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Ryerson's Union Fair: Introducing Students to the Labour Movement

Myer Siemiatycki

LABOUR EDUCATION has made an exciting breakthrough at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto. For the past two years Ryerson and the labour movement have cooperated to mount an annual Union Fair designed to familiarize students with the role, concerns, and achievements of unions. In view of the event's overwhelming success, readers may wish to consider holding a Union Fair on their own campus.

Business and industry have long had their own special relationship with post-secondary educational institutions in Canada. Employers are a major presence and influence on most campuses. By contrast, the labour movement's input at most schools has either been ignored or marginalized. Ryerson's Union Fair is one way of enhancing organized labour's profile and legitimacy on campus.

Ryerson Polytechnical Institute is in the forefront of career-oriented education in Canada. The school offers degree level programs to some 10,000 full-time students enrolled in a wide range of fields spanning industry, business, the arts, media, health, community, and public services. Many of our graduates become union members when they pursue their careers; others manage in unionized settings. Ryerson's students, faculty, administration, and staff have actively supported the Union Fair as a unique opportunity for students to learn about the labour movement — from experienced union activists themselves.

So what exactly happens at the Ryerson Union Fair? We hold the day-long Fair in mid-March and last year's event promoted an awareness of the labour movement through three different types of activities.

First, over two dozen unions set up displays and information tables reflect-

ing their organization's role at the workplace and in the community. Tables were decked out with union banners, periodicals, policy statements, and other handouts. Many unions also brought videos and photo displays to illustrate their activities and achievements. Several thousand students visited the tables throughout the day to collect material and to speak informally with union representatives staffing the tables. The diversity of Ryerson's educational offerings was reflected in the range of unions present — including ACTRA, the Newspaper Guild, the Toronto Typographical Union, the Canadian Auto Workers Union, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the Communications Workers of Canada, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, the Ontario Nurses Association, CUPE, PSAC, and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union. In addition the Metro Toronto Labour Council, the Ontario Federation of Labour, and the Canadian Labour Congress also participated. As one Ryerson student observed in a written evaluation of the Fair, it all amounted to "a showplace for unions in one location."

The second feature of the Union Fair was a speaker series. Topics discussed included issues likely to confront our graduates in the workplace as well as broader challenges facing the labour movement today. These proved very popular with hundreds of students coming out to hear presentations on issues such as technological change, pay equity, occupational health and safety, unionizing the professions, free trade, unions against apartheid, labour and the media.

Finally the Union Fair also included a variety of cultural events. Arlene Mantle performed a concert of songs about work and social change from her album *Class Act*. Several noted film-makers screened and discussed labour films: Laura Sky (*Moving Mountains* and *Good Monday Morning*), Sturla Gunnarsson (*Final Offer*), and Ryerson graduates Mary Jane Gomes and Emil Kolompar (*Downside Adjustment*). The Union Fair also sponsored an "Images of Labour" photo contest for Ryerson students. Top prize went to a superb photo of a recent garment workers strike in Toronto; runner-up was a very fine picture of workers on an auto plant assembly line.

Ryerson's Union Fair has proven to be a great success, enthusiastically supported by students and the labour movement alike. In their written surveys, over 90 per cent of students rated the event highly. They described the union representatives and speakers as very knowledgeable and they appreciated the wealth of written material available. Many students left the Fair with a far more informed and sympathetic understanding of the labour movement. Here are some of the things students told us they learned:

There is strength in numbers and unions are a very necessary thing. I've never actually heard anyone speak about unions before. They strive for equality and fairness.

I found out a lot about what's going on that I had no idea was happening — this shocked me.

The role that unions play in relation to women's rights.

Drawing on our experience, several ingredients to a successful Union Fair stand out. Support from both the educational institution and the labour movement are obvious pre-requisites. In our case both have been enthusiastically committed to the project.

On-campus promotion of the event is extraordinarily important. While little encouragement may be needed to assure student attendance at on-campus career days or employer recruitment sessions, considerably more groundwork is necessary for a Union Fair. Few students — even in the most highly unionized field — recognize that there is a union in their future. We have devoted considerable effort to producing promotional brochures and posters which are attuned to a student audience, and explain the connection between unions and their area of study.

For each of our Fairs we have taken a popular theme of youth culture and associated it with the role of the labour movement. The unifying theme of this year's Fair was "Stand By Me — Unions At Work". Previously we borrowed from the Talking Heads to come up with "And You May Ask Yourself . . . Will My Future Work?" In both cases the creative talents of labour illustrator Joss MacLennan turned these phrases into powerful, evocative images. With this promotional material in hand, generating student and faculty interest became considerably easier.

Thanks to the initiative of one participating union we discovered that Ryerson students are very interested in a subject frequently discussed in these pages — the work process. The International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees brought film cameras, stage lighting, and related equipment to their display area to demonstrate their members' craft. Students were keen to learn how everything worked, and next year we will encourage more unions at the Fair to demonstrate "all that our hands have done."

Finally we've been pleasantly surprised by the amount of media interest the Union Fair has generated. The event has received very favourable coverage on the CBC National News, the *Globe and Mail* as well as other local media. For its part the labour press has also given the event prominent coverage.

In sum, this event has proven to be a very effective way of introducing students to the labour movement. Ryerson's Union Fair has been good for Ryerson and good for the union movement. Everything a Fair should be.

