

# Building Traditions of Inquiry and Transforming Labour-Academic Collaboration at the Union Local: Case Studies of Workers' Research and Education

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# Building Traditions of Inquiry and Transforming Labour-Academic Collaboration at the Union Local: Case Studies of Workers' Research and Education

Peter H. Sawchuk

A MAJOR GAP in education and training scholarship exists regarding the links between academic institutions and organized labour at the level of the union local. More specifically, there is a lack of scholarship that looks at the ways in which union locals can (and do) develop their own traditions of educational research, and the possible role — if any — for academic “fellow travellers” in this development. In this brief space, I want to focus on the role of the union local in the development of educational research with an emphasis on the following: the position of educational research within the organizational structures of unions past and present; the connection between unions and academics; case study examples of educational research with three union locals; and finally, some general lessons to be taken from these reflections. Through this we will see how the position of educational research within the organizational structure of the labour movement tends to prevent the full development and use of research by workers and for workers. This organizational positioning serves an important defensive function that protects workers and their unions from exploitation and helps maintain control over information and the development of knowledge. However in the case studies we will see how shifts in research practice involving a type of “Union Sponsorship” can contribute to a different research dynamic that benefits the workers at the local level by bringing research closer to the union rank-and-file. This alternative approach brings activism and real world struggles much closer to the conception and production of social

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research in a tradition that, as sociologist Dorothy Smith has recently suggested, stretches at least as far back as the theoretical but action-oriented (i.e. praxis) conceptions of Marx's original scholarship.<sup>1</sup> While academic scholarship certainly benefits, this is obviously not among the most important outcomes.

While this article focuses on the research processes and collaboration between academic researchers and organized labour, it is based on educational research which had as its original goal to investigate working-class informal learning practices. Briefly, the category of informal learning refers to the learning that is done outside of schools and organized courses of any kind. What both educational research and our own good sense confirm is that we do the vast majority of our learning in this informal way amongst work-mates, family members, friends or on our own.<sup>2</sup> The original projects sought to develop a better understanding of how the informal learning of working-class people takes place in an effort to offer strategic information on its further development for and by workers. Relying principally on in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observation, the research was carried out in a variety of unionized workplaces throughout Ontario, the case studies I report on in this article being three of them. As we shift our focus from informal learning to the research process itself, we see that the case studies show how specific contexts, processes and products in research can make contributions to general rank-and-file union education, local mobilization in response to management initiatives, and the development of a type of local activism that includes a tradition of social research.

Research is important to the survival of the labour movement. By this I mean that it has been understood for some time that creative adaption to change is essential to the maintenance of union density and the health of the labour movement generally.<sup>3</sup> But while research in general terms is important to the labour movement good sense tells us that the way research is done, the questions it asks and the interests it serves makes some research better than others from the perspective of trade unionists. While we can dicker over methods and the virtues of "professional" versus lay analyses – what we really cannot argue over is the fact that research is

<sup>1</sup>Dorothy E. Smith, *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory and Investigations* (Toronto 1999), 33-37.

<sup>2</sup>Although this has a common-sense quality to it, for the beginnings of these discussions in educational research see the work of Allan Tough, *Learning without a Teacher: A study of tasks and assistance during adult self-teaching project* (Toronto 1967). More recently see D.W. Livingstone, *The New Approaches to Lifelong Learning Network Canadian Survey of Informal Learning* (Toronto 1999).

<sup>3</sup>E. Kane and D. Marden, "The Future of Trade Unionism in Industrial Market Economies," *Labour and Society*, 2 (1988); G. Chaison and J. Rose, "Continental Divide: The Direction and Fate of North American Unions," in D. Sockwell, D. Lewin and D. Lipskey, eds., *Industrial and Labor Relations* (Greenwich 1991); Pradeep Kumar, "The Canadian Experience: Establishing and Strengthening Links Between Trade Unions and Researchers," in Keith Forrester and Colin Thorne, eds., *Trade Unions and Social Research* (Aldershot 1993).

*always* undertaken from a particular perspective or standpoint. This is the point I mean to draw attention to in the last sentence when I say "the perspective of trade unionists." Standpoints are important because they produce particular frames of reference, apply often presumed systems of relevance, and in general meet the needs, perspectives and worldview of the researchers (and the institutional structures in which they are embedded) rather than the researched. The worst research remains (to this day) absolutely clueless to this issue and imagines a type of "Archimedean" objectivity that is, in fact, impossible. There are forms of objectivity that are valid, but this "clueless" variation is the stuff that philosophers of science, such as Donna Haraway, call the "God Trick."<sup>4</sup> It is a view of virtually anything and everything from outside, nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Defenders of the notion of the "disinterested observer" in this traditional, positivistic form of objectivity typically refer to research which openly proclaims its standpoint, interests, and imperatives as "partisan research."<sup>5</sup> So how exactly are issues of standpoint and research bias related? Sociologist Howard Becker talked about it this way,

