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Economic and Labour Relations Review, UNSW

Postal address

Economic and Labour Relations Review
Industrial Relations Research Centre
The University of New South Wales
Sydney NSW 2052 AUSTRALIA

E-mail

irrc@unsw.edu.au

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Organisational Learning: How Organising Changes Education in Trade Unions

Tony Brown*

Abstract

Australian trade unions in the 1980s and 1990s sought to influence and guide the restructuring of vocational and workplace education policy, to widen participation in education and training, and establish partnership arrangements with government and business in order to promote international competitiveness. Since the mid 1990s, however, the changed contours of the labour market, and a steady decline in both the numbers of union members and density rates, accompanied by legislative attacks on the right to organise, led many unions to shift their emphasis to organising new members. Education was identified as a critical factor in preparing unions to undertake this new effort and as a means of changing union culture. This article studies the changes in union education that flowed from one union's new concentration on developing capacity for organising for growth, and examines the new ways of knowing that resulted among officers and activists.

Introduction

In recent years, much of the attention given to the topic of workplace learning has focused on learning inside corporations or large public sector organisations, and on professional and managerial occupations within those organisations. Less attention has been devoted to how education and learning are organised within community and voluntary membership organisations found in the broader civil society. Similarly, little academic research now focuses on the sort of workplace learning, whether formal or informal, that provides an opportunity for reflection about work relations by the majority of people who are outside managerial or professional layers. This article focuses on a particular form of organisational learning — that education delivered through and by trade unions.

* University of Technology, Sydney.

Over the past twenty years, economic rationalist policies have removed public sector support and funding from many community and voluntary organisations, and a number of these voluntary associations have had to restructure, reorganise and reconsider their primary activities, staffing and funding sources. Other organisations, more reliant on their members' financial contributions than on government support, have also had to weather difficult times. Such organisations include trade unions, along with indigenous groups and cultural institutions such as the ABC and universities. Increasingly restrictive legislation has limited the ability of unions to recruit new members and defend existing members' conditions. These restrictions have come on top of significant changes in the structure of the labour market, and shifts in modes of employment. They follow a period of union quiescence under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, during a period when the labour movement expected its future to be looked after by state institutions.

Since 1996 however, important changes have been taking place in how unions organise their members and in how they organise education about workplace relationships. Partly this is to do with legislation that now restricts unions' rights, and with the steady decline in union membership and density. But it is also connected to the recomposition of the labour market. The past twenty years have produced a reconfigured labour market that has taken the shape of an hourglass, with growth at the top levels of high-skilled, well-rewarded jobs, a hollowing out of middle income jobs, and the biggest growth of employment concentrated at the bottom and based on insecure and poorly paid jobs with few of the conditions associated with employment in the post-war boom. Access to workplace education, including union education, is one of the conditions that have diminished.

This article begins by briefly looking at the rapid growth of low paid jobs — a trend that runs counter to many of the claims about the contours of the new knowledge economy. After discussing the changing role of unions as sites of individual and organisational learning, it examines the way in which one organising union covering low paid workers has been re-organising itself over the past decade. It investigates the educational implications of a shift in trade union focus to a concentration on organising for growth, and reports on emergent educational initiatives aimed at developing capacity and new ways of knowing among officers and activists.

At the heart of this account is a single, seemingly simple question. How, given the contemporary political economy of work, can unions construct education and learning among their staff and members? That question begs another. How is that education, or learning, best facilitated in order to address unions' need for cultural and structural change, and in response to the major changes taking place in the organisation of work and employment? The paper contends that there is a need for critical reflection in developing thinking, agile unions, capable of responding to new and/or unforeseen challenges.

Jobs Growth in the New Economy — the Received Wisdom and the Statistics

The predictions that dominated public debate in the early 1990s about the shape of the new knowledge economy — the jobs that would be created and those that would disappear — have not materialised. Nor have forecast increases in individual worker autonomy turned out as expected.¹ For example Robert Reich's influential book *The Work of Nations* (1991) set out a typology of existing and future employment patterns. Reich identified three broad groups of workers, based on employer types, employment status, type of production, skills, attributes, mobility, productivity, education and training and competitive position. He concluded that the future was bleakest for routine production workers and brightest for 'symbolic analysts'. He thought that a third group, in-person service workers, would increasingly come to depend on the ability of the symbolic analysts to derive international wealth in a globally competitive economy. Official data in Australia, the USA and Canada, however, have failed to reveal Reich's expected boom in high-skill, well paid jobs requiring discretion and autonomy. Instead the labour market has taken on the shape of a bottom heavy hourglass.

