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## **New CTC literacy course inspires, challenges**

They were keen. They worked hard and had fun. And they went away inspired to tackle their literacy work back home.

Nine participants from various affiliates, federations of labour, labour councils and local unions were the first to attend the CLC's new course, *Union-based Literacy*. The course was piloted at the CLC Ontario Winter School at Port Elgin from February 6 to 11. Participants travelled from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, the Northwest Territories and various points in Ontario to learn about the union approach to literacy and what a worker-centred program entails.

They explored various topics, including adult learning, changing definitions of literacy, critical literacy, elements of program design, curriculum, programming models, anti-racism, bargaining and joint committees.

It was a challenge to have the content meet the diverse needs of the people in the group. One suggestion for the future was to develop a series of modules that can be mixed and matched for various purposes and time frames.

Participants were enthusiastic about the learning and about working together. Hopefully, the course will be offered in other regions in the future.

Ian Thorn, the Moncton-based Literacy Co-ordinator with the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, was one of the course participants. "The Union-Based Literacy course brought together a group of union literacy activists with a whole lot of varied literacy experience. The three instructors brought us all to a much broader view of what a union approach to literacy is all about. I have a much better sense now of what needs to be involved in setting our goals and figuring out our direction for programming. I came away from the course with greater understanding and new ideas to bring to my literacy work," said Thorn.

First row, left to right:

- Steve Petersen, Northern Territories Federation of Labour, Yellowknife
- Al (Spud) Nicholson, CAW local 1285, Bramalea, Ontario
- Karen Kennedy, Alberta Federation of Labour J CUPW, Edmonton
- Jean Cannon Unda, Toronto (Instructor)

Second row, left to right:

- Par Williamson, Manitoba Federation of Labour, Winnipeg
- Linda Wentzel, Nova Scotia Federation of Labour, Lunenburg N.S.
- Jane Ruttan, CAW local 61. Bracebridge, Ontario
- Ann Curry, Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board, Regina

Third row, left to right:

- Kim Letourneau, Sudbury and District Labour Council, Sudbury, Ontario
- Tamara Levine, Canadian Labour Congress, Ottawa (Instructor)
- Sharon Simon, George Meany Centre, Springland, Maryland, USA (Instructor)
- Ian Thorn, CEP, Moncton, N.E.



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## **Organizing workplace literacy programs to benefit workers**

It seems that literacy is everywhere these days. But far too often, discussions about adult literacy and education are not about helping people become more active citizens so that they can work to eliminate injustice. Instead, worker productivity and the bottom line are the focus, especially when it comes to workplace programs.

But researchers at the Centre for Labour Studies at British Columbia's Simon Fraser University are looking at ways that workplace literacy programs can be developed for the benefit of working people, not the bottom line of their employers. The researchers are involved in a three year research project on Canadian unions and workplace literacy programs funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

The project's aim is to give union literacy practitioners and those involved in collective bargaining a deeper understanding of the ways that workplace literacy programs can be organized for the benefit of workers. Researchers will be travelling to different regions of the country to look at union-sponsored workplace literacy programs and to talk to their organizers and participants. They will examine issues around these programs, such as the types of organizational and administrative structures that work best for workers and their unions, and how partnership arrangements between labour, management, and government affect the way programs are offered.

To find out more about the project or how you can help, please contact: Tom Nesbit at Simon Fraser University, (604) 291-4177, email: [tnesbit@sfu.ca](mailto:tnesbit@sfu.ca) or hart caplan, (604) 268-6591; email: [hcaplan@sfu.ca](mailto:hcaplan@sfu.ca) .

## **A new verse for Solidarity Forever**

**Here's a new verse about literacy to add to "Solidarity Forever":**

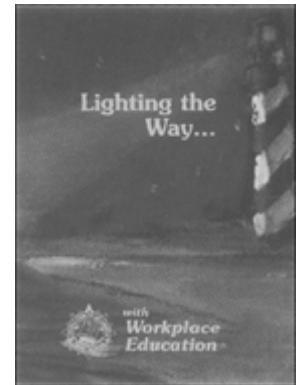
Literacy can divide us when the bosses get their way  
But when the union takes a stand the workers have their say  
We'll forge a new agenda that builds unions day by day  
For learning makes us strong

Les cours d'alpha des employeurs pourraient nous diviser  
Mais si le syndicat s'engage, nous pouvons avancer  
Nous accroissons la force de la collectivité  
Ensemble nous apprenons

## Lighting the way with workplace education

The Nova Scotia Federation of Labour is lighting the way for lasting workplace education in the province. It's all part of the federation's plan to help unions develop learning opportunities that will continue beyond the three years of funding available from the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture for workplace education.

One of the key priorities for the federation's workplace education Co-ordinator, Linda Wentzel, will be to work with unions on strategies to create sustainable worker-centred programs. Other priorities include the promotion of workplace education to unions and labour councils, the development of a training institute for union literacy advocates and project team members and building a support system and network for unions involved in workplace education.