*When do we accuse ourselves and our fellow sociologists of bias? I think an inspection of representative instances would show that the accusation arises, in one important class of cases, when the research gives credence, in any serious way, to the perspective of the subordinate group in some hierarchical relationship.... We provoke the suspicion that we are biased in favour of ... subordinate parties when[ever] we tell the story from their point of view ... when[ever] we assume, for the purposes of our research, that subordinates have as much right to be heard as superordinate, that they are as likely to be telling the truth as they see it as superordinate, that what they say about the institution has a right to be investigated and have its truth or falsity established, even though responsible officials assure us that it is unnecessary because the charges are false. [In other words] we provoke the charge of bias, in ourselves and others, by refusing to give credence and deference to an established status order, in which knowledge of truth and the right to be heard are not equally distributed.<sup>6</sup>*

To clarify briefly before moving on, all this has absolutely nothing to do with "telling people what they want to hear", "getting the real story", and the like.<sup>7</sup> Rather, it deals with something more simple — a recognition of one's own position in a social system (for example as an academic who is subject to specific institutional requirements, paths of career development and so on, but also as a classed, gendered and racial person as well). A critical approach to social research thus

<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway, *Symians, Cyborgs and Women* (London 1991).

<sup>5</sup> For an example of this particular type of objectivity in Labour Relations/Studies see Kumar, "The Canadian Experience: Establishing and Strengthening Links Between Trade Unions and Researchers," 83.

<sup>6</sup> Howard Becker, *Sociological Work* (Chicago 1970), 125-27.

<sup>7</sup> These were comments from different academics during the conference presentation of an earlier version of this paper (University of Laval, Québec: 1999).

depends on genuine attempts at enunciating the perspectives of researchers/researched, the contexts of research, the funding, projected uses, and other issues that form the foundation of research but are thought to be somehow separable from it.

From the perspective of trade unionists specifically, these are in fact critical skills that we use every day but which we sometimes allow to be discredited by "experts." When we're paying attention (but lots of times we're not), these are the skills that unconsciously put issues into a context in specific ways based on our experiences. These skills tell us whose ideas, work, and proposals are most aligned with ours. These skills tell us that questions like who, why, where and for what are important issues for understanding what researchers are trying to do and the effects the research will have. Importantly, as trade unionists we shouldn't underestimate our instincts, our gut feeling, though it also benefits us to carefully evaluate the specifics of the proposed research itself. This may be an oversimplification, but from this perspective, sound social science for trade unionists is about learning skills and techniques, being familiar with previous work, all the while trusting our gut and keeping our "bullshit meters" running. Intensive, local member participation as a method of producing research from a union/working-class standpoint can therefore be an important component for the production of relevant, quality research for labour. What we need, then, is not merely more research on labour and labour issues, but rather more research with, for and by unions, from conception to consumption, on the issues workers see as relevant and via the processes that offer the most opportunity for the internal development of their own activities and goals.

Research from a working-class standpoint can contribute to the informal and formal networks of knowledge production that unions already have. It is this type of approach, as Haddad suggests in her comparative research on labour unions across different countries, that correlates so closely with the stability of national labour movements.<sup>8</sup> It indicates the ability of unions to adapt and provide their own creative responses and alternatives to the initiatives of capital. However, actually producing research calls for more than sound philosophy: it requires resources and expertise as well. Indeed, these issues are the central axes around which labour-academic collaboration seem to currently revolve. To this end, former Research Director and longtime activist within my own union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, Gilbert Levine suggests that, "... the labour movement ought to be escalating demands on the universities for researching, teaching and many other forms of assistance."<sup>9</sup> It is important to consistently emphasize that organized labour has significant claims on the use of public monies. It should go without saying that these claims are every bit as legitimate as those of corporations though

<sup>8</sup>Carol J. Haddad, "Unions and Technological Change: Labor Research Strategies and Structures in the USA and Canada," in Keith Forrester and Colin Thorne, eds., *Trade Unions and Social Research* (Aldershot 1993).

<sup>9</sup>Gilbert Levine "Relations between Unions and Universities in Research and Teaching: Union Expectations," *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (Spring 1988), 191-196.

this legitimacy is only narrowly recognized, if at all, within various research funding protocols such as the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and academic institutions generally. In St. Catharines, Ontario, where I work at Brock University, for example, organized labour was one of the major local contributors to the foundation of the school from the beginning while its participation as a partner on an institutional level has remained virtually non-existent.

While painting a disappointing picture of research linkages between organized labour and other public institutions in Canada, it is nevertheless important to recognize Canada's history in this area in terms of specific programs, centres and institutions of education and research. Some initiatives are long defunct, others are still carrying on, while others seem to be emerging in new forms. Indeed, many of these links were rooted outside of academic institutions altogether. To name a few, the Labour Research Associates (Québec), the Trade Union Research Bureau (British Columbia), and of particular interest to education and training researchers such as myself (in Ontario) the Workers Education Association have all been significant. Another type of extra-Union research link has been based around specific public-funded research programs. We can learn a great deal from our experience in programs such as, for example, the Technology Impact Program (federal) and provincial initiatives such as Ontario's Technology Adjustment Research Programme. Finally, the experience in academia-based centres for the study of work, education and society in many of Canada's universities provide both a forum for collaboration as well as an opportunity to assess the linkage between Labour and Universities as a phenomenon in its own right.<sup>10</sup>

