

Learning *together*

Solidarity at work

Volume 3, number 8, Spring 2002

We will miss you, Jean-Claude

Jean-Claude Parrot, CLC Executive Vice-President since 1992, will retire after the CLC convention this June. As the officer responsible for the CLC Workplace Literacy Project since it began in 1996, JC has been a stalwart champion of union-based literacy.

"My involvement with literacy has been one of the most important parts of my work at the CLC."

During the last six years, he has helped put literacy on the unions agenda by speaking at literacy forums across the country, rolling up his sleeves at CUPW's training session for its national literacy reference group and actively participating in the CLC Literacy Working Group.



Jean-Claude Parrot with gift presented by members of the CLC Literacy Working Group.

"My involvement with literacy has been one of the most important parts of my work at the CLC," said JC. "I've seen first-hand how literacy can really change our members' lives, and how the union can become more responsive and inclusive through literacy."

We want to thank JC for his contribution to literacy, and we wish him all the best in his retirement.

Learning Together is published three times a year with financial support from the National Literacy Secretariat. We welcome your articles, event notices and opinion pieces.



Congrès du travail du Canada
Canadian Labour Congress

Literacy = Freedom: CUPW takes up the literacy challenge

Colourful balloons sporting the phrase Clear Language greeted delegates arriving at the Canadian Union of Postal Workers' (CUPW) triennial convention held April 7th to 11th in Ottawa.



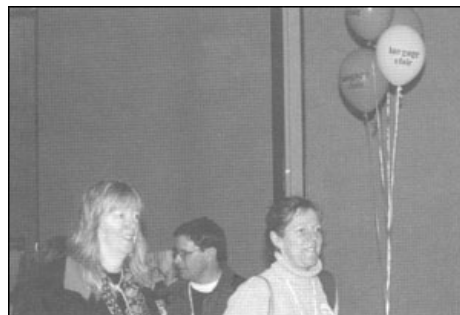
For the first time, a literacy table staffed by two members of the new CUPW Literacy Reference Group offered information and resources. Most delegates stopped by to ask questions or offer encouragement. They snapped up the literacy materials offered, including thousands of **Literacy = Freedom** stickers.

"Literacy is a working class issue," said Denis Lemelin, 2nd national vice president and the officer responsible for the CUPW literacy program. "It's not just about skills building. We are building a family of working people who are teaching and learning from one another. It strengthens our collective interests."

"We are building a family of working people who are teaching and learning from one another. "

Brother Lemelin explained that the postal workers' program would focus not only on traditional concepts of literacy, but also on clear language for the union's communications. "Clear language is a key part of our literacy work. Together, we will be looking at new ways to communicate with our members effectively without sacrificing important technical information. We will start by setting up focus groups in several of our locals to look at how well our communications are reaching our members."

The CUPW literacy program has taken off over the last few months with financial assistance from the National Literacy Secretariat. The national Literacy Reference Group, representing each of CUPW's eight regions as well as the national office, had their first training and planning session in January. Participants have already begun valuable research in their communities, generating information that will help identify new projects.



Karen Kennedy and Diane Lanneville, members of CUPW's Literacy Reference Group, pass by "clear language" balloon display at CUPW convention.

In the coming months, CUPW will be looking at developing pilot projects and bringing clear language issues to the union's leadership and membership. Our challenge will be to make this a collective rather than a "top down" process. We know that unions develop and analyze technical and legal information all the time, and that watering down essential information can have devastating consequences. Everyone needs to be involved in the process so that they feel valued, not threatened. Everyone should have the opportunity to become part of the solution.

Why is literacy a working class issue? When we cannot communicate effectively with one another, we are divided and weak. If literacy is merely about a worker learning to understand an employer's manual or about being trained to work harder and faster, we fail. We have to ask ourselves some tough questions. How many workers do not access their benefit plans because they are intimidated or embarrassed at not being able to understand a form? Can all workers read to their children? How many of us stop to celebrate the diversity of our workplaces? How many workers have an opportunity to share their collective stories with each other?

Literacy is a human rights issue that opens doors to equality and respect. It looks to identify and remove the barriers to inclusion that may not be obvious to those with privilege.

The CUPW program is aimed at developing our members both individually and collectively. It is also about organizational change within the union. As one convention delegate put it: "It is not a question of charity but one of solidarity. Literacy removes walls. Ours will not be a society where workers will be mere bystanders."

