and legislatures.

While the Knights of Labor was a feature of working-class life west of the Maritimes in the 1880s, its Nova Scotia counterpart was the Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA), founded in 1879. Primarily a miners' organization, with some members in other occupations, local PWA miners' branches struggled to retain worker control over coal-mining activity. The organization was also successful in pressuring the provincial government to improve the mine-inspection system, extend the vote to those living in company housing and require the certification of miners. Educationally, the PWA conducted schools for miners seeking competency certificates as managers or engineers. By the early twentieth century the majority of those holding these positions in Nova Scotia mines had received their training at PWA schools and, when a new system of technical education was introduced in 1907, the schools were integrated into it.

While the labour movement grew slowly and incrementally throughout the nineteenth century, the rapid demise of the Knights of Labor in the 1890s convinced many craftworkers that it was foolish to try to represent all workers, regardless of skill, and that they should concentrate on bread-and-butter issues rather than mounting a wide-ranging critique of industrial capitalism. Meanwhile, other workers, especially those in resource industries such as mining, sharpened the Knights' critique into an analysis of the place of workers in the economy and society that focused more closely on the role of the employing class and its control of government.

At the turn of the century Canadian craftworkers were able to take advantage of a new brand of unionism proffered by the AFL, founded in 1886. The AFL employed full-time organizers, including one in Canada, and built trade-based unions to match the power of the new corporate employers. These new organizations featured higher dues than previously, full-time officers and staff representatives, and greater central control over union resources such as strike



funds. Furthermore, the purpose of these unions was to use the workplace power of skilled workers to establish long-term collective bargaining relationships with employers through written, legally binding contracts. Between 1899 and 1903, thousands of Canadian workers joined AFL unions as part of a massive organizing drive, and in 1902, AFL unions expelled from the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC; formed in 1886) all unions and locals that were not affiliated with international AFL craft unions. AFL unionism, while based on a craft exclusivism that ignored the mass of so-called unskilled and semi-skilled workers, did establish labour organizations as a permanent presence in Canadian society. The TLC met annually and provincial federations of labour were formed in Ontario in 1902, in British Columbia in 1910 and in Alberta in 1912. Community based labour councils were the sites of most inter-union activity as local activists met regularly to address a range of issues, including support for strikes and for labour political candidates. And these councils were the most likely venues for education among craft unionists in this period, notably in the form of weekly labour newspapers and through cultural and educational activities held at council-built labour temples. James Simpson, a Toronto labour politician, joined with other trade unionists in 1903 to launch the Labour Educational Association in support of their political activities. The association was then converted into an actual electoral vehicle to contest the 1917 federal election.

While craftworkers responded to the demise of the Knights by building better and more permanent craft unions, non-craftworkers in the resource and other industries where large groups of workers were concentrated embraced industrial unionism. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), formed in 1905, was the most significant industrial union prior to the First World War. The Wobblies, as they were known, believed in organizing all workers for the ultimate goal of toppling capitalism through a general strike and building a new democratic and egalitarian society. They rejected the AFL practice of signing collective agreements, arguing instead that workers always had the right to withdraw their labour. The typical Wobbly was a transient unskilled or semi-skilled worker in a general labouring job, such as construction, logging or farm work. The IWW developed a rich and extensive system of informal education, no doubt as a result of its commitment to a specific ideological position. Its literature was printed in several languages and informal courses in Marxist education were conducted in construction camps and union halls. Furthermore, Wobbly artists were noted for their creative use of cartoons and music to get their point across, often taking popular songs or cartoon strips of the day and changing them to contain a worker-friendly message (or, in their words, “to make more sense”).⁶

At the same time that the Wobblies were using a variety of educational means to build independent working-class consciousness and organization among these groups of workers, Frontier College began its literacy and cultural-uplift work with the same constituency. Formed in 1901 as the Reading Camp Association, Frontier College was an employer and professional initiative to educate

immigrant and working-class labourers in Canadian citizenship. Alfred Fitzpatrick, the college's founder and a proponent of the Protestant "social gospel" attempt to soften the edges of industrial capitalism, represented the compassionate and socially conscious side of Canada's professional class. He had a genuine interest in using education to improve the lot of itinerant workers building Canadian railways and toiling in logging camps. But Fitzpatrick and the other college leaders countered the socialist education provided by groups like the Wobblies with the message that these workers should integrate into Canadian society and accept reforms proposed by social gospellers that would ameliorate the worst features of industrial capitalism. In pursuing its mission, Frontier College established a system of labourer-teachers, who were normally male university students who lived and worked in the camps and conducted classes during available non-work time. The college claimed that as many as 50 percent of the workers in the more stable lumber camps attended classes, with participation falling to between 2 and 10 percent in the railway camps. At the peak of college activity in 1913, seventy-one teachers were working in camps. By 1919, more than six hundred male (and some female) teachers had gone through the Frontier College system.⁷