In regard to the linkages between unions and universities however, the most basic lesson learned is that creating and sustaining real participatory collaboration is not easy. In the UK Forrester and Thorne comment on research links in relation to a conference designed to establish and celebrate such collaborations (from which a book was eventually produced):

On the whole, however, the significance of the contribution by trade unionists to the Conference is not reflected in the contents of the book: most of the contributions are from professional researchers. This is, in itself, an indication of some of the difficulties inherent in the relationship between trade unions and researchers.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Two examples of these in the Toronto area are York University's *Centre for Research on Work and Society*, and the *Centre for the Study of Education and Work* at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

<sup>11</sup>Forrester and Thorne, *Trade Unions and Social Research*, ix.

Quoting a rank-and-filer at the conference,

Here was a conference aimed at developing links between the worlds of professional research... and the world of trade unions. Yet it is set up in a way that will alienate not only trade unions but also the entire population of non-professional researchers.<sup>12</sup>

The point here is that while the traditional academic mode of knowledge production (scholarly papers in scholarly journals; scholarly presentations; and scholarly conferences) may be important, it is probably not sufficient for supporting the development of union/academic research linkages, particularly at the level of the union local and rank-and-file membership.

### *Organizational Positioning of Educational Research in Unions*

For researchers outside of unions who have entertained the possibility of productive, ongoing research links between organized labour and allies in the academic community it is well known that the collaborative highway is full of pot-holes, spot-checks, and even the occasional road-block. From an academic perspective, Kumar has observed difficulties for Canadian unions attempting to sustain research programs generally.

[t]here is very little internal research within unions; most of this research is confined to a selected few large unions and central federations of labour.... Unions have limited internal resources and inadequate research and analytical capabilities for strategic thinking on their medium to long-term goals and objectives for the valuation of management and state agendas.<sup>13</sup>

While to my mind Kumar's notion of "analytical capabilities" is meant to refer to issues of resources and training, the feature that I wish to draw attention to is that the vast majority of existing union-based research activity tends to be located in central bodies and the regional, national offices of the affiliates.<sup>14</sup>

From the perspective of the trade union researcher, Levine reflects on his experiences in this way:

Given the very limited research resources of the labour movement, I could easily recognize labour's need to tap into the vast pool of knowledge and expertise available in the academic environment. I could also see that there was a sprinkling of academics whose sympathies were with the labour movement. But labour did not know how to ask for help or how to use help. As for sympathetic academics, they did not know how to offer help or they had other

<sup>12</sup>Forrester and Thorne, *Trade Unions and Social Research*, x.

<sup>13</sup>Kumar, "The Canadian Experience: Establishing and Strengthening Links between Trade Unions and Researchers," 76-84.

<sup>14</sup>Central bodies such as the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) federally, or provincial federations of labour (e.g. Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL)).

priorities.... Most labour researchers feel that [their unions] seldom provide initiatives for new programs. Instead, much of their work is defensive — a reaction to the negative initiatives of employers and governments.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of both Kumar and Levine, we see a focus on solutions revolving around a *centralized mode of research*. It is, in a sense, a perfectly rational response to limited resources. However in other ways this style of centralization runs against the grain of an aggressive, creative bottom-up unionism. Indeed, unions have typically been committed to keeping the issues members see as most important as democratic and locally controlled as possible (e.g. collective bargaining). The extension of this “centralization strategy” suggests the development of a body of labour researchers that work in a cooperative and coordinated fashion.<sup>16</sup> As a lone strategy for the development of effective research, however, this approach has serious flaws. The roots of these flaws lie in the fact that however important the cooperation of workers across provinces, countries and continents (and it is vitally important), the heart of the trade union movement resides in local, participatory democratic action rather than, as the “age of P.C.1003” here in Canada has helped to initiate, centralized bureaucratic force.<sup>17</sup> Simply put, the labour movement was not built on a rationalized “feasibility study,” but by energy and commitment of local activism. Why would we expect the building of meaningful research traditions to be any different?

We are presented with a bit of a paradox. On the one hand, unions are democratic institutions which, perhaps more than any other large-scale organization, are driven by their grassroots. Of course, things are never perfect, but this structure of local democratic control is significant. On the other hand, *vis-à-vis* the current structure of organized labour (both affiliates and centrals), “research” is located at a distance from this same local control. While research has an important role to play in the growth of unionism in Canada, it nevertheless seems to remain at a distance from the heart of trade unionism. If the heart of the trade union movement is in fact local, democratic action it becomes clear that research initiatives that operate at a distance from this core will encounter difficulty in taking root, will not be fully developed, and will continue to remain low on the list of labour’s priorities.

<sup>15</sup>Gilbert-Levine, “Economic Research in Labour Unions,” *Socialist Studies Bulletin*, 52 (1998), 62-64.

<sup>16</sup>An early example of which could be seen from the work of CLC Research Director John Fryer back in the late 1960’s. See John Fryer, *The Canadian Labour Movement in the 1990’s: Challenges and Opportunities* (Kingston 1991) and also Levine, “Economic Research in Labour Unions,” 1998.