In Australia in the fifteen years from 1986 to 2001, virtually all job growth has been in low paid, low skill, 'peripheral' occupations. Employment growth has been predominantly female and overwhelmingly part time. Of the 1.1 million new jobs created between 1990 and 2000, more than 980,000 or eighty-seven percent were generated at the lowest end of the annual salary scale, that is, below \$26,000 per year. (All figures are year 2000 salary equivalent) At the other end of the scale only 130,000 extra jobs were created amongst those earning over \$72,800 a year. In the middle, 213,000 jobs earning between \$36,400 and \$72,000 were lost. (Borland et al 2001, 15–17). The fastest growing occupations were Sales Assistants, General clerks, Computing professionals, Project and program administrators, Sales and marketing managers, General managers, Child care workers, Accountants, Waiters, Special care workers, Sales representatives, Receptionists, Primary school teachers, Storepersons, and Inquiry and admission clerks (Cully 2003).

A similar trend can be observed in the United States where the ten jobs that the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates will have the largest employment growth between 2002 and 2012 are: registered nurses, post-one of America's biggest poultry processing companies, preparation for the job and its dangers was cursory. 'Safety training consisted of a personnel officer rattling off a list of the chemicals in the plant and the hazards they might pose. "It's the law; we have to tell you," she said "apologetically"' (Horwitz 1994a).

Other best-sellers by Thomas Frank (2004) and Eric Schlosser (2002) have also drawn attention to the impact of the work practices of massive food manufacturing companies on workers and the environment. Frank described how beef processing companies had followed a deliberate strategy of re-locating plants and jobs from unionised factories in Chicago to non-union workplaces in Kansas, which is now the biggest beef-packing state with a daily 'slaughter

capacity' of twenty-four thousand cattle producing twenty percent of the beef consumed in America, and extracting a potentially disastrous toll on the environment (Frank 2004, 51–55).

The concentration of manufacturing, in this case food, production into large factories runs contrary to the popular conception that hard, dirty manufacturing jobs are being replaced by new jobs that are mostly to be found in neat air-conditioned offices. Also running counter to this popular misconception is the even bigger growth of low paid and insecure service jobs found in retail, hospitality, building services and various human care industries such as child and aged care. Barbara Ehrenreich's accounts of precarious work at Wal-Mart, and in cleaning, hotels and cafes in *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) documented the difficulties faced by workers in securing basic standards of housing, food and transport. She detailed the anonymity of low-paid workers and the arbitrary treatment they received at the hands of supervisors.² Since then *Bait and Switch* (2005), presents a personalised account of white-collar unemployment, in which educated Americans 'in transition' submit themselves to numerous consultants, networking events, and seminars, in search of leads, interviewing tips, résumé help and support from fellow unemployed white collar workers. The prospects for a healthy and secure life are little better for those with skills and university degrees who now form part of the 'disappearing middle' (See also Mahler 2003).

Spanning the academic/popular divide, Richard Sennett (1998) compared contemporary work practices with those that formed part of an ethnographic study undertaken a quarter of a century earlier. His accounts of the de-skilling process involved in making bread in a Boston bakery, or processing accounts in an IBM office were balanced by a cautionary note that the old world of work should not be sentimentalised. Sennett recognised that 'old' jobs were based on physically hard labour, exclusion of women, indigenous and immigrant workers, and strict hierarchies. He argued that the 'new' world of work, based on growing inequality and 'flexible' social relationships, pays scant regard for the non-work life of employees. It breaks down solidarity in the workplace, threatens community involvement and civic participation, and lays down new moral values where respect is devalued and inequality grows.³

These are not the case studies or stories to be found in the mainstream literature on workplace learning. Low paid workers in retail, cleaning, hospitality, aged and child care are not the knowledge workers that attract most interest. They are in many ways invisible. For unions, changes in the structure of employment and the sharp decline in membership density has posed new, urgent challenges, to find ways to grow again by winning the confidence of unorganised workers and new entrants to the workforce. Unions have been forced to confront the challenge of organisational renewal and to develop new ways of working and learning.

