

Labour Education in Canada: A SoliNet Conference

Bruce Spencer and Jeff Taylor

Volume 34, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt34dc01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Spencer, B. & Taylor, J. (1994). Labour Education in Canada: A SoliNet Conference. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 34, 217–237.

Labour Education in Canada: A SoliNet Conference

Bruce Spencer and Jeff Taylor

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY is an open, distance university located in Athabasca, Alberta. Its mandate is to break down barriers that traditionally restrict access to university-level education. This mandate is interpreted broadly to include constraints of time, space, educational background, and social position. In the latter case, the university offers innovative programmes in the areas of women's studies, native studies, and labour studies.

Athabasca University's Labour Studies programme is one of a small number of similar programmes in Canada. It is unique in a couple of ways. For one thing, like all of Athabasca's programmes it is available entirely through distance education, making it the only distance education labour studies programme in the world to our knowledge. It is also unique in that the programme has a mandate to provide education to its adult constituency, which in the first instance is the Albertan and Canadian labour movements. One of the ways this mandate is achieved is to collaborate with organizations, services, and educators in the labour movement.

In one such collaboration Athabasca University is cooperating with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Solidarity Network (SoliNet). CUPE is Canada's largest union, with over 400,000 members in 2200 locals scattered across the country. It represents public sector workers in hospitals, schools, municipalities, and other such workplaces. SoliNet is an electronic mail and computer conferencing system owned and operated by CUPE since 1987, and made available to the Canadian labour movement generally. It links over 1000 users from across the country, as well as some subscribers from the USA and other countries, providing a vital information medium that is unconstrained by time and physical space.

It is apparent both to CUPE and to Athabasca University that collaboration is mutually beneficial. It is in CUPE's interest to expand its educational offerings on SoliNet. Indeed, one of SoliNet's educational ideals always has been to offer an on-line university labour programme. Similarly, the Athabasca University Labour

Bruce Spencer and Jeff Taylor, "Labour Education in Canada: A SoliNet Conference," *Labour/Le Travail*, 34 (Fall 1994), 217-37.

Studies programme is able to fulfill its mandate in a new and exciting way by adapting its offerings for electronic delivery on a union-based network. The labour studies programme is able to provide an alternative method of course delivery to its core constituency and, in the process, raise its national profile.

The first instance of Athabasca University—SoliNet collaboration is the Labour Education conference, which took place on SoliNet between October and December of 1992 and was moderated by the Athabasca University Labour Studies programme. A total of 68 individuals registered for the conference. Since CUPE has established computer facilities in offices across Canada, inevitably it was the majority union represented in the electronic conference. But the conference also attracted representatives from the United Steelworkers, the British Columbia Teachers Federation, the Telecommunications Workers, the Woodworkers, and others. Participants also included university labour educators from across Canada (some working overseas) and two from the USA.

The discussion followed a suggested agenda, with new topics introduced every week or every two weeks. These included the provision of labour education in Canada and abroad, links between internal union education programmes and educational providers, the differences between industrial relations and labour studies, and the role of distance education and new communication technologies in labour education. But the discussion also ranged across the implications of post-fordism for labour, the role of intellectuals in the labour movement, and the nature of trade unionism. The agenda proved to be flexible and free-flowing. The conference generated 155 separate messages, a few of which were longer comments split into two shorter messages, while others were little more than participants introducing themselves or the moderator asking the contributors for more information on comments made. But the majority of the messages provided information, insights and opinion on labour education that participants had experienced or offered.

Computer conferencing does have some limitations: it favours the written not the spoken word and those with reasonable computer skills, and it can take a few messages (and therefore a number of days) to unscramble a misunderstanding or get back onto a topic. On the other hand it does allow more than one debate on one topic to continue at any one time. However, the purpose of this piece is not to debate the merits of computer conferencing or to re-run all the debates, but to use some of the contributions to illustrate examples of the labour education available in Canada and being offered by Canadians abroad. Therefore what follows is a selection of messages (contributions) grouped under five headings:

- Introductory Comments and Canadian Union Education
- International Labour Education
- Institutional Provision of Labour Studies
- Pedagogy, Women's Studies and Labour Studies
- Computer Conferencing and Conclusions

Introductory Comments and Canadian Union Education

TITLE: Some Thoughts on the Conference

I am an environmental consultant from Winnipeg, Manitoba. Over three-quarters of my clients are unions, and the vast majority of my work with them is related to environmental education activities.

It appears that education programmes will need to change to meet new challenges.

Firstly, financial constraints are limiting the options. Week long residential schools are becoming prohibitively expensive (in Canada unions pay lost wages and benefits). At the same time, many unions are facing higher costs and/or reduced incomes. For those reasons, local unions are less able to send participants to these schools. When they do send their members, they often prioritize the basic courses so that they can build a base of functional stewards and elected leadership.

This trend will result in labour educators focusing on these course where there is the most take-up. The process reinforces itself over time. Accordingly, there will be less support for the development of new courses to educate and train on emerging issues, such as the environment.

