

Labour Unions and Social Capital: Proactive Strategies for the 21st Century

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In *Unions and Learning in a Global Economy: International and Comparative Perspectives*, Bruce Spencer has produced a text that is meant to illustrate “how labour education can contribute to a democratic and liberatory future for working people in the 21st century” (12). Many of the contributing authors are leading labour and adult educators from English-speaking countries, and most of them point towards globalization as one of the preeminent challenges facing the labour movement. In the final section, “Unions and Learning in a Global Economy,” Spencer and Naomi Frankel write, “Many of the initiatives discussed in this book have elements of both accommodation and resistance to current globalization trends” (176). They then note that while some of the initiatives can be seen as proactive, a greater number of labour education courses and programs remain reactive. In 2022, unions can no longer afford to devote a significant amount of time and/or resources to educational movements that are primarily reactive in nature. In this essay, I will draw upon the theories outlined by Herbert Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* and will attempt to explain why some labour leaders demonstrate complacency whilst representing their fellow workers when discussing globalization. I will also discuss the concept of social capital and illustrate how unions can accumulate this form of good will while increasing their presence in civil society.

Herbert Marcuse and Advanced Industrial Societies

In the online article entitled “The Politics of Globalisation” Pierre Bourdieu writes, “Globalisation is not a fate, but a politics. For this reason, a politics of opposition to its concentration of power is possible.” Arguably, he is correct, and yet leading government, corporate, and media officials promote globalization as if it were an inevitable phenomenon that society has little or no control over. Bourdieu then writes, “The neo-liberal politics

of globalisation has also contributed to the weakening of trade unions.” Marcus Widenor and Lynn Feekin echo this comment in “Organizer Training in Two Hemispheres: The Experience in the USA and Australia,” and describe globalization as one of the avenues leading towards the decline of union prominence in these two countries (101). If globalization is in fact responsible for economic hardships within the labour movement, why do so many labour leaders appear to be accepting this ideology as an inevitable fate? Instead of promoting reactive and adaptive strategies to confront the politics of globalization, why don’t these same leaders concentrate on proactive solutions? In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse helps answer these questions when he explains that the mass media, corporate management, and pro-capitalist governments, all combine to promote a false social consciousness, which indoctrinates individuals and hinders their abilities to critically analyze the system in which they live. He further argues that advanced industrial societies use technological progress to increase production and consumption, which, in turn, creates false needs and the perception that one’s standard of living is on the rise.

If rank-and-file workers in the labour movement have been indoctrinated into an economic system based on production and consumption, then they too will believe that they stand to benefit from their increased ability to consume commodities. Because globalization is promoted as a means to increased consumption, any argument put forth by a labour representative running contrary to this ideology appears to be economically unfavorable, and therefore can easily be dismissed in political arenas. Thus, neo-liberal governments, multinational corporations, and the mass media have managed to create a society “which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of the individuals through the way in which it is organized” (4). According to Marcuse, “Such a society may justly demand acceptance of its principles and institutions, and reduce the opposition to the discussion and promotion of alternative policies within the status quo” (4). By focusing on adaptive and reactive educational programs, instead of actually challenging the political ideology of globalization, labour leaders are merely promoting alternate ideas that still fall “within the status quo” of public perception. These reactive policies may be perceived as non-conformist, but they are arguably just another form of conformity within the capitalist hegemonic ideology.

One example of a labour leader promoting reactive strategies which are meant to help labour workers adjust to globalization can be seen in “Programa Integrar in Brazil: Union Intervention in Employment, Development and Education.” In this piece, Fernando Lopes writes about union education in Brazil and explains how the labour movement has reacted to the neo-liberal policies in the 1990s. He makes statements like, “High unemployment aided entrepreneurs in eliminating any possibility of resistance” (121), as well as “At the local union level, workers concerned with these transformations began to place occupational training on their list of priorities” (121). Unfortunately, statements like these are reactive in nature and don’t explain how the labour movement in Brazil can avoid further hardships that may result from future economic globalization plans. The article itself is not without merit, but it is primarily a reactive piece that exists “within the status quo” of globalization acceptance. It does encourage readers to take a critical view of the social problems in Brazil, but it doesn’t challenge the neo-liberal political ideology or offer any tangible proactive solutions.