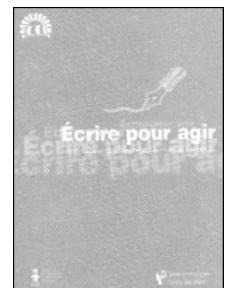
"It is not a question of charity but one of solidarity."

CUPW understands that our literacy program is part of our worker-to-worker organizing. The workplace is a living, bubbling pool of rich and diverse working class histories. As members acquire more skills and the union develops clearer and more accessible materials, our hope is that the entire membership will benefit.

by Dave Bleakney, CUPW

Keep up with your reading...

Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work & Society is a new on-line publication of the Centre for Research on Work and Society at York University. Seeking to bridge the gap between academic research and the research activities of the trade unionists, Just Labour is available at www.justlabour.yorku.ca. Volume 1 (2002) includes the article Learning in Solidarity: a Union Approach to Worker-centred Literacy by Tamara Levine, co-ordinator of the CLC Workplace Literacy Project.



Écrire pour agir: Guide syndical de communications claires et simples, is a parallel French resource to Making it Clear: Clear Language for the Unions Communications. Produced jointly by the CLC and the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ), this handy binder is full of practical suggestions, and contains a clear language workshop to help make union communications more accessible. It is available from both the CLC and the FTQ at \$16 a copy (\$14 for orders of 5 or more copies). To order from the CLC, write to clcliteracy@clc-ctc.ca or phone (613) 521-3400. To order from the FTQ, write to ftq@ftq.qc.ca or call (514) 383-8000

Knowledge Matters: Will the Green Paper Create Fertile Ground for Learning?

In February, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) released *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians*, a discussion or "Green" paper on skills and learning that could reshape the federal government's role in relation to skills training and literacy in Canada.

Unfortunately, the paper does not seem to favour a move away from the current federal policy of putting the cost of training and post-secondary education onto individual students and workers. As well, there seems to be little interest in doing anything about the low level of employer investment in skills training.

Nevertheless, some useful targets for the next decade may be worthy of our support. The discussion paper proposes to:

- double apprenticeship completions to 37,000,
- increase business investment in training per employee by one-third,
- reduce the number of Canadians with low literacy by 25 percent,
- ensure that all students who graduate from high school achieve a level of literacy sufficient to participate in the knowledge-based economy,
- remove the barriers for persons with disabilities, Aboriginal people, visible minorities, and those with low literacy levels,
- ensure that all high school graduates have access to post secondary education,
- recognize prior learning and foreign credentials,
- help immigrants integrate into the labour force with language training, job search assistance, initiatives with employers, and
- reduce the income gap between immigrants and Canadian-born workers with comparable skills and education.

Literacy activists within labour and other sectors have been saying for a long time that we need a publicly supported system for adult basic education in Canada, and that adult learning needs to be entrenched as a right. At the very least, Canadians need access to adult high school programs in all regions of the country.

Canadian employers have a poor track record when it comes to investing in employee training. In 1995, 34 percent of workers in Canada received employer-sponsored training, compared to 55 percent in the United Kingdom and 44 percent in the United States. But the paper does not suggest ways to increase employer investment in training or to provide income support for training through the Employment Insurance (EI) system.

Too often, we've seen adult education cut by governments through the transfer of federal training dollars to the provinces and provincial cut-backs to adult and workplace education programs. The result is a patchwork of literacy programs that vary greatly in quality and accessibility, depending on where we live and work.

It will be important for unions to seize the opportunity for consultation offered by the Skills and Learning agenda. We need to affirm that unions are key players in workplace literacy, and we need to make the case for:

- a public system of adult education,
- measures to ensure that employers pay for workplace education, and
- access to learning for workers through EI.

IAM has clear language goals

Clear language is about learning to communicate effectively, and the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW) is committed to taking a message about clear language to all our members across Canada.

In January, 12 representatives from the IAM Grand Lodge and from local lodges across Canada met in Toronto for a Clear Language workshop led by Tamara Levine of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). The workshop included hands-on training, as well as a strategy session on how and when the IAM could move clear language training out to its members.

Since the workshop, the IAM has developed a training session to be delivered to members by staff reps Mario Clermont (Education), Frank Saptel (Communications), and Gord Falconer (Special Projects). The union hopes clear language skills will help the lodges strengthen the newly-created roles of "Communicator" and "Educator" within the structure of each local and District lodge.