Secondly, the subject matter itself is often becoming more complex in areas like health and safety, the environment, technological change, etc. — education and training needs to advance with the times. One approach is to teach information gathering skills and techniques, but, that alone, does not address the need to constantly update curriculum and course materials and retrain previous trainees as new information becomes available.

Lastly, the people we train are learning in different ways. This is largely a result of the impact of new technology. Younger workers have grown up with electronic information. Children today are learning on computers and through interactive mediums. New technologies are most certainly forcing change, but they are also enabling change.

I am looking forward to this conference as a way to discuss and act upon those challenges. The format as outlined looks excellent. I wonder if the issue of maintaining ongoing contact with trainees through new technologies could be included as a topic area. As well, I would like to see some discussion as to how peer instructor groups can be established to extend training programmes through technologies like SoliNet without necessitating the active involvement of already overworked union staff or consultants.

Jay Cowan, Environmental Counsultant, Winnipeg

TITLE: Labour Education — An Overview of What's Going On

Most of the *tool* courses (shop steward training, grievance handling, health and safety, courses which directly prepare members for active roles in the union) in Canada have been provided directly by the unions, the provincial labour federations or the CLC (Canadian Labour Congress), rather than placed in educational establishments — unlike the situation in the US and the UK where colleges and university extension programmes have traditionally provided some tool courses.

Many unions grade their courses with *advanced* programmes available to those who have completed introductory courses, PSAC for example. Some of these tool courses spill over into the *awareness* category of courses which deal with the broader context of Canadian unionism, free trade, union history, working women, politics etc. For example, a course on sexual harassment might deal with workplace and societal issues.

The union movement also provides more extensive and demanding educational opportunities such as the CLC's eight-week residential Labour College which teaches five courses — labour history, economics, sociology, labour law, politics — at a first year university standard. Whilst the Labour College uses university educators, it is directly accountable to the CLC and, although placed in the University of Ottawa, it is a separate entity unlike the roughly equivalent Harvard's Trade Union Program or adult residential colleges in the UK (Ruskin, Northern College etc). (The origins of the CLC's Labour College is discussed in Max Swerdlow *Brother Max: Labour Organiser and Educator*, CCLH, St. John's 1990, chapter 10.)

Whilst many universities in Canada offer labour studies concentrations to undergraduates fewer have dedicated programmes of study for trade unionists. Those that do in Western Canada include Simon Fraser University Labour Program (Elaine Bernard, *Labour/Le Travail*, 27, Spring 1991), Manitoba's University-Labour Three Year Certificate Programme (Saturday mornings) and University of Saskatchewan's Labour Studies Programme (3 hour evening classes for three years). In the East the flagship programme is the Atlantic Region Labour Education Centre (ARLEC) run through St. Francis Xavier Extension, Nova Scotia. Others claim their classes are open to trade unionists but in some cases it is unclear if these are dedicated courses intended to provide a coherent programme of study and if the programmes are co-sponsored by local trade unions. Certificates are granted in some cases and these are usually non-credit. The intention of the dedicated courses is to supplement trade union *tool* courses with a broader educational programme, or to provide a research basis for union activity.

There is also Toronto's Metro Labour Education Centre which provides *tool*, *awareness* and a Labour Studies Certificate programmes and there is some work going on in community colleges.

TITLE: UAW/Paid Educational Leave

I thought I would point out that in the US UAW/PEL management, in addition to unionists, are in the program. In fact, the UAW sees this as a strength of their program, they try to buddy workers and their management (Contrast with Canadian Auto Workers).

Needless to say, even though the union plays a major role if not the central role in determining the curriculum, I've tended not to see the US PEL as union education — and I for one, think the CAW model is much better.

But for university labour educators this raises a rather interesting point. Some of our programs are open to any interested student — not simply trade unionists. I think it's important that we distinguish between different types of university based labour or union education. To me, the most important distinction is between what I call education about unions (open to any students — so called labour studies) and union programs (programs for trade unionists — and not for the general student body).

Sometimes the tension between universities and trade unions is based on not distinguishing between these two types of programs. And often in universities there is dispute between these two — is the university offering education about unions to anyone interested, or is it offering education for trade unionists. The level of education, course materials, integration with other subjects both inside and outside of the university, and the role of unions themselves (as advisors, etc) can vary depending on which of these two you engage in.

Elaine Bernard, Director, Harvard Trade Union Program

TITLE: Another joiner

This conference looks quite fascinating — a chance to carry on discussions that one doesn't find a place for in other venues.

My name is Larry Kuehn and I am the Director of Research and Technology at the BC Teachers' Federation. I also teach a course in the Capilano College Labour Studies Programme — a one day course on using SoliNet and the WEB for union communications and international solidarity. If this tool is going to be used effectively by unions, I believe that attention has to be paid to introducing people to the power of the medium and provide the support that is frequently needed by new users.

I will also attempt to get others from the Capilano programme to join SoliNet and this conference.

