

**Education and Knowledge Production in Workers' Struggles:  
Learning to resist, learning from resistance**  
**Les conflits ouvriers, source d'apprentissage et de création de  
connaissances : apprendre à résister, apprendre de la  
résistance**

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Article abstract

Trade unions and other sites of community-labour organizing such as workers centres are rich, yet contested spaces of education and knowledge production in which both non-formal and informal / incidental forms of learning occur. Putting forward a critique of dominant strands of worker education, the authors ask what spaces exist for social movement knowledge production in these milieus? This article critically discusses the prospects, tensions and challenges for effective worker education practice in trade unions, alongside a discussion of informal learning and knowledge production in migrant and immigrant worker organizing. We consider how worker education practices within trade unions might best be built to support critical thinking, the collective power of working people and cultures of resistance, and the significance of knowledge and learning in community-labour struggles.

## EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN WORKERS' STRUGGLES: LEARNING TO RESIST, LEARNING FROM RESISTANCE<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** Trade unions and other sites of community-labour organizing such as workers centres are rich, yet contested spaces of education and knowledge production in which both non-formal and informal/ incidental forms of learning occur. Putting forward a critique of dominant strands of worker education, the authors ask what spaces exist for social movement knowledge production in these milieus? This article critically discusses the prospects, tensions and challenges for effective worker education practice in trade unions, alongside a discussion of informal learning and knowledge production in migrant and immigrant worker organizing. We consider how worker education practices within trade unions might best be built to support critical thinking, the collective power of working people and cultures of resistance, and the significance of knowledge and learning in community-labour struggles.

### LES CONFLITS OUVRIERS, SOURCE D'APPRENTISSAGE ET DE CRÉATION DE CONNAISSANCES : APPRENDRE À RÉSISTER, APPRENDRE DE LA RÉSISTANCE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Les syndicats et les autres organisations communautaires de travail, telles que les centres pour travailleurs, constituent des bassins riches, quoique contestés, de formation et de production du savoir, au sein desquels des apprentissages informels et fortuits se produisent. Ébauchant une critique des branches dominantes de formation des travailleurs, les auteurs questionnent l'espace donné dans ces milieux à la création de connaissances liées aux mouvements sociaux. Cet article formule une critique des perspectives, des tensions et des défis d'une pratique efficace de formation des travailleurs. En parallèle, celui-ci aborde la production de connaissances et les apprentissages informels dans les organisations de travailleurs migrants et immigrants. Nous examinons de quelle manière les pratiques de formation des travailleurs au sein des organisations syndicales peuvent être mieux développées afin de soutenir la pensée critique, le pouvoir collectif et la culture de résistance des travailleurs, ainsi que l'importance du savoir et de l'apprentissage dans les luttes menées par les organisations communautaires de travail.

Trade unions and other forms of community-labour organizing such as workers centres are rich, yet often contested sites of critical adult education and knowledge production in which both non-formal learning (e.g., union education programs) and informal / incidental learning (in the course of struggle) occurs. This article critically analyzes the prospects, tensions, and challenges for effective worker education practice drawing from experiences in a national Canadian public sector trade union, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and engaging with knowledge produced from migrant and immigrant worker organizing in the work of the Immigrant Workers Centre in Montreal (IWC). In doing so, we attempt to think through some of the challenges to rebuild workers' power from below, in the context of today's climate of austerity and ongoing capitalist crisis, where workers are on the defensive.

Putting forward a critique of dominant strands of worker education, this article asks: what spaces exist for social movement learning and knowledge production in these milieus? How might they be created? Arguing that it is through social movement organizations that working people can develop their capacities to think and act for social change (Camfield, 2011), we contend that creating spaces for collective learning and action are essential to building a strong working class social movement (Bleakney, 2012; Bleakney & Morrill, 2010; Choudry, Hanley, Jordan, Shragge & Stiegman, 2009). Alongside this, we argue for a rethinking of who comprises the working class and where they are located (Choudry & Henaway, 2012), in a context where increasing numbers of workers in Canada – particularly those from racialized communities, with a range of immigration status – live and work in conditions of labour and immigration precarity (Block & Galabuzi, 2011; Galabuzi, 2006; Zaman, 2012), and who currently have no access to union membership. Moreover, as Griff Foley (1999) and Mario Novelli (2010) noted, the incidental learning which takes place in the course of labour organizing, worker-led struggles, strikes, and campaigns is often overlooked and under-theorized. Labour educators, organizers, and other practitioners in a range of worker education milieus often lack the time to document or articulate their practice. Is Sheila Cohen (2006) right to suggest that “what is missing is not outrage, not militancy, but a more analytical and strategic awareness of the class issues and implications raised in struggle, whether everyday or explosive” (p. 177)?