<sup>17</sup>See arguments made, for example, in Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From Wage Control to Social Contract* (Toronto 1993); C. Gonick, P. Phillips and J. Vorst, *Labour Gains, Labour Pains: 50 years of P.C. 1003* (Winnipeg 1995).

*Reflecting on Educational Research at the Union Local*

This paper arose from a conference presentation by myself and Tam Gallagher, a Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) National Representative temporarily on leave at the time from his executive position with CEP Local 200-O.<sup>18</sup> The situation that Tam and I experienced trying to collaborate on the presentation can perhaps serve as a starting point for a discussion of expertise, resources and the linkages between labour and academics. Briefly stated, whether it was my teaching load or research commitments, or whether it was Tam's responsibilities for servicing the membership or constantly putting out fires, our intellectual collaboration was made virtually impossible. Meetings we could arrange were literally never completed. One meeting was carried forward as we rushed to do strike support at a local chemical plant. Between dealing with security guards, members of the local themselves, and helping stop (scab) trucks from entering the plant we exchanged ideas on the presentation and planned our next meeting. Here we see the most basic barriers to labour/academic research linkages. The constraints on time, space and human energy, as other engaged social researchers can attest, are enormous.

Reflecting on the difficulties and strategies of doing educational research with unions, over a year ago I co-authored a working paper with D'Arcy Martin on experiences in the "Working-Class Learning Strategies" (WCLS) research project.<sup>19</sup> In this paper, we outlined the importance of sustaining connections with workers/interviewees, working with local union committees, and getting back to the union locals with a set of "preliminary" findings for the success of the project. As one local union officer commented:

When I was first approached, I have to say honestly, I thought the idea to have more information was good in principle, but when you try to actually do something it's very hard to get going. When I talked to [the researcher] and we sorted out who we might be interested in interviewing I was still sceptical, but when I talked to people they seemed willing to give it all a try. At least some of them. After the thing took off though, and people got to see that what they were saying was going somewhere then things got even better and I think the final presentation and the booklet and everything was really something.... People became much more interested, and here we are. (Local Union Officer)<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>*Trade Unions and Training: Thinking and Acting, Globally and Locally*, Université Laval, Québec (28-30 May 1999).

<sup>19</sup>Peter H. Sawchuk and D'Arcy Martin, *Reflections on the Social Research Process with Trade Union Locals* (Toronto 1998). The WCLS project (1994-1997; Dr. D.W. Livingstone principle investigator), investigated the existing learning practices of members of union locals in five key sectors of the Ontario economy (Auto/CAW, Steel/USWA, Chemical/CEP, Garment/UNITE, Service/OPSEU) with a focus on informal learning in the three overlapping spheres of work, community and home.

<sup>20</sup>Sawchuk and Martin, *Reflections on the Social Research Process with Trade Union Locals*, 2.

We noted at the time how important it was to understand the myriad of knowledge forms brought into contact with each other but that,

[t]he trick was (and is) to combine these knowledges within a clear, broad-based, politicized, knowledge production project. The consensus among those interviewing and those interviewed was to put more information in the hands of the rank-and-file workers at the local level in order for them to gain greater control over their learning and their lives in the workplace and beyond.<sup>21</sup>

Martin and I went on to identify three key sets of activities for positive union/academic research linkage at the local level: union sponsorship, critically self-reflective academic mode of production, and personal contact.<sup>22</sup> Briefly, "union sponsorship" referred to a conscious process of building on progressive connections between central labour representatives and academics with the goal of transference of collaboration from these central representatives to local ones and eventually the rank-and-file.<sup>23</sup> It was, in practice, a process of informal negotiations, personal vouching, and nurturance of new contacts and alliances. This process of union sponsorship can be described as a "spiral" relationship in which the union sponsor engaged and disengaged a series of times, slowly moving to the periphery of the local activity. Importantly, union sponsorship was also a process of affirming the value of other levels of the union structure. Locating research locally did not, in this context, mean separating the union local from the provincial, national or central labour bodies, but instead meant moving the decision-making and activities of research closer to the grassroots while maintaining the integrity of existing union structures. Indeed, one of the union sponsors in a description of his experience within the project later recalled coming to understand the importance of just this type of affirmation for the development of a sustained research linkage and its full development for his union.

<sup>21</sup>Sawchuk and Martin, *Reflections on the Social Research Process with Trade Union Locals*, 3.

<sup>22</sup>The notion of "critically self-reflective" indicates a process that is discussed in sociology as "reflexivity." This concept can be recently ascribed, in different forms, to postmodern social theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard but also "modernist" writers such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. However, to my mind many of the basic observations (particularly those involving issues of standpoint) can be found in the Marxist dialectic as well. Beck defines the concept this way: "...scientific skepticism to the inherent foundation and external consequences of science itself... [namely] that... both its claim to truth and its claim to enlightenment are demystified." Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London 1992), 155.

<sup>23</sup>The "Union Sponsors" in the case of our research were National Representatives and union staffers from provincial offices and related bodies.