Larry Kuehn

TITLE: Message from Alvin Finkel

My name is Alvin Finkel and I've been involved in AU's attempts to develop working relationships with the labour movement since 1978. I think that Elaine Bernard raises the key issue when she asks about both the audience and the control of labour studies. In my view, a labour studies program, like most "studies" programs, has a primary commitment to empowerment of the group being studied. The organizations these groups have spawned are, for the most part, also interested in this objective. Thus a successful studies program ought to involve a working partnership between such organizations and the academics in the program. I might note that in 1982 we went so far as to offer the Alberta Federation of Labour a form of input into our course production model that amounted to a veto. They didn't have the staff necessary to take us up on this. And in retrospect I am not sure it was a great idea. While I don't think many labour studies academics would wish to argue notions of disinterested teaching and research, most of us recognize that unions, like other successful organizations within society, have a dual character: they both fight for workers' rights and, in various ways, work to maintain the rotten capitalist system. Even in their fight for workers' rights, unions have historically had mixed records (which fortunately are now improving in most countries) in dealing with patriarchy, the environment, racial equality, etc.

So, to some extent, a labour studies program, while supportive of trades unions has to also be in a position to analyze them from a critical perspective. Fortunately, many of their members also analyze them this way. So it is not necessary to exclude interactive ways of developing and delivering courses. But devil's pacts with the leadership are less likely to achieve this end than attempts to involve union members and other workers who, for whatever reason, are not unionized, in determining where courses should be going. In saying this, I recognize, of course, that the rank and file are not necessarily more radical than their leaders, far from it. But their experiences are often a better starting point because they have less institutional commitment to the status quo.

Alvin Finkel, Athabasca University

TITLE: Hello

I am Dave Lindeman of the United Steelworkers of America, currently seconded to the National Office in Toronto in the Safety, Health and Environment Dept. I have been a member of the Steelworkers for 10 years during which time I have pursued a course of part-time studies that has allowed me to obtain a History B.A. from McMaster University and certificate in Occupational Safety from Mohawk College.

I now consider myself a pointy headed, rank and file bred casual staff representative and am prepared to speak wearing any of my many hats (whichever is to my advantage).

I am still a newcomer to SoliNet and of course this conference and I am amazed by very idea of becoming involved with such a wide range of individuals representing such differing backgrounds. I have just read the previous 40 odd messages and enjoyed the discussions.

Part of my responsibilities in Toronto is the development of a week-long Environment Training course for local union activists. We have also assembled a Home Audit Kit that is to be distributed through workshops starting in Ontario. Both these projects have included considerable contribution from Jay Cowan.

That's all for now.

Dave Lindeman

TITLE: CUPE 6 Level Program

CUPE's Six Level Education Program is called such because it leads to a Certificate of Completion for six levels of courses which includes the CLC Labour College courses.

Courses in Levels 1 to 4 are usually held on weekends and in week long seminars and are instructed by peer instructors and/or Union staff. Broadly speaking, the Levels are outlined as follows:

1. New Members and Officers
2. Steward Training
3. Collective Bargaining
4. Specialized Courses
5. Labour College Correspondence Courses
6. Labour College Residential Program

CUPE issues a Diploma with Seals for Completion of each Level. Some levels an individual will receive a Certificate as having completed the Level after taking one or two of the courses whereas others require full completion of all courses in the level. But this is not really very important in the context of this conference.

Level 1 has a course called *Our Union* which is designed to provide newer members and new local unions with knowledge on what is CUPE and how it functions. It also shows participants how to set up and run an effective union organization including union committees, it explains the role of Union Officers and how to conduct meetings. Another course is the *Financial Officer Training* which is a special course for Secretary Treasurers and Trustees. There is material available for a course for Recording Secretaries but it is not outlined as part of the 6 level program.

Level 2 is Steward Training and is in two parts, *Effective Stewarding* which is primarily instructed by rank and file occasional instructors trained to provide this program. The second part is advanced steward training and is usually presented by staff people. This is more advanced analysis of contract language and review of arbitration cases than the Grievance Handling component of the first part of the level. We frequently refer to this by their old names as Basic Steward and Advanced Steward.

Level 3, I quote directly from *The Challenge* which outlines the 6 level program and is available on request from any CUPE Education Representative: "This level offers three courses which should be undertaken consecutively:

Collective Bargaining — Part I Introduction to Bargaining

This course shows how many of the negotiating skills we use in our daily lives relate to the collective bargaining process. It focuses on how to develop an overall bargaining strategy to achieve specific goals.

The course deals with these issues:

- How to set and pursue bargaining goals
- Dealing with the Employer
- The importance of good communication skills
- Leadership in bargaining
- Developing effective tactics

Other areas covered are building support for bargaining goals, both within the local and the community, the right to strike and presenting a settlement to the membership.

Collective Bargaining — Part II

This course provides an overview of the Collective Bargaining system as it exists in Canada today, outlining the roles played by the three main participants — employers, unions and governments — and analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the system.

It introduces the CUPE Standard Agreement and deals in detail with a number of contemporary issues.

Collective Bargaining — Part III

This course deals with formulating and substantiating Collective Bargaining demands. The emphasis is on the utilization of research and statistical materials. Where the course is given in a seminar setting, a mock bargaining session provides a vital part of the learning experience.