Organising Out of Crisis

In Australia, the first step for unions in accepting the need to change was to take stock of where the labour movement stood when the Labor Party lost government in 1996. The Australian labour movement, not just the left wing, or the radicals, but the whole movement, was clearly in trouble. A number of reasons can explain the specific conditions that led to a weakening of trade unionism in Australia, as elsewhere, from around 1980. These include the ending of the exceptional, and historically atypical, economic conditions that had existed from the 1940s to the 1970s. There had been a drastic restructuring, relocation, and removal from economic centrality of many industries that had been the bastions of trade union organisation for a whole era, such as the ports, or the car industry. Privatisation meant that formerly heavily unionised workforces were reduced in number through large-scale redundancies. The restructuring of employment created a labour market that is turbulent, unstable and based on an increasing number of precarious jobs. Unionised industries and large-scale workplaces where solidarity was traditionally learnt have been broken up.

These labour market changes had been accompanied by internal union changes that had produced a dual effect. Firstly there had been a withering of union delegate structures, workplace union activity, rank and file decision-making, and democratic practice and involvement in union affairs. The ALP-ACTU Accord years had weakened the capacity of unions to respond to the attacks of the incoming Howard Coalition government in 1996. Secondly there was a 'subjective factor' — the demoralisation of a whole generation of working-class militants, especially after 1991. Many had been formed politically by the old Communist Parties. They experienced disarray as a result of the demise of most organised socialist politics, and this had an impact on the formation of a new generation of political union activists (Brown 2006a).

The weakening of unions was made all the more apparent with intensifying legislative restrictions on the rights to organise, and the removal of legal union rights and preferences. Most recently the 2005 WorkChoices legislation has given unprecedented power to employers in the workplace and was accompanied by political commentary making explicit its agenda to render unions irrelevant.

Confronted by these factors, by a stark decline in union membership numbers and density rates and by a lack of presence in new growth industries, Australian trade union leaders from the mid-1990s adopted what became known as the 'organising model'. This was seen as the best means of achieving membership growth and re-establishing union vitality. The crisis stimulated a paradigm shift that emphasised new education methods and part of an organising strategy, as well as the forging of community alliances and the development of new political tactics.

The organising model's primary focus is to achieve renewed growth in membership. It envisages the optimal way of achieving this as being through the establishment of a new relationship between members and the union. This

involves building new structures based on a renewed layer of activists and utilising new targeted organising techniques. The aim is to shift the relationship between member and union from a transactional one, to one that is instead participatory or even 'transformational'. Members are encouraged and supported to assume leadership roles in the workplace and the union, and in the process to transform union structures. (Oxenbridge, 1998: 76) The role of the union official is not to solve individual member problems but instead to act as educator and facilitator of localised activism. The emphasis is on developing measures that promote activism amongst members, including, critically, workplace delegates. The anticipated benefits are that unions can become more democratic, more resilient to employer and government attack, better placed to coalesce with other social movements and community groups, and better able to stretch limited union resources.

There is now a substantial literature that debates and describes aspects or activities in the organising model as it is being applied in the USA (Bronfenbrenner 1998; Fletcher & Hurd 1998; Feekin & Widenor 2002, Rooks 2002, 2004; Lerner 2003, M. Yates 2003, Lopez 2004, Ganz 2004, Milkman & Voss 2004); in Australia (Crosby 2002, 2005; Cooper 2003, Ellem 2003; Griffin & Moors 2004; Peetz, Houghton & Pocock 2004; Brown 2006); the UK (Fairbrother 2000, de Turbeville 2004, Fiorito 2004; Heery & Adler 2004 and Carter 2006); in Canada (Yates 2002, Kumar & Schenk 2006,) and in comparative studies (Carter & Cooper 2002, Widenor & Feekin 2002, Fairbrother & Yates 2003).

Changing Education

In Australia, education was allocated a central role in this renewal process. The ACTU, in a series of reports, spelt out the connecting role that education should play in developing organising capacity (ACTU 1999, 2003, 2004, Crosby 2002). In addition to providing training for union officers, union education was seen as a means of developing new layers of activists who would rebuild 'strong and effective' unions at the enterprise level:

'Activism and commitment are the lifeblood of unions. Educating delegates and developing activists is the key to strong and effective unions in the workplace. It is the basis for union growth.' (ACTU 1999, 11)

The new education and organising practices therefore required labour educators and organisers to see their roles, and hence their practice, in different and broader terms that included theorist, consultant, facilitator and organiser (Fletcher 1998, Crosby 2002, Yates 2003).