When I got the fourth call from [the researcher] about his approaches to the local executive in that site, I felt irritated, like he was wasting my time. And then I realized he was taking care not to end run me when building his workplace links. So I called him back and said, 'Go means go'. Then we could both relax. (Union Sponsor)<sup>24</sup>

Not "end running" people was a practical means of confirming that indeed the local research was taking place in the larger context of an organization and social movement.

The student researchers and the process of academic research were slowly phased into the local. Indeed, student researchers (of which I was one of the original) generally recalled the massive amounts of learning that was necessary to carry out collaborative research successfully. The student researchers were learning from the union sponsors on the one hand and the rank-and-filers on the other. This was, we came to learn, a vital feature of our research methodology.

Finally, the notion of personal contact was also very significant. This simply referred to the importance of engaged researchers, drawing on their own lives to build solid relationships in the course of each contact, interview, presentation and meeting. This is often what is referred to in social research as "action research": a process in which, in its most basic form, study is undertaken *within and contributing to* activities in solidarity with the researched.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the data collection methods themselves (in-depth, life-history interviewing) had an enormous effect on building the commitment of all concerned within the research process. As several local officers commented, these methods put a "human face" on the research, helped reiterate and produce "practical" outcomes, and, in general, formed a positive basis for both the work at hand, as well as future research.

<sup>24</sup>Sawchuk and Martin, *Reflections on the Social Research Process with Trade Union Locals*, 5.

<sup>25</sup>This notion of "action research" or "participatory action research" as it is also called is the subject of a range of theoretical justifications and descriptions beginning with the fascinating work of Orlando Fals-Borda, *Knowledge and Social Movements* (Santa Cruz 1991). Also see earlier and less radical discussions under the heading of the concept of "participant observation," for instance, Robert Bogdan, *Participant Observation in Organizational Settings* (Syracuse 1972). Writing that contributes to the post-positivist epistemological underpinnings of action research and subordinate standpoints can include a diverse range of feminist authors: A. McRobbie, "The Politics of Feminist Research: Between Talk and Action," *Feminist Review*, 12 (1982); B. Hooks, *From Margin to Center* (Boston 1984); Sandra Harding, ed., *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues* (Bloomington 1987); Haraway, *Symians, Cyborgs and Women*. For a discussion of methodologies for linkages between unions and professional researchers along these lines as well see Heidi Gottfried, "Notes Towards the Development of a Liberatory Research Project," in Keith Forrester and Colin Thorne, eds., *Trade Unions and Social Research* (Aldershot 1993).

*Case Studies in Educational Research with Three Union Locals*

The three cases I wish to briefly review were originally investigated in the WCLS project (Steel and Chemical sites) which I mentioned briefly above, and the "Education as Research/Research as Education: Labour and Workplace Reorganization 1993-1997" (ER/RE) project (Telecommunications site).<sup>26</sup> Each of these cases demonstrate a different perspective on educational/social research and the union local, and are discussed in terms of the interrelated effects of research contexts, processes and products. Differences and similarities exist, but the importance of the establishing of a research tradition among members in the locals themselves is paramount.

### STEEL

The United Steelworkers of America local in this research involved workers in a medium-sized metal fabrication plant which produced trim and door parts for the Big Three auto manufacturers. Throughout this research, the workers experienced difficulties in production as management persisted with a mix of newer but largely outdated production technologies to maintain market share in the rapidly changing and expanding (via outsourcing) autoparts sector in Canada. For workers in this relatively small privately owned company, this meant an unpredictable cycle of lay-offs, call-backs, creeping unemployment through attrition and the polarization of the workforce into a small but stable trades and technicians group (mostly men), and a larger group of operators (mostly women) who experienced insecurity, tightly disciplined and narrowly defined work as well as wage stagnation. More than half the hourly waged workforce were English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) workers.

The union sponsor and co-investigator who initiated contact for this site was Mike Hersh, former President of USWA Local 2900 and currently Senior Coordinator for the Canadian Steel Trade and Employment Congress. Hersh's sponsorship was, as I've described earlier, like a spiral: introducing student researchers to the rhythms and traditions of the local. Hersh's involvement moved from centre to periphery, re-emerging at key moments as the research proceeded, particularly in the final stages in which it gave rise to specific collective bargaining proposals, at which time Hersh facilitated teaming-up with representatives of USWA's District 6 Education Department directly.

The data collection itself, drawing on the busy lives of working families, was a drawn-out affair. The methodology required a series of long, life-history interviews with an eye toward getting to know people well and meeting at times and places convenient for them. Formal interviews took place in coffee-shops near the plant and workers' homes. Other meetings and informal interviews took place at

<sup>26</sup>Peter H. Sawchuk, Jorge Orgales and D'Arcy Martin, *Education as Research / Research as Education: Labour and Workplace Reorganization 1993-1997* (Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada / New Approaches to Lifelong Learning Research Network Grant Proposal) (Toronto 1997).

the plant. The fact that 80 per cent of the workforce were women who worked full shifts, including overtime, possibly a second job, and still typically had prime responsibilities for home-care was both a significant feature of the research process as well as the learning practices we sought to grasp.<sup>27</sup>

The presentation of initial findings back to the local produced further discussion which built momentum for a bargaining proposal on training in the next collective bargaining session at which time the union won a commitment of space, human and technical resources, as well as a joint committee for worker training. As the committee began to function in the summer of 1997 I was invited to participate as technical advisor for the local. Detailed proposals were put forth and based on the new collective agreement and research findings, the committee agreed that a Workers' Education Centre would be created in the plant and two pilot courses would be run: one in Computers to be taught by a Human Resources representative; and the other in ESL which I was asked to deliver on behalf of the local. Bolstered by a handy and accessibly written booklet-form of the final report (complete with pictures from a photo-shoot around the plant and the opening of the Education Centre) and the publication of an important article in the District Newsletter, the pilot courses took off.