As noted in the editorial for this issue of the *McGill Journal of Education*, labour education and learning is a contested terrain. On the one hand, many trade unions have extensive adult education programs and have adopted approaches which draw from, or at least invoke, Paulo Freire's (1970) work in Brazil, for example, or other traditions of popular education for action to change oppressive conditions and power relations (Boughton, 1997). But on the other, popular education is sometimes misunderstood and underutilized, and may obscure or deny conflict and risk among participants, two essential components

of deeper learning and understanding. If we are to build what David Camfield (2011) called a “new infrastructure of dissent that nurtures workers’ capacity for collective action” (p. 138), we ask what can be learnt from different models of workers’ organizations such as workers centres which are connected to anti-racist and immigration justice struggles in communities which have often been marginalized or tokenized within trade unions? How might worker education practices within trade unions best be built to support critical thinking, the collective power of working people and cultures of resistance?

This paper draws from the authors’ engagements in popular education and organizing contexts in labour and other social movement struggles. One of us (Bleakney) has been national representative for Education for English Canada in the Canadian Union of Postal Workers for the past 17 years, and a postal worker since 1987. The other (Choudry) is a university academic who is a board member of the Immigrant Workers Centre, a community-based workers’ organization in Montreal and who has long been involved in popular education, organizing, and research with a range of social movements, community organizations, trade unions, labour rights organizations, and anti-colonial struggles in the Asia-Pacific and North America. We have collaborated for many years, in many social movement, organizing and education contexts.

#### **THE STATE OF THE UNION(S): LABOUR EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS**

Unionized and non-unionized workers are in a downward decline. From concession bargaining to precarious employment benefits made in the post-World War Two period, workers face an unrelenting neoliberal onslaught. People, resources, and culture are viewed as mere commodities to feed stock markets within a globalized economy and culture of greed generating more social and ecological disasters. The willingness and capacity of trade unionism – or at least dynamic trade unionism – intent on going on the offensive is also shrinking. Between 1981 and 2012, Canada’s unionization rate (the proportion of all employees who are union members) declined from 38% to 30% (Galarneau & Sohn, 2013). Social gains of the past are dismantled at a shocking rate as employers smell blood, as organized labour struggles with a meaningful response that could make a difference. Precarious and insecure employment is becoming more the norm than the exception (Choudry & Henaway, 2012; Cranford, Vosko, & Zukewich, 2003; Lewchuk, deWolff, King & Polanyi, 2006, Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario, 2013).

What role does organized labour play in confronting these challenges within a labour education milieu? Critically reflecting on these practices requires some unpacking. Since workers are hamstrung by a global race to the bottom brought on by free trade and investment agreements, they are left to compete with one another across borders, regions and continents. There is always

some place that the work can be performed cheaper with fewer rights and benefits, leaving organized groups of workers to resist in a defensive position. Further, the historical role of the strike is not as effective as it was in the past. Governments legislate workers back to work in the name of the economy, employers simply lock their doors and move someplace else, or subcontract to non-unionized workers. Unions have not fully adapted to this new reality nor have they effectively addressed the systemic features that created it. Union leaders are locked into legal responsibilities defined by law and collective agreements. Capital is on the warpath and has shifted the terrain while organized labour has not kept up, using the same legal and arbitration processes that now burden them with debt without many results. If this new reality is to be faced effectively dynamic education at the base is required. We must find spaces to talk and explore opportunities for resistance and reshaping society from the ground up.

Jeff Taylor (2001) suggested that union education is “about challenging the dominant power of employers and their supporters on the one hand, and building worker and union capacity on the other” (p. 7). But (for Bleakney) writing from a place of 17 years as a labour educator likely reveals unpleasant truths for some, based on experience, practice and critical reflection. Labour education is not just a preprogrammed transfer of facts regarding our own demise and presented in isolation from a bigger picture. It is not just about building models of “holistic inclusion” but must aim to contribute to the transformation into a new world, embracing other worldviews and those who struggle daily on the frontlines. Labour education today cannot live in Cold War denial of the systemic ravages of materialism and capitalism by fighting battles in disconnected isolation. The system is failing: it is rotten, and labour education must not only name it, but aim to find spaces to strategize against it, making it about more than changing the leader or the party in power but changing the nature of relations between human beings and the earth. Managing the crisis but surviving as best as possible by filing a better grievance or relying on labour law blinds us from seeing what we could be. Such education need not be bound by the paralysis and practices of union boardrooms. Labour education claims a special role beyond the latest communiqué from on high.