The coalition government had abolished the Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA) soon after winning office in 1996 and had thus removed a publicly funded authority that provided training for union delegates and officials. For a period union education was disoriented as new structures were established to replace TUTA. Eventually the ACTU established a national Organising Centre (renamed in 2005 the Education and Campaign Centre) and a national pro-

gram, called Organising Works, for recruiting new, young organisers. Later in 2003, with the funding support of the NSW and Victorian ALP governments, a Trade Union Education Foundation modules and competencies (Brown 2006b).

In general, union education programs have emphasised three aspects of the organising model. Instrumental approaches, usually focused on 'organising skills', involve techniques such as learning how to complete industry and enterprise mapping, how to devise focused 'blitz' recruiting campaigns, and so on. They also involve communicative techniques, with new attention being paid to listening skills and one-on-one communication. Trainees learn to identify issues nominated by members, establish contacts with non-unionists and community groups, and develop critical understanding. This includes analysis of the reasons why unions need to change; the changed economic, employment and legal environment; the need to develop new activists; and ways to devise new strategies for labour to influence economic change and community development.

This third area is the least developed, highlighting the challenge involved in moving from the narrower 'how-to' of organising to a critical understanding of the 'why' of organising and change. It therefore helps trainees face the challenge of translating the theory of organising into practice. The important lesson is that learning new techniques is not sufficient by itself for introducing the significant cultural and organisational change envisaged by the model.

Moving to an organising model confronts unions with the task of facilitating and managing their own organisational and cultural change. A major issue is the need for unions to 'transform' themselves internally before they can effectively undertake external organising. Thus changing the organisation must accompany or precede organising for change. American and Australian experience points to the impact on union staff of changed expectations about their roles. Where staff had acted as mini-lawyers representing individuals in cases and grievances, they are now expected to train delegates to resolve workplace problems and mobilise members. Union staff are expected to identify potential leaders and recruit them to organise and mobilise local members and take up leadership training. This means that the power associated with being the voice of the union should in theory pass from union staff to delegates and members (Silton 2001, Fletcher & Hurd 1998, Eisenacher 1999, Milkman & Voss 2004).

For some union staff and in some unions there is tension and conflict over the best model to employ. Similarly there is quite an uneven understanding and application of the organising model. While most if not all unions salute the flag of organising, there is less evidence that the changes necessary to give life to that model are being implemented. An important distinction needs to be made between efforts to exhort and/or inspire union organisers to try harder and the structural changes that are needed to facilitate growth. The need for fundamental structural change has been advanced most strongly in the American union movement. Stephen Lerner argues that much of the American labour movement's failure to grow can be put down to unions not trying hard enough, but he makes the case that too many unions continue to believe that

the way to overcome this growth failure is to devote more resources to enthuse unions into organising. The assumption is that if only organisers had a better understanding of the nature of the crisis and were inspired enough to believe they could win, then results would flow. Lerner suggests that this misses the vital point that it is the union structures themselves that prevent successful organising, and are in need of overhaul. Education and inspiration are insufficient to overcome those obstacles:

Continuing to hide behind this rhetoric [of education and inspiration] is dangerous, because it prevents us from confronting the politically explosive and emotional issues of the failure of most unions to organise or protect their own industries, even while they organise in industries where they have no density or strength (Lerner 2003: 18)

These issues raise the question of how unions facilitate and manage internal organisational change. How is the learning among union staff around these new ways of working facilitated or organised? How is the balance between individual and organisational learning, and between formal and informal learning achieved? Does the required education and development incorporate operational, expressive and critical learning? And how is the balance between member control and staff expertise managed?

Re-Thinking Work and Learning in an Organising Union

One union that has taken very seriously the need to re-structure and to discover new ways of working and learning is the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU), which covers low paid workers predominantly concentrated in three areas — property services (cleaning and security); hospitality (hotels and casinos) and human services (child care, aged care, education).

