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Exploring the Social Relations of Education and Organizing In the Ontario Minimum Wage Campaign¹

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Abstract: Many of the workers' rights activities going on in Canada today form a nexus of education, union-renewal-oriented organizing, and anti-racist social-change initiatives. My dissertation on *The Social Organization of the Ontario Minimum Wage Campaign* (OMWC) is a case-study exploration of community and union workers' rights organizing throughout the 2001 to 2007 period of the campaign. For my research I employed Institutional Ethnography (IE) to explicate the social relations of class, race, gender and bureaucracy. In this paper I look primarily at the relationship between labour education and workers-rights organizing goals and activities in the last phase of the campaign.

Introduction

Many of the workers' rights activities going on in Canada today form a nexus of education, union-renewal-oriented organizing, and anti-racist social-change initiatives. My dissertation on *The Social Organization of the Ontario Minimum Wage Campaign* (OMWC) is a case-study exploration of community and union workers' rights organizing throughout the 2001 to 2007 period of the campaign to raise the minimum wage to \$10 per hour. The campaign brought together across time and space activist groups, community agencies, and labour organizations, all of whose volunteers, members, clients, educators, officials, and staff were the agents and/or targets of the campaign.

In this research I employed Institutional Ethnography (IE), a praxis-based method of inquiry, a novel application of it in the labour-community workers' rights setting. To develop historicized explications of the OMWC's social organization, I combined in-depth interviews of 21 diversely located community people, workers, staff, labour officials and educators, with document analysis. I also incorporated my own reflections and knowledge, as an activist in the early phase of the campaign.

In this paper I will look at the relationship between labour education and workers-rights organizing goals and activities. I will start by explaining my theoretical orientation. Following that, I will discuss the location of organizing-oriented education as part of labour education today. Finally, I will explore in brief the case of the 2007 phase of OMWC in terms of the education/organizing relationship.

Social Relations, Union Renewal and Labour-Community Organizing

As a result of the declining unionization levels that resulted from neoliberal changes to the global economy in the 1970s, the organizations of unionized workers in the US and Canada have been engaged in various forms of *union renewal* for their basic survival. Revitalization strategies are reflective of community, social, social-movement, or dressed-up business-unionism practices, and vary with union size, labour-market focus, and the influence of community-based. Within social-movement unionism (SMU) practice, a distinction can be made between, on the

one hand, the transformative, democratic-involvement, and mass-mobilization orientation (Ross, 2008) and, on the other hand, the more common “mobilization unionism” (MU). MU is a selective and controlled member-activation approach that is subsumed in the SMU category as a whole (Camfield, 2005). The SMU/MU distinction is conceptually useful for understanding the various forms of worker organizing being carried out today.

Applying the concept of *social relations* offers a way to understand better what is going on when these practices are carried out. Such relations are historically conditioned and always evolving. They are the myriad patterns of complex, coordinated, power-infused, inter-subjective happenings (and our consciousness of them), carried out and lived by individuals in actual places and across real time.

Many theorists have contributed antiracist, feminist and Marxian analyses to develop an understanding of how class, race, and gender have evolved historically and dynamically as social relations (Bannerji, 1987, 1995, 2000; Brand, 1999; Ng, 1993a, 1993b, 1998; Das Gupta, 1996, 2009). While there are various ways of conceptualizing how these relations are connected, an integrated orientation toward class, race, and gender relations can be said to understand racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression as power relations with particular historical origins. They are also ones that have evolved in complex and contradictory ways and are mediated by, and foundational to, contemporary lived experience as inseparable parts of class relations (Acker, 2000; Bannerji, 2005; Camfield, 2004; Ng, 1993a, 1993b). Even though they are profoundly institutionally mediated in contemporary society, social relations are always relations among people.

In addition, particularly in contexts relating to workers’ rights, it is useful to incorporate the idea of *bureaucratic social relations*. Camfield (2010) proposes this way of conceptualizing union bureaucracy as something much more than particular groups of elected officials and staff, or a defined set of roles. His orientation toward bureaucracy helps to uncover how the activity of (working) people is conditioned and constrained by the deeply relational and difficult-to-change formal rules and laws of the state, employers, and unions. Seeing union bureaucracy as simultaneously relational in these ways puts the multiple relationship moments among workers, employers, and labour officials in view at once, and keeps them grounded in the alienation of labour. When combined as a whole in an integrated class-relations perspective, this concept becomes an additional tool in developing an understanding of workers’ combination of struggle and complacency in workplaces, unions, communities, and labour-community campaigns.