Undoubtedly, there will be those in the labour movement unhappy with what they find here. Speaking out in trade unions today is rather akin to speaking out of turn in church. Culturally these organizations can reproduce a certain non-critical worldview and politburo-like tendencies of hierarchy, patriarchy and white privilege. This is the nature of established and staid bureaucracies. It is too easy to blame leaders. Twenty-first century unionism places union leaders in a bind. Members find it easier to blame their union than their employer for changes in working conditions. There is less risk. But unions are not inclusive democracies, although they may claim to be. The leadership

is predominantly white, removed from shop floor struggle, and spends a great deal of time meeting and consulting with employers who are generally going to do what they want anyway in the absence of labour power. Labour conventions are not places of real debate or empowerment. Conversation is directed toward the front table. There is precious little time for debate or break-out groups. Most participants don't have an opportunity to speak: rules of order are used rather more to stifle differences than explore them. Rhetorical outraged drama from leaders permeates the field of labour which invites a culture of self-victimization and lays all blame for the crisis at the feet of conservative politicians and corporations (Bleakney & Morrill, 2010). Deeper systemic questions remain unrevealed and off-limits. How and where we learn and teach, the process, the content, and the spaces where all this takes place requires thoughtful attention. Absence from front-line struggles ensures this ongoing narrow or broken connection between much labour education, union conventions, and dynamic struggle.

Working for unions today leaves little time for critical self-reflection because the labour movement is not structured for that in theory or practice. In many ways the Canadian movement is a product of the Cold War and the Rand formula<sup>2</sup> and a "truce" with capitalism. In the post-war period economic growth and social spending resulted in an apparent rise in living standards. Collective agreements became more lucrative. Today, employers and governments are generally the ones in the driver's seat — they know that and pile on pressure, keeping unions busy chasing paper, consulting and lobbying. Possibilities of honest and radical perspectives, especially among staff, are often muted and rarely encouraged. Most self-regulate. They know which lines cannot be crossed, thus depriving our movement of valuable and transcendent opportunities. Employers like Canada Post have figured out and adapted to the game to benefit their interests, as seemingly (based on recent conversations at the postal union workshop at the 2013 World Social Forum) have other postal administrations around the world. Unions have not. Bosses deliberately violate contracts, forcing unions into expensive legal work only to do it again and again. This is done deliberately to ensure unions spend more time communicating with arbitrators and lawyers rather than having a two-way conversation with members. One of the features of corporate power in these past decades has been the ability to think outside the box and shift public acceptance of corporatism, from privatization to repression. If critical self-reflection is not built in at either the base or central command structure of large trade union organizations, they are left to defensively react to a deliberate onslaught and assault on the union movement.

#### REFOCUSING TO MOVE FORWARD

Struggles are reduced in scope and vision. The rules are set by governments, media and corporate-speak as we play blindly or hopelessly within them. Instead

of aiming to build social power to challenge corporatist hegemony we retreat to superficially liberal notions of atomized struggles. We celebrate identity politics, human rights, and international solidarity as if they are disconnected from the social organization of society becoming mere moral questions of good and bad, and right and wrong. We do this in the absence of recognizing our colonial legacy. Recognizing Indigenous title means more than cheering for some drumming, dancing, and other sacred practices rooted in another worldview. This is not merely entertainment for polite settler audiences. Yet many unions meet again and again on stolen and occupied lands without so much as an acknowledgement. Trade unions tend to view Indigenous Peoples not as distinct and vibrant nations that have been occupied and robbed in our name and without so much as a cursory expression of outrage. Notable in the recent Idle No More uprising were union flags of support at the round dances, from coast to coast. Letters of support, of the “we are with you” variety, were commonplace (after many weeks of actions). Letters without bodies on the ground are typical. This reveals a kind of “white guilt” detached from the systemic and economic factors that benefit from these relationships. We stop short. Class power, or genuine Indigenous sovereignty and the two-row wampum<sup>3</sup> are rarely, if ever, on the agenda for the trade unions. It would be fair to say this critique may sound overly harsh. Fighting for maternity leave, the eight-hour day, workplace health and safety regulation, and dignity are surely worthwhile. Some unions supported Occupy and Idle No More in whatever limited or humble way they could (typically through letters of support and financial donations). Without the unions, things would surely be worse and the benchmark of labour standards even lower. But this remains incomplete. Can we explore the racialized nature of materialism itself or explore other worldviews and ways of relating to the planet? Can we address the seeming ineptitude of our unions? How could focusing on systems rather than merely on leadership carry us forward? How can egos be parked at the door to allow us to have the kind of discussions we all need to have?