What we learn from this level of engagement is that the products — as important, interwoven parts of the action research process — helped to build momentum for participation amongst the workers who donated scarce time and energy. Maintaining the trajectory of the project, collectively coming up with do-able outcomes from the research, building participation amongst the rank-and-file did, in short, help establish a new tradition of research and inquiry at the local. "Research", before a distant and largely adversarial notion, became "*workers' research*." Overall, it can be said that in the face of difficult sectoral and organizational contexts, the spiral of the union sponsorship process, the level of engagement between researchers and the rank-and-filers, the realization of research outcomes that mattered to workers most, and the leadership of the local union executive (and support of the district representatives) were all essential elements of effective research with union locals themselves.

## CHEMICAL

The Steelworkers site offers a glimpse at workers struggling to hold their own while inching forward with some strategic gains. The Chemical site, however, was a union

<sup>27</sup>See Peter H. Sawchuk, "Workplace Learning in the Everyday: Structured Participation from an Emancipatory Perspective," *Proceedings of Researching Work and Learning: A First International Conference* (Leeds 1999); D.W. Livingstone and Peter H. Sawchuk, "Beyond Cultural Capital Theory: Hidden Dimensions of Working-Class Learning," *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies*, 3 (1999); D.W. Livingstone and Peter H. Sawchuk and Contributors, *Hidden Dimensions of Working-Class Learning* (Washington forthcoming).

local on the offensive, though this had at least as much to do with the very different sectoral and organizational context as it did with the union itself. In the chemical sector, Industry Canada indicates relatively stable employment and capital investment over the last decade and into the near future, while the company itself is a staple in the *Financial Post's* top 200 net sales, has recorded dividend increases for the last 26 years straight (indeed they've paid dividends uninterrupted since 1899) and has demonstrated stable employment and strong growth primarily on the strength of its North American operations. Another major (interrelated) difference between the Steel and Chemical site was the character of the workforce. In contrast to the predominantly female, ESL workers and low to medium wages in the steel plant, at the chemical plant, workers were paid higher hourly wages, predominantly spoke English as a first language and were virtually all male. In Livingstone and Sawchuk we discuss the effects that these patterns of social division have on learning, training and education, but here we should note that these same features also played a role in the research process itself.<sup>28</sup>

The union sponsorship for the chemical local came in the form of long-time labour educator, and Director of Education for the Ontario Region of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, D'Arcy Martin.<sup>29</sup> Like Hersh, Martin's sponsorship was a spiral-like process bringing local union executive members to the table with researchers with personal assurances of the integrity and interests of the research. Also like Hersh, Martin re-emerged again in the research to play an important roll in the feedback process, and the subsequent development of the research tradition at the local.

Some further comparisons between the Steel and Chemical sites are instructive. Unlike the Steel site, the research process with the chemical workers went much smoother and more quickly. The largely male workers in the research (in fact women made up only 1 per cent of the hourly waged workforce at the plant), though busy with lives of their own, experienced few of the barriers seen with the Steelworker women. I also remember the very different experiences of visits to the Steel and Chemical sites. In the steel site plant tours, periodic meetings and workplace ethnography were achieved as the union president and I wove our way around the factory through a maze of back allies, between buildings, walk-ways between presses and stacks of warehoused crates avoiding management and "stealing time" to talk with workers on the job. It was, in fact, an example of the type of tactical skills required for running a union in difficult corporate and sectoral contexts. By contrast, in the chemical plant organized tours were given by the

<sup>28</sup>Livingstone and Sawchuk, "Beyond Cultural Capital Theory: Hidden Dimensions of Working-Class Learning," and Livingstone and Sawchuk and Contributors, *Hidden Dimensions of Working-Class Learning*; Sawchuk, "Workplace Learning in the Everyday: Structured Participation from an Emancipatory Perspective."

<sup>29</sup>D'Arcy Martin has since this time become Co-Director of the Educational Department for the Service Employees International Union (Canada).

company's industrial hygienist and union health and safety representative, while for meetings with workers I had the use of a private corporate meeting room, or the run of the local union hall. In short, the chemical workers enjoyed better conditions which translated into a smoother research process and the use of research outcomes that were more calculated and incremental. In this site, for example, our project played a more subtle role in supporting collective bargaining (in terms of training issues).<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, research has continued to develop and now holds a much higher profile in the local.