Through my OMWC case study I have also conceptualized two contrasting ways to characterize the difference practices within workers’ rights organizing. I build on the concept of mobilization unionism as a variant of union praxis within social movement unionism, and the literature analyses of racialized unionists’ ongoing lack of meaningful involvement in their unions despite years of anti-racist struggle. I thus describe the dominant organizing approach as *pragmatic anti-racist mobilization*. In this practice, anti-racism is mainly an officialdom representation matter, whereby racialized officials who achieve equity seats or staff positions yet only the appearance of power (Edelson, 2009), and memberships as a whole are activated to sign petitions or attend events as needed campaign by campaign. Specific reforms often do result from these efforts. While many community groups also use such implicit mobilization methods, community-based non-workers rights groups often attempt *transformative anti-racist political capacity building*, focusing on developing workers’ and their organizations’ abilities for effective and collective dissent through creating opportunities for ongoing decision-making based participation in campaigns.

Labour Education and Workers-Rights Organizing

Labour education carries on the radical adult-education ideal of learning with a social, rather than solely individual, purpose (Gereluk, Spencer & Briton, 2000). Campaigns and conferences, meetings and events are forums in which members, officials and staff share often-spirited expressions of the need for fundamental social change. Yet, in an era of ongoing crisis that constitutes an all-out assault on working people, unions are responding to employers in concessionary ways that do not reflect either the rank-and-file collectivity or the goals promoted in many educational activities. And unions are particularly implicated in the defense of workers' rights because they are organizations made up of a mix of service-provision, support, and solidarity of and amongst working-class people. They arose historically both to improve working conditions and fight employer and state power and control. While their effectiveness is highly contested, today unions continue to have a central role in the open-ended and relational process of class struggle (Camfield, 2004, p. 436).

Yet, the full purpose of and the relationship between educational planning, delivery, and movement-building activities are not always clear. Looking at the various formulations of what adult education proposes to do (Spencer, 2006), I suggest that social-purpose labour education is not necessarily synonymous with a social-transformation orientation. Education may well have some sort of social-change content and intent (such as, bargaining equity rights) and lead to materially positive bargaining outcomes (such as effective anti-racial harassment language). Nonetheless, such efforts still function overall in a socially reproductive way because of the existing dominant social relations of labour in which the education and application of the learning are carried out. Whatever intentions educators may have, I argue that such conditions allow for the contradictory coexistence of important incremental change moments while still reproducing existing social relations and systems. As Newman (2000) notes,

People's everyday experience and learning can as easily reproduce ways of thinking and acting which support the often oppressive status quo as it can produce recognitions that enable people to critique and challenge the existing order. And even when learning is emancipatory it is not so in some linear, development sense: it is complex and contradictory, shaped as it is by intrapersonal, interpersonal and broader social factors (p. 275-6).

Our struggles to learn and understand do not happen externally to our lives, unions, communities, and workplaces, even if educational moments are created that make this seem to be so. Our learning does not happen either before or "after reality has occurred" (William, in Martin, 1995, p.77). As such, the scope of organizing-oriented education's content, purpose, and participant involvement needs to be looked at relationally with workers' ongoing consciousness development and democratic union/community involvement, as well as with the degree and types of institutional change, to see how workers are actively involved in creating social history as it happens (Newman, 2000).

As the economy has become more global, it is believed that organizing must become more local. Labour Councils are thus seen by many union renewal advocates as "the only existing body capable of organizing the common interests of workers – whether they belong to unions or not – to reach beyond the individual difference of unions and form the basis for a more unified labor movement" (Ness, 2001, p. 13). Self-described as the "largest democratic and popular organization in Canada with over three million members," today the Canadian Labour

Congress (CLC) has under its umbrella 136 district Labour Councils that are regional- and local-level bodies. The broad mission is to get “the working families’ point of view across to business, governments and the general public on issues affecting workers across many unions, sectors and regions” (CLC, 2005). The Toronto and York Region Labour Council (TYRLC) is one of these.

As part of revitalization efforts, the TYRLC developed a strategic plan for 2004 to 2010. Their goal of building labour power is broken down into three tasks: “Building Leadership; Building Power for our Communities; and Organizing Unrepresented Workers” (TYRLC, 2005). A key element of this is building the leadership of workers of colour, as their equity action plan “ask[s] our unions to make the goals of workers of colour participation and leadership a top priority” (TYRLC, 2002).

Consistent with both the union renewal and the social purpose of labour education, the Labour Education Centre (LEC) that was created by the TYRLC in 1987 has as its mission “to build the capacity of unions to plan, develop and deliver training, adjustment and labour education programs that transform the lives of individual members and build strength, solidarity and equity of their unions” (LEC, 2007, p. 3). The deepening gendered and racialized poverty of working people in Toronto led in 2005 to the LEC “activating a coherent labour education framework... informed by an understanding of power relations based on a critical analysis of class, race, and gender in a globalized economy, and seen from an anti-oppression perspective” (LEC, 2005, p.1). They carry out organizational change programs and conduct various train-the-trainer and equity workshops. They also do “Popular Education workshops... as applied to training and development, as well as applied to other union activities like organizing, political action, and coalition building.” (LEC, 2008) An example of the latter was their involvement in the Ontario Minimum Wage Campaign. Ultimately, the LEC’s stated goal is to assist labour in being a “strategic, critical, transformative” vehicle for change and to “help achieve the resurgence of a labour movement that is militant, progressive and democratic” (LEC, 2007, p. 2).