A second article in *Unions and Learning in a Global Economy* that is reactive in nature is “Union Education in the New South African Democracy.” In this piece, Linda Cooper provides an insightful look into South Africa’s Development Institute for Training, Support and Education for Labour (DITSELA). She outlines how South Africa’s political landscape has uniquely influenced the development of labour education policies, but also notes that it faces the same challenges as other countries with regards to a globalizing society (48). Cooper cites DITSELA’s research report “The Changing Trade Union Organizer,” and indicates that globalization has played a significant role in destabilizing the labour movement and weakening its overall voice in South Africa (47). However, she does not give any indication of how the labour movement can actively challenge globalization before the problems it creates start to materialize. Once again, like the Lopes piece, this article may be informative and educational, but it does not challenge the politics of globalization and leaves the reader with little more than an adaptive response to a labour issue in need of attention. As Tom Nesbit points out in “Learning for Change: Staff Training, Leadership Development, and Union Transformation,” “the crisis confronting the labor movement is not only rooted in globalization or the changing composition of the workforce, but also in the way labor

addresses these issues” (109). Assuming he is correct, if labour wants to progress and develop in the 21st century, it must start seriously focusing on how it confronts the politics of globalization instead of merely maintaining the status quo of adapting to this ideology.

Labour Education and Confronting False Needs

For labour leaders, challenging the political ideology of globalization can be difficult because it would mean that they would be working towards a general paradigm shift in social consciousness. There aren't any definite or immediate solutions, and thus actually trying to develop a methodology that would have any social effect whatsoever could be seen as daunting or even overwhelming. If, however, a labour leader does attempt to argue against any socially accepted ideology, she would almost certainly have to develop some sort of educational program to spread her message. In order to proactively combat the politics of globalization, labour educators will have to help fellow union members critically evaluate their consumption habits, and then help them distinguish between what Marcuse refers to as their vital and false needs. According to Marcuse, “Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate,” (7) belong to the category of false needs. He also explains that false needs are superimposed upon individuals in a manner that represses them and contributes to their overall level of ignorance. He writes:

The only needs that have an unqualified claim for satisfaction are the vital ones—nourishment, clothing, lodging at the attainable level of culture. The satisfaction of these needs is the prerequisite for the realization of all needs, of the unsublimated as well as the sublimated ones. (7)

If senior labour educators and rank-and-file members within the unions can and do in fact become more aware of their false needs, then they will hopefully become more aware of the repressive nature that comes with the politics of globalization. Once this general awareness exists within the labour movement, educators will then be able to start challenging the notion of globalization in other sectors of society.

Unions and Civil Society

If, as Marcuse argues, an advanced industrial society creates false needs, which in turn represses and indoctrinates individuals into a system of ignorance and mass

consumption, then how can labour leaders challenge this ideology in areas that are outside of the labour movement? In “Part of the System or Part of Civil Society: Unions in Australia,” Michael Newman outlines a proactive strategy that encourages unions to play a greater role in civil society. He builds on previous theories outlined by Eva Cox and Robert Putnam and states that civil society represents “those accessible gatherings of people at a local level through which we participate in society and give meaning to our everyday social lives” (163). He then explains that unions for the most part have historically been concerned with representing the economic interests of their own members and have not necessarily focused on the concerns of other groups within local communities. For Newman, this is an area of concern and thus he advises union educators to develop labour programs that will help union officials take a more proactive role in engaging different organizations outside of the union movement.

Unlike many of the articles found in *Unions and Learning in a Global Economy*, Newman offers specific ideas about what unions could be doing in order to ensure greater success in the 21st century. He discusses Bourdieu’s concept of social capital and encourages unions to work on building this form of capital with the idea of establishing a much more prominent social position in local communities. Social capital, according to Bourdieu in “The Forms of Capital,” “is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (248). Newman simplifies this comment and writes, “Social capital is the accumulation of trust as a result of cooperation amongst people, and the more we base our relationships on trust, the more trusting all the parties become and the more trust we create” (165).

If unions do decide to follow the strategies outlined by Newman, they will have to engage in programs that support community development and will have to decide just how they will get involved with these communities. They will have to invest a lot of time and energy with the hopes of gaining public trust, which to some may appear to be a wasteful use of resources. Newman, however, argues that a union’s increased social capital within a community could result in decisive public support when they themselves are in public confrontations with larger corporations or neo-conservative governments. But how can

labour educators actually increase social capital and where should they begin? *In Thinking Union: Activism and Education in Canada's Labour Movement*, Darcy Martin describes the success he has had introducing grassroots educational programs while working with the United Steelworkers of America and the Communications and Electrical Workers of Canada. Of course, it takes time and stamina to help people develop critical thinking habits, but if labour educators like Martin apply their philosophical grassroots approach to education, and then attempt to accumulate social capital using the same methods, perhaps unions will begin to experience a greater degree of acceptance and support from within local communities.