I am most familiar with Level II Advanced Steward Training and the 3 Collective Bargaining Courses as I spend a considerable amount of time instructing in these courses at the weekend seminars. I find that the methods of instructions outlined in the CUPE manuals are conducive to people learning more from each

other using the seminar leader's knowledge and experience to further support their own various experiences.

Finally Level 4 — Specialized courses, these are divided in three categories:

1. Advanced discussions of material already covered such as advanced parliamentary procedure, arbitration, public speaking and face-to-face communications.
2. Courses designed to broaden the understanding of the role of trade union activity in the context of Canadian and world citizenship such as Political Action, Understanding Economics, Labour Law.
3. Here all the special concentrated courses such as Health and Safety Training WHMIS, Pay Equity, Employment Equity, Contracting out, Aids in the Workplace, Union Counselling, EAP's etc.

The first two categories serve the additional purpose of preparing members for the Level 5 Labour College Correspondence course.

Most of these courses are available at weekend seminars sponsored by the CUPE District Councils, specific courses are arranged for Local unions or groups of them. Here in Ontario, the Ontario division sponsors up to three large weekend seminars where we will have 10-12 courses going on with upwards of 350 participants. CUPE National also holds three week long schools in Ontario. Some of these courses are available on a correspondence basis.

I hope this outline explains the 6 Level Program clearly.

Joe Bouchard, National Representative,
Canadian Union of Public Employees,
Niagara Area Office

TITLE: CUPE Courses

What I have been doing in the CUPE programme is learning. I started taking the CUPE six level program to learn more about procedures and about CUPE, and to meet CUPE members on a different level than just in my job as a secretary in the CUPE Grande Prairie office. I love to learn and have found all of the courses I have taken to be very informative and enjoyable. I have continued taking courses even though the beginning courses were the only courses I really needed to assist in my job. I have taken both Level 1 courses, completed Level 2 and 3 and have taken two Level 4 courses. I now have the correspondence courses that I am working on. I hope to attend Labour College in 1993 or 1994 to complete the six levels. After that, depending on my workload and family life I will probably look at taking some labour related university courses. Most likely I will go through Athabasca University as the Grande Prairie Regional College does not offer very many labour

oriented courses. I also feel that if I am continuing my education I may as well work towards a specific degree or certificate.

Beverley Smith, CUPE, Grande Prairie, Alberta

International Labour Education

TITLE: Joining in from afar

Hello to people in this labour education conference, a few of whom I know, but many I don't. My name is Ken Hansen, and I am coordinating the occupational health and safety project in Mozambique which Dorothy Wigmore mentioned in her message.

In answer to David Moore — yes, we are working directly with the unions here, and in fact have good links with the Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions (ZCTU), which we have visited a couple of times, and received their visits here. They will be one of the delegations at a workshop we are trying to organize in Brazil in February or March, on participatory approaches to OH&S training of workers. The ZCTU will also, we hope, be participating in a small project in January-March 1993, which we are developing, involving a visiting Canadian labour educator and two steward training in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Working with the unions here (a country which is just now coming out of single-party *socialism*) forces one to be very clear about what unionism is or isn't, in its essential form (ie, not Canadian-style, South African-style, etc., but unionism *per se*). This also leads us to emphasize the need to approach union education in close combination with more general questions of union *organization*, the role of a worker representative (eg. shop steward) in the workplace, etc. All of this links up to the general issue of union education being nearly-inherently linked to practical results (even outside of *tool* courses). The *popular education* approach is useful to us in our work, in emphasizing the existing knowledge workers have (from their workplaces), and the applicability of the learning experience for *transforming the world* (conditions in their workplaces).

Ken Hansen

TITLE: Labour Education and the Labour Movement in Zimbabwe

This is a very brief introduction to the situation in Zimbabwe. As I think about how to start writing it, it is apparent that the section on *international issues* is by no means separate from the preceding one. *Intellectual* issues such as *fordism* (mass production and mass consumption = the post-war compromise and the *Golden Age of Capitalism*) and *post-fordism* or even, god help us, post-modernism (flexible production, globalization and *liberalization* of finance and productive capital, expansion of the service sectors and de-industrialization in the west, the rise of the

NIC's or Newly Industrializing Countries in southeast Asia — many of them related very closely to Japan — the devastation of Africa, and the incorporation of Latin America into an enlarged NAFTA, the downfall of Eastern European and Soviet models of socialism and the related crisis of the left everywhere else, etc., etc.) are very much relevant to countries such as Zimbabwe.

As international capital in the form of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund force countries like Zimbabwe to *liberalize* the economy and the polity, trade unions face a crisis. As the state increasingly seems to be swallowing international capital's medicine in the form of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme, ESAP — or as some of the slogans have it: Even Sadza (a corn meal type of porridge) is A Problem, and Eat Shit Amidst Plenty — the labour movement is facing the moment when it may be the only *political* alternative to a largely discredited state and party apparatus.