Where, then, is the space for critical self-reflection in organized labour? What legacy is to be left for future generations? Where are the connections and learnings drawn from historical and front line struggles of today? Organized labour risks being seen as an irrelevant or out of touch privileged group by youth, students, environmental and other social movements grounded in the present.

Part of this “speaking out of turn” includes the recognition that unions are often places of hierarchy, patriarchy, personality cults, gossip and ego. Ideas are welcomed when bookended in a narrow space of banality. These are cultural union practices unsuitable for these times. This reproduces the helpless and reactive nature of worker organizations in the twenty-first century. Without critical self-reflection, those struggling at the base are locked into a defensive battle rich with rhetoric from their leaders (when they choose to communicate,

it is generally one-way) producing feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and fear. Resistance does not take place without risk but where are these risks to be taken? Where are the places where those at the base can contribute? Speaking out at the local or regional level may ensure that your opportunities for playing a bigger role in the union remain stifled. Bureaucracies, especially privileged ones, are like that. The dynamic and the curious either conform or are weeded out, even if such silencing is not always conscious or deliberately vindictive.

Unpacking these systems and recognizing this requires courage and patience. What spaces are there for labour education to critically challenge ourselves and our organizations? The Canadian Union of Postal Workers negotiated a fund of three cents per person per hours worked which is used for an education program that the union controls. There has been no increase in this amount for almost twenty years. Most labour education is comprised of topics to fit within narrow employer-defined parameters; grievance filing, health and safety and disability advocacy, human rights discourses, and route measurement systems (a kind of Taylorism constantly in speed-up). Human rights courses remain critical of personal biases and behaviours that isolate others based on their class, gender, culture, background, ethnicity and so on. But they risk incorporating a kind of charitable or “can’t we all get along?” notion of inclusion, however necessary, without delving deeper into the economic systems that generate division. So where do we find those spaces? Who are we educating and for what?

Like literacy and numeracy, these things are certainly important to the work relationship and reality of the shop floor but obscure the “world of social context” (Kuehn & Shaker, 2010). Labour education could ask, how, in this milieu, will the “collusions and collisions between spontaneity and organization play out” (Keefer et al., 2013, p. 1). Unions may embrace semi-popular education methods and the work of Freire (1970), but within pre-defined contexts. If some topics remain off-limits, forums to express them are stifled. Spectators, whether at a union convention or in a classroom face the front, not each other and engage in programmed topics of discussion limited to yet another union “campaign” and corresponding “worldview” in managing crisis (Bleakney, 2012). Workers have both the capacity and need to engage in processes of discussion more fulfilling than this but do not receive “permission.” If social change is desired then it requires more than, as one postal worker recently posted on a Facebook discussion forum – a forum that CUPW up to now does not use – “re-arranging deck chairs on the Titanic.” (There is currently no official CUPW Facebook, Twitter or other social media pages. Members are left to create their own and are having cyber-discussions without the filter of the “official” union and corresponding bureaucratic and hierarchical structures.) So where can this need for organization and spontaneity of struggle merge? Can education play a role in this?



Educators make choices. The classroom can become a democratic space, a space where chaos can meet organization. Classroom design, physical space, emotional space, other channels of learning can be opened up that challenge closed practices. How was it, for example, that a few dozen postal workers from small Prairie locals closed a highway to the 2002 G8 Summit in Kananaskis, Alberta, defying the government, police and army? This action, using spokescouncils and grassroots planning would not have happened without the ingredients above (Bleakney & Morrill, 2010). The question is not whether they work, but why they are not used more often.

Many trade unions have become legal entities virtually removed from the day-to-day struggles of unionized and non-unionized working people. The dominant worldview of unions is programmed by their employers. One union president from France recently said “we are paper animals, employers keep us occupied and we fall for the trap while removing ourselves from membership development and resistance” (N. Galepides, personal communication, 28 March 2013). Further, unions often fail, for example, to recognize the role of women’s unpaid and unacknowledged work in nurturing and providing for children, materially, emotionally, and socially as part of the economic paradigm. There are rare exceptions to this. Our gender discussions are often limited within the framework of a patriarchal system – yes, women can be pilots, drive trucks, and be hockey players just like men. Can men be nurturing and co-operate, while not having to speak on every issue? Doesn’t dismantling patriarchy include those things too? Why do we confine ourselves to material relations? How can we conduct our discussions so they are not competitive?