Outside of formal trade unions, but closer to them than institutions such as Frontier College, socialist parties carried on their own educational activities through informal means similar to those of the IWW. The Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), the most significant socialist group prior to 1911, embraced a Marxist analysis to explain that capitalist exploitation was the source of workers' ills, that the concentration of capitalist ownership was leading inevitably to class polarization and that a socialist future was inevitable. This analysis led SPC leaders to argue that unions were detrimental to the interests of workers in that they helped ameliorate the worst effects of capitalism and hence delayed the inevitable arrival of socialism. Other socialists, who eventually left the SPC in 1911 to form the Social Democratic Party of Canada (SDP), agreed that capitalism was the source of what was wrong with Canadian society, but they argued that reforms—including union activity—were possible without jeopardizing the long-term goal of socialism. Both the SDP and the SPC sponsored lectures, held indoor and outdoor meetings, distributed socialist literature and published party newspapers in a variety of languages.⁸

At the other end of the political spectrum, the Catholic Church began to take an interest in labour matters and the condition of the working class following Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, which held that workers in industrial societies had certain rights and that capital had certain responsibilities towards labour. The church in Quebec used this encyclical to intervene in industrial relations in the province, notably to counter the presumed socialist and materialist influence of the broader North American labour movement. Educationally, from 1900 onward, the archbishop of Montreal hosted an annual labour festival at Notre Dame cathedral so that Catholic workers could hear the Church's views on labour issues. A more systematic system of Catholic workers' education began



in 1908 with the organization of workers' study circles, which by 1911 had become L'Ecole Social Populaire. L'Ecole was eclipsed in 1918 by the birth of the Cercle Leo XIII, another workers' education centre, which established a programme of studies to acquaint workers with the Church's position on contemporary labour problems and to deter Catholics from joining international unions. This and other activity in the first two decades of the twentieth century laid the groundwork for the 1921 founding of the Canadian and Catholic Confederation of Labour.⁹

At the end of the First World War the church in Quebec was beginning to establish some non-formal programmes for educating workers, but there was little comparable activity in English Canada. During the workers' revolt of 1919, there was scattered talk of creating labour colleges, but there is no evidence to suggest that anything developed from these ideas.¹⁰ Rather, between the earliest stirrings of union activity in the early nineteenth century and the latter part of the second decade of the twentieth century, labour education was primarily informal and was conducted as part of wider labour activities, such as meetings, lectures and publications. In some cases, such as in the IWW, unions conducted sporadic short courses on specific topics, but these too were embedded in broader labour cultural activities. Non-working-class adult education institutions such as Frontier College developed more systematic programmes from the turn of the century, but there were no structured activities in unions or activities directed at trade unionists. This would change with the arrival in Canada of the Workers' Educational Association in 1918.



Notes

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6. Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement*, 23, 31-42; Morton, *Working People*, 40, 95-96; Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 111, 127-135, 187-188; Logan, *The History of Trade-Union Organization*, 113; Salvatore Salerno, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).



7. George L. Cook, "Educational Justice for the Campmen: Alfred Fitzpatrick and the Foundation of Frontier College, 1899-1922," in Michael R. Welton, ed., *Knowledge for the People* (Toronto: OISE Press, 1987), 35-51; Bruce Spencer, *The Purpose of Adult Education; A Guide for Students* (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 1998), 31-32, 38.
8. Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement*, 44-45; Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 180-186.
9. Logan, *The History of Trade-Union Organization*, 321-328.
10. "A 'Labour College' Project in Vancouver," in Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *RCMP Security Bulletins: The Early Years, 1919-1929* (St. John's Nfld.: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1994), 126-127.