A Mobilization-Unionism Moment of Labour-Community Worker Organizing

The Ontario Minimum Wage Campaign had varying moments of activity and disengagement by various people and organizations, and so offers an opportunity to explore the multitude of relations and issues raised above in a contemporary and specifically Canadian context.

Toronto was the launch point and the geographical fulcrum of the OMWC. Justice for Workers (J4W) launched the campaign. J4W was determined (yet, ultimately unsuccessful) to focus on grassroots, neighbourhood-based, campaign building before seeking substantive political commitment from both unionized labour organizations and community agencies to take the campaign city- and province-wide. The campaign arose from the fightback against the Harris government’s regressive amendments to the *Employment Standards Act* (ESA) in 2000. A combination policy-oriented and activist coalition, the Employment Standards Work Group that formed in 1996 was key in both documenting employment-standards violations and organizing that ESA campaign (Thomas, 2009). In talking with low-waged workers in a range of outreach and organizing efforts, the workers’ rights activists that came to form J4W heard time and again that, while workers were in principle against the Harris government’s imposition of a 60-hour workweek, their biggest problem was the abysmal wages they were earning that forced them into multiple jobs and such long hours of work (TYRLC, 2008, p. 2).

Within two years, the labour-community coalition Ontario Needs a Raise evolved, with varying degrees of community agency and union involvement. The period of the campaign that

went from January 2007 to the October 10, 2007 provincial election was co-ordinated by the TYRLC in conjunction with New Democratic Party (NDP) M.P.P. Cheri DiNovo. In late 2006, she had tabled her private member's Bill 150 to raise the minimum wage in Ontario to \$10.

Speaking on the campaign at a public event in February 2007, TYRLC President John Cartwright talked about how building class unity required building new leadership, building power in our communities and organizing unrepresented workers. When I asked Cartwright what the timeline was for the campaign, and specifically whether the October election might be an implicit endpoint, his response was a general commitment to learning as they went, and not engaging in "drive-by organizing." My point in raising this question was to explore the depth of commitment to building a labour-community relationship over the long-term.

As Camfield (2008) notes though, "Unions often put considerable effort into supporting a political party at election time" (p. 77). I would thus suggest that the timing of the Bill and the TYRLC involvement can be seen largely in this light, especially given the importance the Council puts on the NDP in the TYRLC report on the campaign (TYRLC, 2008). Along with print and electronic petitions, the main tactic in the 2007 phase of the campaign was the holding of community-based meetings in various ethnoracially-diverse, lower-income neighbourhoods around Toronto (TYRLC, 2008). These were organized by TYRLC staff, labour educators through the LEC, and some local community organizations. The messaging and scope of activities seemed largely controlled by the Council President's office, out of which all meeting notices and political framing of the campaign came. The wave of meetings was stopped and started depending on a top-down-determined timeline: they were stopped and victory claimed when the Liberal government announced in April 2007 a phased-in increase to \$10.25 per hour by 2010. It was started again a few months before the October 10, 2007 provincial elections and then stopped again immediately after. My measuring of the stopping and starting is through a combination of a lack of messages on the Labour Council campaign listserv on the topic, a lack of community events, and no general public presence of the issue.

Conclusion

Neither the J4W-led initial phase nor the ONR coalition of the second won the \$10 demand nor led to the building of a low-wage workers' driven movement. I discuss the complex reasons for this elsewhere (Wilmot, forthcoming). The electoral focus of the TYRLC-led phase saw the government's eventual phased-in minimum wage increase to \$10.25 an hour by March 31, 2010. Yet, the "victory" proclaimed by TYRLC officials in public events and writing was not so for most organizers. Many research participants who are or work with unionized and non-union workers generally agreed that the \$10 achievement had a degree of material importance for people. Yet they also thought that the appearance of movement building generated by the TYRLC's momentary activation of union and community connections and people was only that. I contend that this is a key effect of such pragmatic anti-racist mobilization organizing practice. For many people I interviewed, workers' participation did not bring with it access to opportunities for real debate and decision-making. And, education and organizing activities did not lead to developing the worker-driven, lasting coalition relationships needed to build a broad-based movement. Yet, the public appearance of a labour success lives on.

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¹ A version of this paper will appear in Mojab, S. & Carpenter, S. (In press). *Educating from Marx: Gender, Race and Learning*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.