As an interview in *Africa South* with Morgan Tsvangirai, the Secretary-General of the 400,000 strong Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions states, "the ZCTU is now considering building a broad national consensus. The bottom line of our concerns is, who is benefitting from the status quo and who is not. There should be an equal sharing of burdens and benefits by all social interests. We have a wide constituency for these views: students, intellectuals, most of the peasantry, ex-combatants (from the liberation war, which was beginning to put socialism on the agenda before international capital — represented by Henry Kissinger in the first instance — put a stop to it!) and non-unionized workers. Our first priority is to rekindle that spirit of popular struggle which helped sustain the liberation war but which died out in the 1980s." (I can send the article to anyone who wants it, or e-mail the draft interview, too, if I get the author's permission).

It is here where we get into one of Alvin's points, albeit indirectly — and other issues about whether or not labour education should be oriented towards *tools* or *social and political analysis*. The ZCTU was born of a real *devil's pact*. It was created *by the state* on the morn of independence, to bring together many different national organizations under the direction of the state and ruling party which called itself socialist — even Marxist-Leninist. The ZCTU soon became mired in corruption, but over a five year period purged itself of these problems and only now is emerging as a strong and independent force for social change. It is not coincidental that the latest labour legislation in Zimbabwe has drastically curtailed the power of national unions, by among other things letting several unions into every industry *and* limiting negotiation powers at the shop-floor level.

It is at this time that the ZCTU's *Workers Manual* — interestingly enough, written by the *women's desk* — has appeared. It is in many ways a political document, introducing the notion of class and discussing ESAP's effect of sharpening the class struggle for instance, alongside extensive sections on health and safety. However, the single most important event in Zimbabwe's history — the war of independence — is covered in one sentence. Why? Probably because the issues which came to the forefront during the *struggles within the struggle*, which posed

the question of independence for *who* — petty-bourgeois politicians or a broad front of workers and peasants led by revolutionary intellectuals — was settled with the elimination of the latter. Zimbabwe's recent history has not been confronted yet, in any forum. Collective bargaining training is not going to do a lot for a labour movement which is poised on the edge of building a new social and political coalition.

If labour education is going to have any real impact, it will have to confront issues like this in a very forthright way, in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. In so far as international worker educators can help, it may be in leading to a recognition that if nationalism is to be a progressive and effective ideology it must have working class content. The workers of Zimbabwe, Canada, Quebec and everywhere else are facing an unprecedented increase in the power of international capital. Labour education may assist in the process of bringing workers around the world together to take on this challenge. Can it do so through a *tools* approach or something more analytical? It must, of course combine both. This turns us back to the age old questions raised by people like Lenin, Kautsky, more creatively by Gramsci, and reiterated by Alvin: what sort of relationship can be worked out between *intellectuals* and the working class's *organic intellectuals*?

David Moore, Political Economy, Athabasca University

TITLE: Steelworker Humanity Fund

The following is a short summary of an article that appeared in the October 1992 edition of *Briarpatch*. The article is by Judith Marshall and it's entitled "Steelworkers Humanity Fund Education Programme."

The article is a description of a course called Thinking North-South developed by the Steelworkers Humanity Fund. It's taught in Steelworkers' weeklong schools. Rank and file activists drawn from the 280 bargaining units now contributing to the Humanity Fund spend a week together thinking about the workings of the global economy.

Over 110 rank and file workers throughout Canada have participated in the course. Fifteen have also travelled to visit projects in El Salvador and Peru.

The course has been offered seven times since 1991, using popular education methods. Participants map out the workings of the global economy, starting with their own workplace and eventually creating a complex map linking structural adjustment in the south with free trade in the north.

The instructor team, which includes worker-instructors who have done the course and travelled to other countries, have been experimenting with different approaches. One course included a role play of a press conference given by delegations at an international meeting on hemispheric initiatives. The Peruvian delegation and Canadian delegation made presentations on current economic policies. The journalists were divided into labour and mainstream press.

The course has tackled the question of how the media frames our vision of the south in relations of charity rather than strategic alliances. One video used is *Simon Ngubane: Still on Strike*, a history of the South African metalworkers. Responses to it include: "I had no idea there was such a sophisticated trade union movement in South Africa" or "Why does TV just show us black on black violence instead of news on trade unions?"

Perhaps Dave Lindeman or others could tell us more about Steel's Humanity Fund initiatives??

Jeff Taylor

Institutional Provision of Labour Studies

TITLE: Message from University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

Hi, I'm Larry Haiven. I teach in the College of Commerce at the University of Saskatchewan and also teach in the Labour Studies Programme which is run by the College and endorsed by the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour. Since the program began in 1988, we have had over 200 trade unionists taking courses, which range from "labour History and the Role of Labour in Society" through "Labour Sociology", "Labour Economics", "Women and Work", "New Technology", and "Labour Law and Occupational Health & Safety". After taking six courses over three years, students obtain a university certificate. I'm very interested in all aspects of the teaching of trade unionists, including methods, materials and course content. I am VERY interested in building a permanent organization in Canada of labour educators. This conference should act as a catalyst for that.