Labour conventions could be a place to launch processes aimed at meaningful short and long term change in an unsustainable economic system. Currently they are typically a staged theatrical performance long on rhetoric and short on debate and especially cooperative discussions (Bleakney, 2012). It is as if we are frozen in the past, reproducing the same methods over and over, sometimes with new words, sometimes not, leaving a disempowered audience of “sheeple” who fall in line lest they be overlooked for the next trip or a weekend in a fine hotel and a meal allowance.

## WAYS FORWARD FOR LABOUR EDUCATION

Where does this leave us? What role can education have in providing permission for participants to deconstruct and disconnect from this privileged reality? The alternative and the reality on the shop floor and community is that austerity and corporate fascism deepens its destructive social and ecological blueprint. Worker victories are becoming fewer and fewer and where they occur is akin to plugging the dike or holding the line.

Vibrant and effective labour education of these times would support, embrace and nurture new spaces where every teacher is a learner, and every learner is

a teacher. It would learn and apply lessons from other worldviews and aim to build systems and relationships of equality and respect among every person, including the disempowered workers we represent. We can ground ourselves in the present moment in the places where we stand, where everyone is “grassroots” and the separation of bureaucrat and community vanishes. This would include the power of assembly, the realization that our collective liberation will not be defined by a narrow set of laws and programmed education processes, but the nurturing and expression of everyone in a safe place of not one answer, but many.

What is labour education for in these times? Is it to maintain a status quo, a legal entity where struggle is a game played by advocates and decided by arbitrators? Is it where human rights are merely those ones defined by law? The classroom must become an insertion point for highlighting new practices and cultures that synthesize this into something more powerful, while representing its parts, all its voices. And where that is not happening in a classroom then it must be designed so that it does. Workplace assemblies are one powerful but overlooked process of teaching and learning in a union environment. More work can be done to shift terrain and seek new contact and entry points for learning that supplement the local union hall. Every moment can be a teachable one. There are other models to consider that encourage self-organizing.

#### **KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND LEARNING IN THE STRUGGLE AT AN IMMIGRANT WORKERS CENTRE**

We turn now to focus on some aspects of the politics of learning and knowledge production in migrant and immigrant workers' struggles in Canada. Montreal's Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC)<sup>4</sup> was set up in 2000 as a community-based workers' organization in the diverse, working-class neighbourhood of Côte-des-Neiges by Filipino-Canadian union and former union organizers along with other activist and academic allies. The IWC engages in individual rights counselling and casework as well as popular education and political campaigns that reflect the general issues facing immigrant and temporary foreign workers—dismissal, problems with employers, and sometimes inadequate representation by their unions. Often issues arise from individual cases and form the basis for campaigns and demands which are expressed collectively. DeFilippis, Fisher and Shrage (2010) argued that for community organizations to be part of a broader longer-term movement for social change, social analysis and political education are vital. They argued that “both contribute to understanding that the specific gains made and the struggles organizations undertake are part of something larger, but so is the broader political economy that structures organizational choices” (p. 177). While perhaps this part of the article sounds a more positive note than the preceding discussion of the limitations and tensions of labour education within a trade union context, we should also emphasize that we are not romanticizing this model of organizing, nor the

knowledge and learning that takes place therein. There are many challenges for workers' centres and migrant and immigrant worker organizing. Indeed, as Jennifer Chun (2012) noted, "the struggles of workers at the margins have the potential to create new horizons of organizational and structural transformation. However, how do we evaluate this potential without exaggerating its broader impact?" (p. 41). While it is outside the scope of this article to answer this question, we are aware of the dangers of false optimism about new modes of labour organizing.