The LHMU's 130,000 members make it one of Australia's ten largest unions. Like most Australian unions it has a federal structure with a National Office and State branches. It has a cohesive leadership group with strong support for its organising strategy, although implementation was introduced at different paces, with different emphases and according to different state conditions. The union does not have an Education Unit, nor State based educators, and there has been a growing dissatisfaction with short course provision. Officials question whether what is learned in courses is being transferred to the day-to-day practice of campaigns and whether organisers are being equipped to respond to the changing industrial/organising situations that arise.

In the 1990s the LHMU, like many unions, had essentially three types of union official. An elected group of executive officers (Secretaries and assistant Secretaries) sat at the top of the pyramid and beneath them were two distinct columns of Industrial Officers on one side and Organisers on the other.

Organisers were expected to do a wide range of activities — recruit, handle grievances, bargain, and campaign. Typically their area of activity was defined geographically rather than by specific industry or employer. Management was very loose, work programming limited to some benchmarking around the

number of workplace visits expected in a day and performance was often assessed branch wide on a six-monthly basis.

The union adopted a new approach to organising and growth in 1998. It decided that it needed to change if it was to halt a decline in membership that looked as if it could become steady and possibly irreversible. The national leadership decided that to win back power in the industries that set the standards for pay and conditions for its members it had to change the way it worked. Central to the change was the decision to make organising the heart of union operations. Organisers were placed in teams and new positions of Lead Organiser were created. 'Leads' were intended to be more than just a new level in the hierarchy; they were expected to plan their team's work within the overall branch and union plan. Leads responsibilities that included managing a team of other staff (formerly peers), monitoring and reporting on progress against specific targets, mentoring, coordinating, briefing and de-briefing, responding to employer manoeuvres, overseeing and advocating for resources to meet the plan's objectives, educating, in some cases providing pastoral support, and identifying potential activists. These roles had not previously been part of their work and represented a major change in the way staff worked.

Two state branches were the first to whole-heartedly adopt the changes and re-structure staff and resources. In the first years of implementation the branches achieved membership growth averaging around 10 percent per year and won support from their state conventions to increase membership fees that would be devoted to organising. One branch mobilised members to win commitment from the State Labor government to restore privatised contracts for the cleaning of public schools to within the public sector. These successes helped cement support for the new direction, giving a boost to other branches to adopt the new structures and organising strategies (Crosby 2005).

Since then further phases of the model have been developed as the union has moved from its first attempts at 'issues based organising' to identifying industry priority areas for growth. Today the structure is very different — it is both more hierarchical and more specialist in focus. Leads are expected to be highly focussed as they work to a single industry plan or campaign plan. They are expected to conduct daily briefing and debriefing sessions with the organisers in their team. Detailed numerical tracking of activity and outcomes is increasingly the norm. The union's leaders stress three outcomes as paramount — increasing membership, activating workers, and developing rank and file leaders. The Lead function continues to change in line with the shift to targeted industry organising. The duties originally allocated to Leads were subsequently seen as being too large and so were split into two roles: Strategic Leads, focussed on the bigger picture, and Operational Leads, more micro focussed on plan implementation and staff development.

As the union's understanding of organising strategy and methods developed, technical systems to support organising and the emphasis on growth were introduced. Additional specialist functions of corporate research, community campaigning and political coordination were added to the more traditional communications officer roles, in order to support and resource the in-

dustry campaigns. The need for overall effective coordination of these different functions thus became crucial. The aim was to align the union's goals, organising activities, support systems and new ways of learning, in order to embed a commitment to ongoing development.

This latest approach was reflected in two large-scale campaigns in 2006–2007. One was in the area of private child care, a rapidly growing business activity and one where the union had very little coverage, as child care had traditionally been provided by public sector or community based organisations. An intense and disciplined nationally coordinated campaign resulted in rapid membership growth over a six month period in the face of a very hostile employer, and among workers who were considered to be very difficult to organise (Brown, forthcoming).

The second, the 'Clean Start' campaign in the cleaning industry, has been perhaps the largest nationally coordinated organising campaign in Australian labour history. Centred on hotels and large city buildings, this campaign has been international in effort in that it is a joint effort with the New Zealand Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and is focussed on both Australia and New Zealand. It has also reflected other aspects of the model under development. It set out to involve non-union organisations as campaign partners, seeking to win community support for the rights of low paid workers and to exercise leverage against the small number of owners in non-industrial ways. At the centre of the campaign have been the faces and stories of ordinary workers, using their experience to speak directly to other workers. (LHMU 2006)

Each stage of the union's change process since 1998 has thrown up new questions and challenges. These have emerged from the practice of instigating and managing organisational change, and have resulted in a re-thinking traditional ways of doing union work and of organising education and learning. The scale of the Clean Start campaign however exposed a number of obstacles requiring further assessment. Successful management of these challenges should in turn lead to further adjustment in the union's development. In addition to the expected employer intransigence these obstacles include the very size of the task, the large number of organisers involved, the inexperience of many of the organisers, and the complexity of the coordination effort.