Presentation of the research updates and the initial research findings were made to well-attended monthly Local meetings, and were invaluable for building awareness of the research process at the grassroots. At coffee breaks, rank-and-filers involved in the research would reiterate and explain their involvement to those who hadn't been involved. All this produced enough momentum to carry the creation of an *ad hoc* Education Committee within the local.

In discussion with local members the suggestion for the production of a decidedly plain-language, handy discussion booklet that workers could easily carry with them and in which there was space for notes was proposed. Members told us in interviews that they weren't interested in abstract descriptions, and suggested that the booklet contain information in people's own words that dealt with the current issues in the workplace (at that time ISO certification process; computer access; and training rates). All these were grounded issues through which workers learning could be better understood but it was infused with current issues relevant to them. The idea was to get the information out to workers and have the findings taken up among the wider membership who could then learn and contribute to future directions of inquiry. This, in turn, became a model of what Martin, Orgales and I eventually began to refer to as a "*research as education/education as research*" dynamic that can be generated at the local level.<sup>31</sup> The idea turned out to be popular: over eighty copies of the discussion booklets were taken away from the meetings by workers and momentum for further initiatives was produced.

Other important products of the research process not already mentioned included articles in the union newspaper (something which should not be underestimated for its affect on the momentum of the research process) and the interesting notion of a "Workers' Knowledge Bank." Briefly, the Workers' Knowledge Bank was an idea that emerged in analysis of the interview data and was directed toward

<sup>30</sup> After some deliberation in the local, it was decided to seek changes in regard to training practices and specifically the rate structures in the plant. Previously, workers trained workers as the company's central training strategy, but were poorly paid and not supported in their efforts (e.g. by being given time off production or train-the-trainers education). Quite literally, workers were responsible for carrying out the company's training for nickels and dimes.

<sup>31</sup> Sawchuk, Orgales, and Martin, *Education as Research / Research as Education: Labour and Workplace Reorganization 1993-1997*.

supporting the expansion of existing informal learning networks amongst co-workers. It was an altogether original notion that emerged directly from the workers themselves. Viewed in the long-term, however, perhaps the most important outcome of the research at the chemical site was the establishment of a research tradition. In fact, when news of an opportunity for further educational research arose (on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition or PLAR), the local union was immediately supportive and dove in.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, building on its experience of the value of educational research and the importance of practical outcomes the local suggested that the findings of the research be produced as an educational video which the members would make themselves with informal technical expertise of the membership and research support from the academic partner.<sup>33</sup>

### TELECOMMUNICATIONS

In contrast to both the Steel and Chemical sites, the Telecommunications site was the focus of a different research project altogether which is, in fact, still proceeding.<sup>34</sup> This site serves an important comparative function as it originated with no direct links to academic researchers at all. While the collection and analysis of the activities at this site have yet to be completed, this research has the potential to shed much light on the process of research and education at the local level. By drawing on personal interviews, analysis of policy and meeting minutes, union memoranda, survey and focus group research carried out by the union locals themselves, and even personal papers of key local union members, this research has the potential for the exploration of the inner dimensions of confrontations in the workplace and the role of research and education in this struggle.

This site was centred around a telephone service provider in northern Ontario where in the early 1990s the union entered into an active and contentious partnership with management in order to stave off rising competition and save jobs in a community being assaulted by deregulation of the telephone industry. However, with no background in the workplace reorganization initiatives being proposed by management, the local turned to a matrix of resources including courses (both union and company-led); union and managerial conferences around North America; intensive joint and union-based strategic planning sessions; the development of their own surveys and focus groups; guest speakers; seminars for the rank-and-file;

<sup>32</sup>This research was run by the Advocates for Community Training and Education for Women (Toronto) and was interested in an industrial workplace as a comparative site in their study of new methods of PLAR that better served working-class people.

<sup>33</sup>Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada Local 200-O, *Learning, Education and PLAR: A workers' perspective* (video tape, approx. 24 min) (Toronto 1998). Distributed by the Centre for the Study of Education and Work (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education).

<sup>34</sup>Sawchuk, Orgales, and Martin, *Education as Research / Research as Education: Labour and Workplace Reorganization 1993-1997*.

presentation of research results to membership and to the company; and the publication of reports, newsletters and memoranda to maintain the active involvement of the membership. The local was intensively supported by their regional union office and made extensive use of their National Representative as well as the union's own educators and researchers. What we can see here is perhaps the most richly documented example, in recent times, of a union local's active and critical participation in a workplace reorganization partnership in Canada.

What has been particularly striking about the data thus far is the degree to which education and research occur as dimensions of each other in what the union executive referred to as "real-time." It is in fact a "mobilization" model of education and research.<sup>35</sup> Local executive members, activists and union educators were conducting research and producing curriculum and reports on the run when the stakes were high. A local executive member recounted in an interview,

It was just a circle, a process. You had the idea. You found out everything you could, so that's the research. You created courses — so that's to do it, to go with it. But then you analyzed what you did — you couldn't just stop there and you did it all over again. Was that effective? Did that work? What else do you have to do? 'Uh, we gotta go back and learn this and this'. So really it is just constant. (Local Union Officer)<sup>36</sup>

Compared to the two other cases, this local had no time for the spiral of union sponsorship and the incorporation of academic researchers. The resources of the union, and particularly the personal time and almost super-human energies of the executive, stood in place of those available through collaboration. At least one similarity across all three sites, however, is striking. In each site, for those rank-and-file members who were mobilized during the research and the many others who have gained important, though more peripheral, experiences with the research/educational process, a general positive valuation of research was produced. Another Officer at the telecommunications local explains her new perspective on the importance of research for the unions.