For the IWC, labour education is a priority, targeting organizations in the community and increasing workers' skills and analysis. Workshops on themes such as the history of the labour movement, the Labour Standards Act, and collective organizing processes have been presented in many organizations that work with immigrants as well as at the IWC itself. For example, the "Skills for Change" program teaches basic computer literacy, while incorporating workplace analysis and information on labour rights and supporting individuals in becoming more active in defending those rights in their workplaces. Language classes held at the centre teach workers French through engaging with the labour code. But labour education also happens in the course of outreach – while handing out informational flyers at locations to connect with migrant and immigrant workers, often in precarious work such as that involving temporary labour agencies (Choudry & Henaway, 2013) and in the course of meetings and assemblies of workers. The IWC strives to develop leadership among immigrant workers in order to take action on their own behalf. Support for self-organizing, direct action, coalition-building, and campaigning are used to win gains for workers and to build broader awareness of, and support for, systemic change in relation to their working conditions and, often, immigration status. As an IWC organizer, Mostafa Henaway (2012) wrote, the Centre

tries to build from an organizing model that incorporates radical traditions, going back to basics, focusing on outreach, collective organizing, casework, and education. At times, there are many challenges faced in balancing all of these facets in the organization; but each facet has proven to be critically important to the political work of the centre, such as weekly outreach outside Metro [subway] stations, building relationships with both communities and individual immigrant workers, or attempts to collectivize the casework and individual issues faced by workers, and to respond in a politicized way. The foundation of this organizing has come from these principal organizing methods, in addition to a flexibility in tactics and strategy, due to ever-changing economic conditions in Montreal, and globally. (p.146)

Significantly, organizations such as the IWC, and the workers' struggles that they support can be key sites of informal and non-formal learning and knowledge production for labour justice struggles. This process occurs through workers' struggles and contestation of their conditions and rights and is important in winning gains for workers. A recent study on immigrant workers' struggles in Quebec, which conducted extensive interviews with migrant and immigrant workers noted:

Individuals that did eventually take action always did so with the support of others, who provided information and other resources to help them in a dispute with an employer. These others can be unions, community organizations or co-workers or friends with whom they have informal relationships. "Street smarts" and small victories are shared between people: this in turn encourages others to take action. Such learning most often grows out of pre-existing relations with other individuals, peers or friends. However, organizations play a key role. (Choudry et al. 2009, p. 112)

This study found that learning to question or to resist exists in tension with learning to cope, adapt or "get by" — as indeed it does in workplace industrial relations since the emergence of capitalism.

### **MOBILIZING WORKERS' KNOWLEDGE TO BUILD STRATEGY AND ACTION**

More recently, knowledge produced by workers themselves has been key to building the organizing, strategy and broader campaign work on temporary labour recruitment ("temp") agencies around the IWC and the newly-formed Temporary Agency Workers Association (TAWA, see Choudry & Henaway, 2012, 2013). Besides workers' own experiences of exploitation, they are often well-positioned to be able to shed light on the identities and (mal)practices of the agencies, for example. Such knowledge is shared in the course of outreach to agency workers at various sites, and at meetings of agency workers where they can pool their experiences and discuss the conditions and possibilities for action. This is also key to mapping the sector in Quebec, especially given the "fly-by-night" nature of some unregistered agencies, and informing the direction of campaigns. Another major challenge is the ability to create effective outreach strategies and target sites of companies that contract out agency workers. The ability to effectively learn and understand the geography of the agencies could only happen through contacts in different immigrant communities, and with agency workers, especially through assemblies and organizing meetings. For example, at one meeting, an agency worker working for a food processing company discussed how many of the agencies operate through financial services offices clustered in neighbourhoods with sizeable immigrant communities. Some agencies did not pay workers directly but rather they received their weekly pay from these businesses that service working immigrants. Similarly, in the course of outreach at such locations, through building a wider contact base, agency workers told organizers that to find out which employers use agencies one must go to various metro stations at 6 am where workers are picked up for work. This has helped locate more companies, especially in the agricultural sector that use agency workers.

This process of outreach and organizing meetings has enabled the IWC and the TAWA to begin to map the web of agencies in multiple sectors such as healthcare, food processing, warehouse work, cleaning, and hospitality. Un-

fortunately because there is no organized existing body of knowledge that has systematically mapped the political economy of Montreal's temp agencies (and given the logistical difficulties in doing so — especially for fly-by-night operations), the day-to-day organizing and outreach is a key research resource that allows the TAWA and the IWC to build a clearer picture of the structure of agency work in Montreal. It also enables building a list of abusive and exploitative agencies. Another aspect of mapping the agency industry involves two other forms of coalition building. The first is a collaboration between the IWC and several unions, in order to discuss temp agencies and acquire the knowledge they have from organizing workplaces with agencies, or share resources on broader issues of precarious work which the unions are currently engaged to put forth a series of demands around temp agencies in Quebec. The second initiative has been to try to transform and build upon the knowledge presented by workers to create a coherent critical narrative by forming an agency research committee in collaboration with engaged academics informed by the experiences of the organizers. This is a more critical and organic attempt to facilitate research combining the real experiences and knowledge of workers / organizers with the tools and resources available to academics to develop research that is relevant to organizing / campaigns.