"Sensitivity to Nova Scotian realities and conditions must be present in any programs developed for this region," says federation President Rick Clarke. "Education programs at all levels have been slashed. Workplace education is an opportunity for our members to further their education while becoming more active citizens. The labour movement has so much to gain from our involvement in these efforts."

### Literacy programs affected

Many literacy programs have also suffered because of the cuts. The impact is largely felt in the rural areas, which have higher school drop-out rates than urban areas. The province-wide drop-out rate is 40%. But in some districts, such as Southwest Nova, 49% of people aged 15 and over don't have a high school diploma.

Low educational levels also lead to high unemployment. Again, rural areas that traditionally depend on resource based industries, such as fishing and logging, have been particularly hard hit. Tourism is seen as a replacement for some of these jobs. A lot of the training offered in devastated communities is geared toward this seasonal industry.

"One of our biggest contributions will be labour's support to rebuilding the public education system," said Clarke. We need to work hard to ensure that Nova Scotians have access to quality education, both at the workplace and within the public education system. As we develop adult education for our members, we will have an impact that will benefit all Nova Scotians."

# ESSENTIAL SKILLS ESSENTIAL FOR ORGANIZING FROM WITHIN

The UNITE member attending a recent basic skills conference in Winnipeg pulled no punches. "you know what, I want your job!" she said to Janice Gairey, the union's Education Director. For Gairey, this was a real compliment to the union's work, and one of the most gratifying things she could hear in her job.

"It makes you feel good," she said. "That might never have happened before our unions *Skills for Tomorrow* program. But so many members now are stewards and activists because of their involvement in the program."

The Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees' (UNITE) essential skills program is designed to help members upgrade their skills so that they can be more effective and confident in their changing workplace, in the community and in the home. But it has also led to increasing numbers of members identifying with their union, and becoming more involved in its activities. In a 30,000-member union with a significant proportion of immigrant members, that's a big accomplishment.

"It's the first time so many have understood or felt the union is doing something for them," said Gairey.

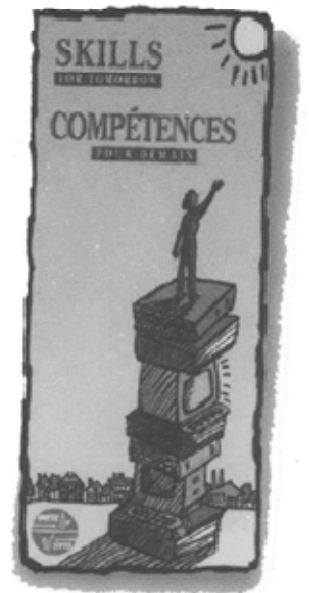
## Membership involvement key

That could have something to do with the union's overall approach to the program. From the start, UNITE saw essential skills training as a way to organize and rebuild from within, and to empower and involve members every step of the way.

The *Skills for Tomorrow* program began as a research project in 1995, the same year that UNITE was created by the merger of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).

The first phase involved a membership survey and needs assessment in all regions. By phase two, members and staff were being trained as regional interns to promote the need for essential skills education and training within the union. These interns met with many locals to discuss how to identify) strategies and resources to provide training to members.

It was also at this stage that the union developed a comprehensive, user-friendly tool kit for education committees. The kit was designed to help locals, joint boards and councils to take ownership of essential skills projects. It is a great resource for the locals.



## Each region distinct

"There was no one model we were trying to promote, and that's why the program has worked," said Gairey. "Each region has moved in the way that it needed to move to best serve the members."

The program is very active in Montréal, Winnipeg, Vancouver and Toronto. The first three cities have learning centres where courses are given. In Vancouver, the union works with colleges and different community agencies to offer courses. UNITE's *Skills for Tomorrow* courses have ranged from math, reading and writing, to computer literacy, sewing, income tax preparation, health and safety, and union membership development.

Montréal opened its learning centre in October 1999, and its experience confirms that of the other regions. Without a doubt, the members need and want essential skills training. During the fall term, 55 UNITE members were learning French or improving their basic skills at the Montréal centre, 67 are participating in the winter term, and there is a waiting list of more than 100.

"Participants are mainly immigrant workers from all over the world," said Gairey. "They are a real rainbow of workers who want to be able to read and write French because it's the language of their workplace, and to know computers because of globalization and technological change. They have to know computers now in order to do their work."

## Transferring skills

The training the union provides to its members is also a way to increase their chances of getting another job if their workplace doses or makes cuts. Plant closures and downsizing hit the union hardest in the 1980's, but they are far from over yet.

"We've lost, and are continuing to lose workplaces," said Gairey. "We tend to have an older immigrant workforce. Older workers and immigrant workers have a double barrier. The members need skills that they can transfer if they lose their jobs."

The *Skills for Tomorrow* program has defied earlier predictions that it would only last as long as the initial grant from the federal government's National Literacy Secretariat. The program is a part of the union now, and nowhere was this more evident than when the union leadership recently identified essential skills training as number one on the union's priority list.