It's invaluable and actually it scares me now that I know, and we can't do it anymore. We're making ourselves sitting ducks. And now that we got a taste of what it can do — I'm really upset. I'm almost second guessing now. I used always just go with my gut, but now I'm thinking this is a really important piece to go with the gut. (Local Union Officer)<sup>37</sup>

She concludes explaining,

<sup>35</sup>This model is not unlike that originally proposed by popular educators such as Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York 1970).

<sup>36</sup>Unpublished material from the "Education as Research / Research as Education: Labour and Workplace Reorganization 1993-1997" project.

<sup>37</sup>Unpublished material from the "Education as Research / Research as Education: Labour and Workplace Reorganization 1993-1997" project.

Throughout that whole [research] process I had some very distinct feelings. I felt proud that we were doing it. I felt that we were finally getting a chance to strut our stuff to the company, that I was smart and as able as they were. I was proud to strut the union resources, and that was, through the whole process, that was my overwhelming feeling. Like a feather in our cap. It was exciting and refreshing to do, and to play their little game with charts and stuff and it's OUR stuff and we strut in front of them charts and things. [laughter] (Local Union Officer)<sup>38</sup>

### *Current Recommendations and Future Directions*

Forrester and Thorne begin their collection of papers on research and trade unions by commenting that when local activists become involved in research,

... the agenda is less likely to drift away from their concerns and the results have both the legitimacy and relevance accorded by lay member involvement. Implicit in the research activity is a restructured relationship between researchers and workers to create teams capable of combining the research skills of academics with the knowledge of lay activist union members.... Research can only become part of a programme of genuine empowerment when the research process itself is democratized.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, this was the basic argument of this paper. I've also argued that not just any sort of research can produce the positive effects we've seen above. Projects need to operate from the standpoint of and in solidarity with the working-class and organized labour.

A key finding to be taken from these experiences concerns the importance of the establishment of an education/research tradition at the local level. Among the positive features of this are: important information is produced for use by the local; new skills and knowledge are captured in local networks; and, new orientations to the value of research and educational programming are realized which cannot help but have a rippling effect within union structures as a whole. As I argued from the outset, unions are predominantly democratic structures where for change to stick, it must be rooted in the rank-and-file.

A second observation deals with the role of union sponsors in regard to the establishment of labour/academic research links. These sponsors are key to the establishment of dialogue and negotiation between outside researchers and the local through which leadership of research is transferred toward the local executive, activists and general membership itself. Part of this process requires an open exchange between researchers and the local union. For example, a local could request that a membership survey be carried out by the academic partners producing a valuable educational experience for student researchers as well as rank-and-file

<sup>38</sup>Unpublished material from the "Education as Research / Research as Education: Labour and Workplace Reorganization 1993-1997" project.

<sup>39</sup>Forrester and Thorne, *Trade Unions and Social Research*, 4.

members who wished to participate in the conception, production and analysis of the survey.

The final observation involves thinking about the relationship between research, education and action in a dialectical way. When, for example, Kumar tells us that "research is lacking in strategies and approaches needed to organize the unorganized, to foster internal democracy and rank and file participation within unions....," we have here pre-figured a separation between research, education, and local union action.<sup>40</sup> Another way of looking at this relationship would be to say that the study of these issues can be done in the course of contributing to action on these matters at the same time. In this case, the value of research is realized in both its practice and in its production/dissemination beyond the local. What we are really talking about however is beyond any purely instrumentalist relationship between organized labour and academics.<sup>41</sup> It is perhaps best described in terms that Raymond Williams has referred to as "alignment and commitment."<sup>42</sup> Effective Labour/Academic collaboration clearly means moving beyond instrumental motives of either partner, and this can involve a move toward a deeper understanding of the our mutual standpoint in political economic relations. This entails moving beyond "commitment" to the recognition of "alignment." In other words, actually coming to understand how the interests of workers in the steel, chemical, telecommunications, or any other sector are in fact aligned with those in the academic sector. A recognition of alignment in this context is a component of the production of social research from a labour perspective. The recognition of the importance of issues of standpoint in the production of quality, critical social research is perhaps the most essential component of efforts to develop traditions of inquiry at the local union level; and, it is the development of these types of locally-centred research traditions that will help move workers' production of the their own knowledge and research to the fore on the national and international levels of organized labour as well.

<sup>40</sup> Kumar, "The Canadian Experience: Establishing and Strengthening Links between Trade Unions and Researchers," 81.

<sup>41</sup> Luckily academics are also becoming organized themselves which provides an additional forum through which the two groups can come together for mutual gains.

<sup>42</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford 1977), 199-205.