Larry Haiven

TITLE: John Price

I just received word that Langara Council has approved in principal the establishment of a labour studies program at VCC Langara — we've been working on this for 8 months so its welcome news. Now we need to get some funding!

One project we're working on here at Langara is a conference on International Competitiveness for May. Any suggestions about themes, speakers, etc. would be welcome. As for the current discussion — internal union education and college/university programs. One of the interesting angles about our labour studies program is that we're directing it at the student population. We've said, and faculty agree, that it is crazy students graduate knowing next to nothing about labour issues, collective bargaining, etc. when these things will play an important role in the work life. I tend to agree that labour should control education of its own members but

they need a strong alliance with progressive academics to bring in the critical edge to learning. There's no easy solutions to the uneasy, at times, relationship.

John Price, Labour Studies,
Vancouver City College, Langara

TITLE: Studying Labour Via an Alternative Delivery

In 1991 Jeff Taylor and Bruce Spencer visited the Alberta Federation of Labour/Canadian Labour Congress (AFL/CLC) Spring School at Lake Louise, which is attended by labour unionists from throughout the province. They talked with the organizers and the union students about Athabasca University programmes and proposed a pilot project for the next Spring School. In 1992 they returned to teach the first ever Athabasca University course to be offered at a union school.

A resolution at the AFL June 1991 convention criticized Alberta's traditional universities for failing to establish labour studies programmes: Athabasca's labour relations and labour studies courses were contrasted with this failure. This convention resolution helped focus the AFL Education Committee's attention on the proposed pilot course, and at subsequent meetings Jeff and Bruce worked with the committee, and with Winston Gereluk (AFL Education Officer and AU Tutor), on the details.

The CLC agreed to support the proposal for the AU course to be offered during one week of the 1992 residential Spring School. It was agreed that individual unions would be approached to help students pay their AU fees. The course chosen was the new 200 level Introduction to Labour Studies which had been piloted in the Fall of 1991 and had been subsequently revised.

Ten students enrolled for the course, eight manual workers and two clerical/administrative: four women and six men. They were quickly introduced to the course materials and the outline of the week's work. A feature of the course was that reading time was built into the programme with a tight reading schedule set for the week. Students responded well to the course demands and took pride in keeping up with the requirements. (One student was *caught* reading at 7 a.m. while walking on the hotel exercise machine).

Team taught by Jeff and Bruce, with assistance from Winston in the last two days, the students covered the first two units and the first written assignment prior to pursuing home study to complete the course. Winston helped prepare the union students for the home study element — he is one of the tutors in AU's Industrial Relations IDRL 311 course — and he also explained the variety of AU courses available from Accounting to Literature to Nursing. He also praised AU's open educational approach.

One of the major problems facing these very busy union activists was finding the time to continue with the course once they returned to work, home and union commitments and it may be that future courses of this kind will work better with

the continuation of the course being via teleconference or computer line. However this pilot course proved that part of an AU course can be delivered in a one week block and that motivated students (including some who may be described as previously educationally disadvantaged) can sustain a heavy reading schedule over that short period. Jeff and Bruce expect to develop other alternative delivery models for AU courses over the next few years, to suit the needs of other trade union students.

Bruce Spencer

TITLE: On Finkel

I particularly agree with Alvin on his point that workers when exposed to alternate perspectives will come to rather leftist conclusions. My difference is that the statement is true whether workers get exposed to right or left perspectives if they are given the opportunity to think for themselves. I believe those opportunities exist in our Union Program and in the Union programs that I have been fortunate to take part in. It possibly exists as well in Labour Studies programs depending on the curriculum and the leadership of the program.

Finally on his suggestion about sharing plans, I agree it is an excellent idea. There may be some practical difficulties in some areas, here in St. Catharines, the Niagara Community College has a Labour Studies program headed by Sheri Rosen who is an OPSEU activist and an Officer of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council. The program also has an advisory Board composed of Labour council delegates and a couple of community people such as United Way officials, who also happen to be Labour Council officers. There is a direct link. Brock University, on the other hand, started a program last year, a 4 year BA in Labour Studies. The program is headed by a generally viewed as left wing economist, Dan Glenday, but there has been little approach made to the Labour community other than a marketing approach to gain some part time students in the program. At least that is what I am aware of.

It seems the Alberta Federation and Athabasca University experience was a good one. Does anyone know of this happening elsewhere?

I agree fully with Marc about introduction of Labour Studies elsewhere. I believe it should start at the High School level. I believe the Ontario Federation of Labour has developed a program which the various School Boards can use.

Joe Bouchard

Pedagogy, Women's Studies and Labour Studies

TITLE: Pedagogy and Women's Studies and Labour Studies

To connect up the discussion of popular education, class and classlessness with Women's Studies/Labour studies, I'd like to talk about feminist pedagogy. I'd say it's much like what Ken describes popular education approaches to be — indeed feminists could call themselves popular educators.

What I think feminist pedagogy adds is an awareness of gender. I think that it's as important for labour educators to facilitate discussion of and challenge to gender oppression as it is to facilitate discussion of class.

