

Education vs. Propaganda

By Elaine Bernard

MOST LABOUR EDUCATION, AND CERTAINLY the best of it, is advocacy. Many educators, however, shudder at the notion of advocacy, arguing that good education should be ideologically neutral. But there is no such thing as neutral education. Despite the fact that business schools see themselves as "neutrals," for example, they are unapologetic advocates of capitalism. I cannot think of a single business school which gives equal time for non-profit enterprise — or even public enterprise — or balances all of their management philosophy with a perspective which explains workers' rights. So, first, let's get a grip on ourselves and admit that we're advocates for democracy in the workplace, and for a just and equitable society.

As labour educators, we advocate economic and social justice as well as equality. Just to raise the notion that we should take a neutral stance on issues related to democratic rights, racial equality, or dignity and justice is sufficient to demonstrate the absurdity of adopting a neutral stance in labour education. Union education is about promoting democratic values and workers' sense of entitlement as members of our democratic society.

Meanwhile, popular education is increasingly being embraced by our labour movements. We need to understand, however, that popular education is more than a compendium of games, exercises and stimulating forms of delivering a pre-packaged message. The real power of popular education is not its form, but its content: critical thinking and empowerment. And here we confront the crux of the problem. Do we really want critical education in our labour education?

Of course we want workers to think critically about the boss, capitalism, and the economy. But what happens when these same workers apply the tools they have learned to their own organizations — our unions, our leadership, and our actions or practices? This stuff can land a labour educator in hot water!

Popular education begins with people's own experience. It gives them the tools they need to analyse their situation and begin to take action to transform themselves and their conditions. For labour educators, popular education helps us generate an assertive, critical-thinking, united workforce which can participate actively in unions — unions being the vital organizations workers need to forge a community of interest amongst themselves at work, and for fighting for workers' rights and justice in the broader society.

But to achieve this, labour educators need to unleash the full power of popular education. We cannot simply limit ourselves to promoting the form, without the critical — including self-

critical — content. That is, we need to understand the difference between education and propaganda.

Clever propaganda gives people analytical tools to be used on opponents, while it simultaneously reinforces a myth about our own virtues. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman have written about the "propaganda model" as it applies to the U.S. media. They show how U.S. commentators focus on the transgressions of foreign enemies while they justify or ignore similar behaviour when it is carried out by the U.S. government, or its friends and allies. The clever propagandist doesn't tell outright lies. These are relatively easy to disprove. Instead, they provide half-truths in the knowledge that a considerable part of the distortion will stick.

Understanding the difference between popular education and propaganda is vital in the field of labour education. In labour education, propaganda is about teaching what I would call "the line." This involves treating union members as empty heads needing to be filled with the proper view of the world, or manipulated to see things "our way." This approach to labour education is insulting to workers' intelligence. It is fundamentally at odds with genuine popular education. And in the long run, it is counter-productive as a strategy for developing a powerful, critically thinking, socially engaged labour movement. Popular education is about transformation and, like any type of genuine, critical education, it will shake things up, often in unintended ways.

Developing a critical culture within the labour movement — one that is more open to free-ranging debates and the discussion of controversial internal issues — is essential to the growth and strengthening of organized labour. And education, especially popular education, has a crucial role to play in this resurgence.

American labour historian Staughton Lynd recently published a book called *We Are All Leaders*, describing the growth of the CIO and its role in the labour battles of the 1930s. As Lynd explains, much of the CIO's strength came from the extraordinary resiliency of its rank and file activists, who insisted upon their inalienable right to participate in the key decisions of their unions.

A movement in which "we are all leaders" will be tough to coordinate, but recent developments indicate that it would be even tougher to try to stop it from developing! In short, the labour movements in North America are exciting today largely because we are beginning to embrace the fundamentals of popular education — its content along with its form.

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