Education and Development

Adopting the organising model and following it through, means that unions have to be open to exploring new ways of working. Being confronted by the need to attract new members and to respond to a rapidly changing industrial and political environment, means they have had to become open to new ideas and to question traditional ways of working and knowing. Although the LHMU has drawn on methods being implemented overseas, it has not been able simply to apply a blueprint without adapting it to very different Australian conditions.

In recent years the union's leaders have become more sceptical of the value of education, understood as short courses. They question the effectiveness of

such courses, their relevance to the organising strategies being pursued, and their applicability to the new types of campaigns being developed. Yet these leaders also recognise the importance of developing staff understanding, techniques and knowledge. Instead of talking about *education* they refer to the *development* needs of staff and the union. In scoping a research program to investigate how Leads were working in the new system, the union identified the need to build an organisational culture and an approach to learning that would enable officials, staff and activists to understand and critically analyse the world around them. They would all need a clear understanding of the nature of an organising union and of their own role in it. In order to carry out the tasks required to implement industry plans and build a powerful union, they needed political and organisational understanding. Rather than relying on attending courses, the union wanted to create space in the workplace for critical thought and analysis, as part of the process of developing a 'thinking union'.

Three themes found in the literature on learning organisations are relevant to the union's search for new ways of fostering learning and development. These are the themes of structuring organisations to enhance performance; facilitating individual learning and development; and ensuring that organisations adapt quickly to changes in the external environment. Argyris and Schon argue that there can be no organisational learning without individual learning, but that individual learning by itself is an insufficient condition for organisational learning. An organisational climate receptive to change and learning is difficult to achieve in practice. In unions, as elsewhere, entrenched aspects of organisational culture tend to place the needs of the individual clearly below those of the organisation. Argyris and Schon identify three levels of learning, which can be matched to the needs of the union staff working in a changing environment. Level I is operational learning against norms built into operating plans; Level II is strategic learning when existing goals are modified to match changes in the external environment; and Level III learning is related to questions of purpose and wider community values. (Argyris & Schon 1981, Garavan 1997, Coopey 1997)

More recently the concept of productive reflection at work has been used to identify how individual learning can be integrated with organisational learning. Productive reflection is less concerned with the individual independent learner and more focused on the context and purpose of work. Reflection in such settings has to be a collaborative effort if it is to influence the work undertaken by groups or teams. (Cressey and Boud, 2006) The six key features can be summarised as:

1. The intent is organisational rather than individual, and the orientation is collective rather than individual;
2. Reflection is necessarily contextualised within work, and connects learning and work;
3. Productive reflection involves multiple stakeholders and connects players;
4. It has a generative rather than instrumental focus: rather than working out how to manage a situation, it is about generating new possibilities;
5. It has a developmental character;

6. Reflection is an open, unpredictable process; it is dynamic and changes over time.

Having reduced its reliance on short courses⁴, the LHMU has nonetheless pursued a program of educational opportunity even if it is not overtly recognised, or named as such, either by the staff or by the leadership. Informal and non-formal work-based programs have been successful to the extent of winning support among staff and officials for the organising model and its key elements. These include occasional staff exchanges in other State branches especially on specific organising campaigns; group exchanges and placements of Lead Organisers with the US Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU); work on nationally coordinated campaigns such as in Child Care and Clean Start; and planned events such as national union seminars and state branch conventions. Until recently such activities were unlikely to have been identified as 'education'.

The experience of how the teams and Leads have developed has also resulted in important changes to the approach to daily work. For instance, activities like debriefing were initially as much about monitoring and scrutinising staff, tallying member growth and so on. Now Leads and Organisers are encouraged to see this task, along with other activities such as participating in recruiting blitzes and placements in other States, as experiential learning opportunities, and could be seen as 'reflection-on-action'. However the responsibilities and expectations placed on the staff occupying these new and pivotal positions, along with the growth and new campaign focus, have revealed new learning needs and exposed areas of staff development that have been ignored in the past.