This brings me to the question of the gender of the educator/facilitator. I think gender matters a great deal; men can't know what it is to be a woman. I don't think this means that men can't be feminist labour educators, but that they must somehow deal with their inexperience of oppression because of their gender.

What do the labour educators think? What do men do to deal with their lack of women's experience?

Catherine Bray, Women's Studies, Athabasca University

TITLE: Class, Gender, and Bias

I'm not saying that the university is a *classless* institution, merely that the prevailing belief ideology shared the institution is that it has no gender, class, or other biased, and that it is important for labour educators to be aware of this attitude because much of what they do will be perceived (in my view rather) as *advocacy* and biased.

I think a similar phenomenon happens in women's studies. I have never taught in or been involved in women's studies where at some point I am not asked why we need women's studies, or is it really an academic discipline, or isn't it simply advocacy ...

Advocacy is a very serious charge in an academic institution. It essentially means that you aren't being scholarly — that your personal beliefs, values, whims, biases and desires are preventing you from being *objective* and fairly measuring the situation. I personally believe that in the case of women's studies, and labour studies if you are not accused of *advocacy* then you probably aren't doing your job right. Because our institutions are sexist, and are class moulding and that those of us who chose to work against these currents will be seen as not part of the team, not mainstream, and of course advocates for change — which I truly hope we are.

Again, I'm dealing more in the area of perception. After all academics in traditional programs are advocates of the status quo — though rarely is it posed that way. I've rarely met a faculty member on business administration who is not an avid advocate of capitalism, and no one seems to take any notice of this bias.

Rarely are faculty in business administration asked to assure that classes have equal time for worker and labour perspectives in their materials and teaching.

Elaine Bernard

TITLE: Pedagogy

I am uncomfortable with one of the unstated assumptions in experiential learning as described by Ken Hansen, and which Cathy Bray and Barbara Roberts seem to suggest is central to feminist pedagogy. While I accept that understanding/education/knowledge must begin with experience, it must go beyond that. To put it another way, there is more to the real world than what we perceive or sense in our experiences: we need more than our experiences to understand the world. I don't think feminism emerges directly from women's experiences nor does socialism emerge directly from workers' experiences. What is required is abstraction, where theoretical or philosophical concepts are formulated that make sense of experience. In the case of women's oppression, for example, theories of patriarchy and the relationship of patriarchy to other systems of domination (class, race, sexual, etc.) are as necessary as experience in *knowing* about gender relations. Theory and experience are linked, of course, but my point is that they are not directly linked: there needs to be some conceptual distance between the two.

What does this mean for my pedagogy? As a man teaching about women, gender and feminism, it means that I bring the skills, knowledge and training I have that allow me to talk about the history of women and feminism, to present theories of gender relations, or to use my analytical skills to draw connections between the lived experiences of oppression (which I don't have) and the relevant literature (which I know and understand). I don't believe there is a hierarchy here, where the theory or conceptualisation is more important than the experience, but neither do I think that experience is more important than the concepts and theory.

Similarly, in labour education there is a crucial role for the theories, concepts and broader knowledge to play. In my labour history classes, for example, I can draw upon student experiences as a way of understanding the past, and students can connect and compare their own experiences with the legacy of labour struggles. But they still have to know about that history both empirically and conceptually: they have to know about the Knights of Labour, the Winnipeg General Strike, etc and they have to know about class relations, capitalist periodisation, etc.

This is not to denigrate the importance of experience-based learning and knowledge, but its important to recognize that that knowledge is only partial in the absence of conceptualisation, abstraction, etc.

Jeff Taylor

Computer Conferencing and Conclusions

TITLE: Keeping up

I spent a hell of a lot of time at my computer during the day, writing up briefs, analyses, stories for the union paper. So when I get tired and need a break from all that, I tune in SoliNet to see what's cooking. Sort of like checking for phone messages, only a lot more interesting.

I realize that everyone's not in the same position as I am in regard to this, but I think it shouldn't be too difficult for people to sign in a couple of times a week at least from work, or more often than that from home. And I'm convinced that if we don't seriously increase our communications abilities, it simply won't be possible for the good guys to win in the battle for the future.

Sid Shniad, Telecommunication Workers Union, Vancouver

TITLE: Keeping Up

I'm rather like Sid, I sign on from time to time during the day, usually when I want a break, or if I want to *check* on someone, to see if I've got a reply for a request, or drop a quick note to someone.

But for me, as a displaced BCer, who now lives in the US, I find the network an important life line. While I subscribe to endless Canadian publications, I get no daily press from Canada (a mixed blessing) and of course don't get daily Canadian media — so SoliNet in particular gives me a daily chat with Canadians — and friends in the labour movement who share similar interests and concerns.

Elaine Bernard

TITLE: Thoughts on SoliNet/Computer Conferencing

I am a newcomer to SoliNet, but already it has become an important part of my day. I get up a half hour earlier than usual and peruse the new messages in my favourite conferences as I have my morning coffee ... if there are no new messages, then I reread some of the ones that were packed with information. Being a relatively new *unionist*, I find the discussion that occurs here really vital as I am figuring out what it means to be a unionist. I don't always feel like I have a lot to contribute, but I expect that will change.