The IAM will begin to offer one-day sessions through the Ontario Provincial Machinist Council (OPCM) in June, 2002. Once the union determines the level of interest and fine-tunes the training, we plan to offer the course through other provincial councils and through the Canadian Machinists Conference (CMC).

by Cord Falconer, IAM

Labour and Literacy: Documenting our Strengths

In partnership with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), the CLC Literacy Working Group has just been awarded \$150,000 for a three-year research project called *Workplace Literacy: Labour Contributions to Principles and Practice*. The aim is to document the important contribution Canadian unions have made to workplace literacy principles and practice.

In the first year, union and student researchers will gather information about the expertise and experiences of unions across Canada in literacy education and advocacy. This includes program development, materials production, and experiences in working with employers, educational institutions, and community groups. In the project's second year, researchers will develop a comprehensive website on worker-centred approaches to literacy, both inside and outside of the labour movement. The website will include tools to help labour educators assess their progress. In the final year, the project will develop and implement a variety of education and training initiatives to support a labour approach to workplace literacy development across Canada.

The project is funded by the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) under a joint program called Valuing Literacy in Canada. It will be co-directed by Tamara Levine of the CLC Literacy Workplace Literacy Project and Nancy Jackson of the Adult Education Program at OISE at the University of Toronto.

BEST programs falter after B.C. slashes HLAA funding

Eilene Gan deeply regrets that the Healthcare Labour Adjustment Agency (HLAA), which has sponsored provincewide Basic Education and Skills Training (BEST) programs since 1995, has itself become a victim of B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell's harsh cuts to healthcare.



(from left to right) Doreen Fraser (assistant co-ordinator / tutor),
Fred Muzin ... (President, HEU, CUPE BC Health Division) and Eilene Gan (co-ordinator /tutor)

The HLAA was set up to allow health care workers dealing with job loss and restructuring the chance to improve their education, skills and training. But thanks to Bill 29, the Health and SOCIAL Services Delivery Improvement Act celebrate BEST graduation at Childrens and Women's Hospital, Vancouver, April, 2002. introduced in January by the provincial Liberals, the HLAA will be closing its doors within a year. It is a critical blow to the Hospital Employees Union (HEU), where close to half its membership is expected to suffer job displacements or layoffs as a result of the bill.

Since 1995, employees at 14 healthcare sites in the province have participated in BEST programs at their work sites, during working hours. Eilene, a graduate of the BEST program, has been a BEST coordinator and tutor with HEU members at Children's and Women's Hospital in Vancouver.

"The BEST curriculum is determined by the participants themselves, they set their own goals," says Eileme. "They read stories and lessons about the jobs they and others do, so the vocabulary is something they are exposed to on a daily basis."

The program appeals to people who, for one reason or another, want to improve their basic literacy skills. Often, they have not had the opportunity to further their education because of work or family commitments. Sometimes, immigrants who have a high level of education in their own language don't have reading and writing skills in English.

Eilene first encountered BEST in 1999. "I was working towards a new job situation after an injury. Someone suggested that I try this program to help me upgrade my skills, so I did," she says. Not long afterward, the BEST coordinator retired and Eilene took over, adding tutoring to her duties.

Now, she says people stop her in the hallway to thank her for encouraging them to participate in BEST, and many of them have gone on to become activists in their local union.

She laments the fact that because the HLAA is being cut, BEST is losing its source of funding. "Programs like BEST are essential if we want to continue to educate our members, to empower them to make informed decisions. The course that wrapped up in April will be the last HLAA-funded BEST course at our workplace," says Eilene. "But our local is kicking around some ideas to start up something similar on our own."

UNITE reaches the hearts of its members

At the gala des *Merites du français* (merits of French gala) in Montreal on March 18th, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) was awarded the coup de coeur prize by the Office de la langue française.



Recognizing that most of its members have serious difficulty filling out forms or following instructions because of their limited skills in French, UNITE decided to take the bull by the horns by offering French as a Second Language courses. Since 1999, hundreds of workers have taken French courses offered by the union, training 420 members in 2001. With recently arrived immigrant women making up 75% of its membership of 10,000, UNITE's initiative is an important aspect of Quebec's francization project.

The awards from the Office de la langue française are designed to highlight successful programs that promote the French language, particularly in workplaces and businesses and with new immigrants.

Mark your calendar...

The Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) will hold its 4th International conference, At the Heart of Communication, September 26th to 29th, 2002 at the Ramada Hotel and Suites in Toronto. The conference will focus on the key role of plain language across disciplines and around the world, For more information, visit: www.plainlanguagenetwork.org.

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