New organizing strategies also emerge from agency workers' knowledge. One issue that the TAWA has taken up is that of holiday pay. This demand is a strategic way to ensure a living wage, without going after the employer directly. In Quebec, all workers are entitled to statutory holiday pay for holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. But agency workers are usually left out of this scheme and do not receive this pay. An agency worker originally from Colombia suggested that if the fight is for agency workers to have equal rights with other workers, they should be entitled to holiday pay. So he put forward a strategy to fight for this by posting complaints and educating workers about what they are entitled to. In turn, the TAWA has produced flyers and framed outreach based on the workers' strategic demands, and their knowledge about effective locations and times to communicate with other agency workers.

Further demands came from workers and reflected a shift in strategy and the political demands itself. In 2013, in an open letter to Quebec's Minister of Labour, a group of agency workers demanded the right to be made permanent after three months of work at the same workplace, arguing that merely making agencies and client-companies co-responsible for working conditions was not enough. This was critical because agency workers themselves are directly articulating proposals about creating a healthy labour market and workplace conditions.

Examples of struggles to change the economic and social conditions of migrant and immigrant workers, including low wage temp agency workers in Montreal highlight the importance of engaging workers in collective self-organization.

Such strategies break from orthodox post-war trade union organizing traditions and create community responses to labour problems. The IWC's support for building a worker-led campaign and organization to change the structural issues of agency work has meant the creation of the TAWA that can address the different type of agency workers coming from a wide variety of experiences and ethnicities. It grapples with challenges faced by mainly newer immigrants and migrant workers in more exploitative conditions, contending with both labour problems and the regularization of status. Alongside this are workers in factories and manufacturing who mainly seek temporary work in the hope of improving their skills and education. This organizing approach allows the IWC to build a more comprehensive organizing strategy, and a sense of solidarity across communities, immigration status, and other experiences. Leadership development and education are central to the organizing model through labour rights workshops, media training, and by supporting workers to take leadership roles. It is a hybrid model — firstly, building an organization or association that can have a broad membership, secondly, dealing with policy issues at the provincial level, and thirdly working to resolve individual grievances with agencies and employers around wage theft, health and safety, and other violations.

In thinking through the forms of significant learning taking place in these struggles, we are appreciative of Church, Shragge, Fontan and Ng's (2008) notion of solidarity learning, Foley's (1999) "learning in social action" and attention to the significance of incidental and informal learning, Mojab's (2012) work on critical adult education and imperialism, and Holst's (2002) pedagogy of mobilization. For Church et al, solidarity learning happens not according to an explicit curriculum but spontaneously and unpredictably through social interaction in situations that foster people's participation. In coining the term "pedagogy of mobilization," Holst writes that "there is much educational work internal to social movements, in which organizational skills, ideology, and lifestyle choices are passed from one member to the next informally through mentoring and modelling or formally through workshops, seminars, lectures, and so forth" (p. 81). Drawing upon Freire, Foley, and Hay (1995), in discussing the role of education and strategic learning in a successful anti-privatization campaign by a union in Colombia and its supporters, Novelli's (2010) thoughts are perhaps particularly salient to thinking through the learning and knowledge production we discuss in this paper, but especially in regard to the IWC: He contended that

"popular education" needs to be seen as not only involving formal educational events, but is part of much bigger processes which, though appearing "informal" and "arbitrary," are very deliberate. In this definition, both the "popular education" events that take place, and the actual practice of "strategy development" and "protest actions" can be seen as examples of popular education whereby the "school" (the social movement) learns. (p.124)

Workers' centres like the IWC and new groups of workers like the TAWA are testing grounds for alternative approaches or models of collective labour organization, and in a sense, are grounded attempts to work through some of the issues, debates and tensions around the shifting centres and margins of labour market regulation and workers' struggles in Canada today. For example, as the expansion of agency work enhances employers' ability to create a sense of fear, austerity, and denial of decent work with job security in order to generate profits, such organizing work amongst a changing working class and their daily issues arising from precarious work is a key way to highlight local impacts of globalization and as critical as fighting for public services and against privatization and outsourcing. There are challenges for political coordination for organizing precarious workers across cities in Canada. This kind of precarious worker organizing is a relatively new phenomenon in Canada, by comparison to more established networks in the USA. Organizers are beginning to facilitate a conversation that could allow organizing experiences to be a way of building more effective campaigns and synergies, yet due to the relative young nature of this organizing it will take some time and resources to achieve this. The need for coordination will be crucial between the mainstream labour movement / trade unions, community-based labour organizations, and other community organizations to build a broader movement against the agencies and workplaces that exist transnationally and within Canada.