"Most employers invest little in training and when they do, they see it as a way to increase productivity and competitiveness," said the union's Canadian Director, John Alleruzzo. "UNITE has a different view. We want our union values of democracy, equality and social justice to be present in all training. Together, we're taking the first step towards ensuring that training encourages workers to take more control of their lives, individually and collectively."



## **Making a personal connection with the union**

My name is Violeta G. Juayong. I came to Winnipeg from the Philippines on October 8, 1980 as a recruit with Freed & Freed International Ltd. I've been a very loyal employee at this company because if it were not for them, I wouldn't have been able to come to Canada. Although I've been in the union (UNITE) for 14 years, I just recently became more actively involved about a year ago. My old way of thinking about the union was that it just collected dues with little or no benefits in return. I hated going to meetings even though I knew they were important, and I might have attended only once or twice during my first 13 years of membership.

When I heard about Integrated Computer Learning at the Union Centre, I didn't pay any attention to it because I hated going to Union Centre. One day I was attracted to the coloured pamphlets- they were yellow and pink. I grabbed one of them, but I didn't read it till I got home.

It so happened that my daughter Glenda was at home with me because she was late enrolling into a post-secondary school. She was undecided what to take. I told her to enroll in the Learning Centre Computer class to improve her computer skills because I knew she'd taken basic computers in school before. When she read the pamphlet, she urged me to go with her. But I said, "No it's just for you-I'm too old for that." She slowly bugged and eventually dragged me to a go with her. She even told me to sit beside her so that when I don't know what to do or if I'm too ashamed to call the instructor, she could always help me.

So I went with her. During my first day, I really enjoyed working on the computer. Glenda and I enrolled in a 30-hour session, which was long enough to learn and explore the computer.

When you're at the Centre, you feel comfortable and feel as if you're at home and not in school. With the friendliness of Ann Haney, Florence Marquez, Christina Mai and other staff, I quickly adapted to the Centre's environment. It was a relaxing place to hang out.

Then one day, Florence Marquez, our local president, invited me to a meeting. I refused. She insisted that it would just be a one-time meeting. I was the only one from Freed & Freed who went to the classes. At the meeting, we discussed ways to promote the opportunities at the

Learning Experience Centre. We agreed to have an open house so we could recruit other workers to come to the class. Then suddenly they pinpointed me and named my workplace. The first time, I said "No." How could I convince my co-workers to come to the Union Centre when they knew I was against the union too? I paused for a while and then I thought - why not? I wanted to share the benefits that I was getting from the union. I wanted to encourage them to come to class.

Our open house was a success. We recruited two classes. They were the first classes to have perfect attendance. My co-workers are all very happy and thank me for bringing them to the Centre. They have registered for more courses and will be getting their certificates soon.

This is my story of how I became involved in the Centre and in my union. Recently, I attended a four-day conference on Union Based-Literacy that was held here in Winnipeg with my union sister Eva Genido. What a great experience and a great pleasure it was to be chosen as what they call a team leader!

I am now a shop steward. My attitude towards the union has changed. I now see the benefits. Thanks to everyone who made this learning opportunity possible for me and my co-workers.

*- Violeta G. Juayong is a member of UNITE local 459 in Winnipeg.*

## Tools for learning

### New releases from the CLC Learning in Solidarity series:

*Learning for Our Lives: A Union Guide to Worker-Centred Literacy.* Why is literacy a union issue? What's involved in determining and meeting the literacy needs of union members in a worker-centred way? How can union-based literacy strengthen the union? This user-friendly publication provides some answers to these questions and a step-by-step guide on how unions can get involved in literacy.

*Bargaining Basic Skills: What Unions Should Know About Negotiating Worker-Centred Literacy Programs.* If your union wants help on how to negotiate a basic skills program, or how to add a basic skills component to existing training language, this comprehensive handbook is for you.

To order these publications contact: CLC Workplace Literacy Project, 2841 Riverside Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, K1V 8X7; (613) 521-3400; Fax: 521-5480; email: [devine@clc-ctc.ca](mailto:devine@clc-ctc.ca)

## A Reminder

Just before the Workplace Learning Conference 2000 in Dearborn (Detroit) Michigan May 7th to 9th, join us at our 4th annual US / Canada Labour Caucus. ***Building Stronger Unions through "Workplace Learning Programs"*** will take place Friday evening May 5th to Sunday noon May 7th at the Radisson Riverfront Hotel in Windsor, Ontario. Co-sponsored by the CLC, the George Meany Center for Labour Studies and the AFL-CIO Working for America Institute, the labour caucus will be a cross-border, participatory learning exchange on how workplace learning can empower union members individually and collectively. To register (at no charge) or for more information, please contact Sharon Simon at the George Meany Center at (301) 431-6400 or email [sharonsimon@compuserve.com](mailto:sharonsimon@compuserve.com)

## The CLC Literacy Working Group

The CLC Literacy Working Group is composed of affiliates and federation representatives with an interest in union-based literacy and clear language, The Working Group meets twice yearly to share information and resources, learn from our collective experiences and advise the CLC on its Workplace Literacy Project Contact your Literacy Working Group representative for more information about what's going on in your organization.

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