I agree with the person who said that a big stumbling block for many people is to get over their feelings of being intimidated by the keyboard, especially those of us who are *older*. We almost need a SoliNet support group in each major centre ... it would probably take only a couple of hours to make a person feel comfortable enough with SoliNet that they would try it without being fearful of making mistakes.

Mami Jordan, CUPE

TITLE: Long Distance Education

I think the most exciting application of computer conferencing is the potential for long distance education — both the formal and the informal kinds.

The formal kind involves structured courses given by union or academic institutions. Workers who may have trouble getting to the regular Tuesday night class or can't give up valuable weekend time with the family can participate at their convenience.

Meanwhile, the range of instructors is dramatically increased. We're a small movement in a large country. Our specialized instructors are few and far between. With computer conferencing an instructor, in say Calgary, can teach students from St. John's to Sooke. That capability could grow into a pretty powerful tool for the labour movement. (And we won't even get into the possibility of international teaching.)

The second kind of educational potential to this medium is the informal interchange. People in the conferences on SoliNet come from all across the country and each region has its own particular union traditions. BC for instance has a very strong and militant union tradition. That tradition comes out as people from BC discuss more industrially-based unionism which promotes its own view of unionism. People in the Maritimes have a more family-oriented approach to unionism in an area that is not heavily unionized. The informal interchange between people in these areas is as important an educational tool as formal courses.

And, from what I've seen, computer conferencing is the only affordable medium which will allow this sort of interchange. The labour movement could never have started a radio or TV network. But we did start a computer conferencing network.

As for the technical difficulties: I think they will be of a burden as communication and conferencing software gets better. I've noticed in the past year alone that many more people are to struggle with modems. And, as we introduce new software, SoliNet will become easier to use. (However, our universities had better start realizing soon that computer communications via mainframe has been bypassed by microcomputer communications. Our universities are supposed to be at the forefront of instructional and technological advances and most professors can't even get to Datapac never mind run microcomputer software to get to SoliNet.)

As for examples of the informal and formal approaches to education we don't have to look much further than SoliNet. The recent *constitution* conference was a superb example of education. This conference is a great example of a university long-distance course via computer conferencing.

And we're just at the start of it all!

Marc Belanger, Technology Co-ordinator, CUPE

TITLE: Comments on the Conference

As you know, this is the last week of the formal moderating of the labour education conference (to the extent that there has been formal moderating). If other conferences of this type are any indication, I assume Marc will allow us to continue to exist as a space where questions or comments regarding education may be posted. Before we move from regulation to deregulation, however, I'd like to make a few comments about what we've accomplished over the past two months and to ask others to add their comments.

Although my participation has been more sporadic than I would have liked, I have truly enjoyed being a part of the conference. Particularly during those times when we got an animated exchange going, it has felt like a *live* conference with different positions being taken up.

As I look back over the hard copy of everyone's comments (one of the major advantages of a conference such as this is that the proceedings are automatically available), I see a number of substantive discussions, including:

- relations between colleges/universities and unions or, more specifically, between academics and union activists.
- pedagogy in labour education.
- technology in labour education.
- the types of courses being taught in unions and in colleges/universities.
- gender and labour education (although there was less discussion here than I would have liked).

Was it a successful conference? As a first effort in this area I think it was fairly successful. I *met* a lot of people I didn't know before and we had good discussions. There were some problems, however.

As someone who has moderated live conferences, I found that an electronic conference calls for different techniques and, I must say, I never figured out what those techniques are. For example, in a live conference the moderator poses questions, summarizes points raised, perhaps gives the points a twist, and then poses new questions. Your participants are captive and directly engaged so this method can work. In an electronic conference, however, this technique is hit and miss: a question can be thrown out and it never lands. Maybe it didn't land because it was a stupid question. In a live conference, you know that the question was bad if no one responds. Here, though, it could be for any number of reasons. Participants aren't logged in for a number of days (including the moderator!), they aren't interested in the question, they're too tired to respond, etc. These are all legitimate reasons, but the dilemma for the moderator is how do you move a paced conference along? What seemed to work in this conference were provocative comments.

Another problem, as Marc alluded to in message 144 and Larry Haiven mentioned in message 13, is getting academics connected to SoliNet so they can

participate. There is the technical problem Marc mentions — of academics connecting through mainframes — but this is compounded by the lack of computer service support many academics get, particularly if they are in the humanities and social sciences. We at Athabasca are lucky, perhaps because we are small, in having great computer service support. Most academics I know in larger institutions don't even use their internal e-mail systems, although that is slowly changing, so if you start talking about datapac and computer conferencing their eyes glaze over. (I didn't know anything about e-mail, computer conferencing, bulletin boards, etc. before I came to A.U. two years ago.) Another problem, unfortunately, is that some progressive academics are too comfortable reading and writing books, or are too busy with onerous teaching and administrative loads, to worry about the real barriers between their worlds and the worlds they study and analyze.

Enough said for now. Any comments? Should I say something provocative to get a last burst of discussion going?

Jeff Taylor