#### ON THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND LEARNING IN MIGRANT AND IMMIGRANT WORKER ORGANIZING

Sometimes, as Robyn Rodriguez (2010) noted, such knowledge emerging from the daily experiences of workers contests not only the power (and knowledge) produced by governments, but also that of professionalized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which purport to speak on behalf of migrant workers. But building alliances with trade unions, through education and supporting internal debates occurring within organized labour to encourage unions to more meaningfully represent the needs and concerns of immigrant and migrant workers is an important aspect of these local and global struggles for justice. As Biju Mathew (2005) and others noted, migrant and immigrant workers can and do bring their own histories of struggle and organizing strategies from their countries of origin to the new countries in which they labour. For those located in universities and engaged in research on migrant and immigrant workers, this work requires some careful reflection and political commitment. Commenting on the role of a growing number of NGOs and think-tanks which purport to represent migrant workers' interests at national and international levels, yet exclude workers themselves, Rodriguez (2010) argued that it is vital to pay attention to the knowledge production of those excluded from official venues and who cannot participate in the circuits, virtual and otherwise, frequented by others in the "global justice movement." She said that in order

to be able to document the kinds of struggles engaged in by migrant worker activists...requires some level of political investment on our part as scholars, for it is in spaces outside of the seats of power, like the space of the street, where migrants can come together not only to narrate their experiences, but also to articulate radical alternatives to the contemporary global order. (p. 67)

Rahila Gupta (2004) of Southall Black Sisters, a long-established British Asian and African-Caribbean community organization in London noted, it is not easy for activists “to sit down and record their work, but in this age of information overload you need to record in order almost to prove that you exist” (p. 3). Indeed – and for engaged labour scholars working on immigration and labour issues, as well as organizers on the frontlines of struggles for social justice, the analyses and knowledge produced in the course of such struggles can be seen as not only important intellectual contributions, but as rich conceptual resources for understanding and challenging the continued exploitation and commodification of migrant workers and immigrants, locally and internationally. They are intrinsic to revitalizing and refocusing labour education in trade unions and community-based forms of labour organizing.

## CONCLUSION

The labour movement in Canada – and here, we include both trade unions as well as workers' centres and organizing that takes place at the margins, as these margins themselves move to the centre with the spreading precarity of work – faces serious challenges, as does labour education. At the same time, as Camfield (2011) pointed out, it is through movement organizations that working people can develop their capacities to think and act for social change. Building, maintaining and democratizing collective spaces where workers can struggle, learn and act together has never been more urgent.

For unions, the cross-pollination of ideas and actions from social movements and community organizing traditions not specifically rooted in unions can be important spaces of exchange, learning and the building up of social knowledge production and constructing alliances across societies and borders. This requires taking risks, and classrooms or other learning situations where participants have a real voice. Workers' centres like IWC highlight the limitations and possibilities of community-based labour organizing in Canada. Yet, though under-resourced and limited in their capacity to address the widespread and urgent needs faced by large numbers of migrant and immigrant workers, such centres are important in helping to transform understandings of who and where the working class is located and who and how trade unions could organize.

The MJE Forum aims to open conversations and exchanges about topics related to education: here, specifically we invite responses from readers who may wish to share their accounts of learning and knowledge production in labour education / organizing settings, and / or to engage with the critiques we put forward.



## NOTES

1. Adapted from a paper presented by the authors for a panel on unions, community organizing and anti-austerity strategy at the United Association for Labor Education Conference in Toronto, 18 April 2013.
2. Devised by Justice Ivan Rand in 1946 in answer to ongoing workplace disruptions that employers could not control (see *Ford Motor Company of Canada Ltd. v. International Union United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America*, 1946). This led to the “dues check-off” where union dues are deducted automatically and sent to the union. Previously the union collected dues by having direct personal contact with workers. The Rand formula removed that necessity and direct contact.
3. This refers to the Two Row Wampum belt on which the first peace and friendship treaty between representatives of the Haudenosaunee and Dutch government was originally recorded in 1613.
4. See <http://iwc-cti.org>

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