The Leads suggest that they need support in areas such as mentoring, both for themselves and in their role as mentors; in supervising staff; managing time; and undertaking political education. They also express a need to acquire computer skills, especially in using ICT and the sophisticated membership database. Other issues raised by Leads during interviews included their roles in inducting new staff, including short term member organisers, in managing inexperience, in assisting new staff to understand the culture of the union and its industries, and in counselling and being alert to retaining staff⁵.

Working out how to facilitate this workplace learning is a big challenge, especially when the immediate tasks of growth and defence are so demanding and occupy so much attention and time.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the 21st century, the environment confronting union movements in Australia, the US, Canada, the UK and New Zealand, is an inhospitable one. Unions need to continue to defend existing working conditions, to devise ways of recruiting unorganised workers, to make and strengthen alliances with other like-minded organisations, and to articulate a broader vision of the role of organised labour.

In Australia, large-scale opposition has been mobilised against attacks on the right to organise, especially through the Work Choices legislation. New layers of activists, organisers and educators are coming together to rebuild and recast the labour movement. However busyness and determination, while critically important, are insufficient in themselves to shape a new movement. Ideas and vision are what turns the 'how' into the 'why' and sustains people in difficult times.

There is an important role for educators in this process but it is a new role, and one that is still evolving. The LHMU has recognised the importance of learning from the experience of work and through campaigns, which can invigorate education especially where it is collaborative and purposeful. This understanding needs to be harnessed by combining structured learning in the classroom and at work. Just as organising workers or leading a campaign requires planning, preparation, leadership and structure, so too does education. Learning, or development, is an organised process requiring intervention and expertise. Despite the advantages of learning in action, time away from the immediacy of work, with new and different comrades, providing time to think and review new materials and ideas, is still important. The role of educators is to develop the material generated by campaigning into fresh artefacts that can then be used as tools for new learning. A new organic curriculum can provide the basis for reflection, consolidating organisational history and contributing to new organisational knowledge.

Union education programs are supporting the shift to organising, if they meet a number of criteria. Are they increasing membership by helping identify and develop new member activists? Are members being equipped to take initiatives and leadership roles in local campaigns? Is organisational culture shifting among officials and staff? It is important to note that these questions go beyond staff education/development and include broader education initiatives. What of the education programs themselves? Does the pedagogy reflect a new democratic intention? Does it develop frameworks for critical analysis? Has there been a change in the quality of attachment to the union as a result of attending union education programs? Can popular education and contemporary theories of learning support union education?

Despite some successes, Australian unions have yet to make substantial inroads into the areas of fastest employment growth, which attract disproportionate numbers of women, immigrant and young workers. The LHMU is one union that has in recent years borrowed and adapted organising strategies and has made significant progress in some areas of coverage. As one of the most promising developments in Australian unionism, in terms of rebuilding numbers and density and rethinking approaches to union renewal, its initiative is worth closer examination. The union's new style campaigns, if successful, will demonstrate that properly organised, the lowest paid workers can win important gains even under the most restrictive industrial laws in modern Australian history. How education, learning and development can be harnessed will be an important factor in furthering this process.

Notes

- ¹ In the UK for example the 2001 Skills Survey (2001), showed that between 1986 and 2001 there was a 14 per cent decline in the proportion of workers who felt they had a great deal of choice over how they did their work. Moreover the fall was sharpest for professional groups (knowledge workers), from 72 per cent in 1986 to just 38 per cent in 2001 (Felstead et al 2002).
- ² In a parallel vein Elisabeth Wynhausen's (2005) account of low paid service work in Australia covered similar territory, showing that the treatment and experience of Australian and American workers had much in common.
- ³ These are only a selection of important books on the experience of work of those who occupy jobs that are outside the 'knowledge economy'. Others include Moody (1997), Hamper (1991) and Burawoy (2000), an ethnographic work that extends beyond the first world.
- ⁴ It has not ceased participating in short courses as its staff still attend courses delivered by the Education and Campaign Centre (formerly the Organising Centre), notably the Lead Organiser course.
- ⁵ See Roots (2004) and Ganz (2004) for a discussion of issues concerning retention of union and community organisers in the USA.

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