An example of social sectors or groups that unions could reach out to or engage with in civil society would be the various immigrant communities. In "Labour Education for Immigrant Workers in the USA," Kent Wong explains that labour education programs can be used to bring unions and immigrants together. According to Wong, unions can use labour education as "a tool for recruiting and training a new generation of organizers among immigrants themselves, who can bridge the divide between unions and immigrant communities" (70). Wong also identifies participatory conferences as a means to bring diverse groups of unions and community groups together in a manner that will allow them to share experiences and develop relationships (78). By engaging immigrant communities at the local level and offering educational programs that are meant to help any and all immigrants adjust to life in their new countries, unions would not only be playing an important role in civil society they would also stand to gain from an increased level of social capital. In this situation, the key issue for labour educators will then revolve around how they develop courses that are informative as well as culturally sensitive.

Developing Social Capital Within Local Communities: A Canadian Perspective

Canadian unions will not be able to build social capital simply by offering a variety of educational programs to rank-and-file workers and their family members. In "Unions and Learning in a Global Economy," Spencer and Frankel identify the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) Summer Camp for Kids as an example of how labour education can specifically target Canadian youth. They write, "This week-long residential camp introduces the teen-aged sons and daughters of SFL-affiliated union members to trade unionism and social justice issues" (173). They then explain that the camp's long-term goal is to recruit

and encourage future trade union members and activists. According to the SFL website, “Young people between the ages of 13-16 who are children of union members are eligible to attend.” The camp may indeed benefit the families connected to the SFL, but does it really build any social capital outside of this union? I will argue that such a program does not build social capital within communities because it doesn’t reach out to any other organization outside of the affiliated unions. In fact, because the camp openly excludes SFL outsiders from participating, it is possible to view it as an isolationist or a detached program. If unions like the SFL really want to reach out to the Canadian youth, they will have to develop all-inclusive programs that are geared towards various parts of different communities. Union representatives could go directly to public high schools and engage the students in proper classroom settings. They could also get heavily involved with a variety of youth programs and perhaps even sponsor some of them. Helping young people play organized sports like soccer or hockey would go a long way in terms of building social capital with children and their parents.

During the summer of 2022, I travelled to Vancouver, Canada and actively sought out any and all noticeable positive union influences. I chose Vancouver because I grew up in the city and like the old writing cliché, “you write what you know.” Vancouver is also the third largest city in Canada and a decent representative for most North American cities. For the purposes of this paper, I attempted to view the city through the eyes of a casual observer and see if he or she would notice any positive labour union influences. In other words, I wanted to see if unions were building social capital within the city. Unfortunately, after days of walking around the downtown area and extensive trips on the SkyTrain into the suburbs, from a casual observer’s perspective, any union presence in the city is ostensibly non-existent. In fact, the only time I ever heard about union influences in a certain area occurred when I actively sought out the information and asked people about it. After talking to numerous residents, I kept hearing how the majority of Canadians unequivocally “supported the nurses’ union,” which, to my mind, was probably a result of their tireless and life-saving work involving COVID-19. For most of the people I talked to, the only time they ever really heard about other unions was when a particular labour organization was on strike, and this usually conjured up negative images. As D’Arcy Martin

points out in *Thinking Union*, the negative portrayal of unions in the mass media works to undermine the confidence of union members and casts a disparaging light on the entire labour movement (84). Because labour leaders cannot rely on the mass media to portray unions in a positive manner, the development of social capital within local communities becomes even more important. Attempting to build social capital without the support of the media may make the task a little more difficult but not impossible.

A prime example of organizations accumulating social capital despite facing global pressure from hostile neo-liberal governments and multinational media conglomerates, can be seen in the way Hezbollah and Hamas have garnered support from their local communities in Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories respectively. Governments from the United States and Canada have labeled Hezbollah and Hamas “terrorist organizations,” and international multimedia outlets like Time Warner Inc. have subjected these two groups to a constant barrage of negative criticism. And yet, both Hezbollah and Hamas enjoy a significant amount of local support in their respective countries. In fact, the political wing of Hamas was even democratically elected to govern the Palestinian Authority in 2006. Organized unions in Canada can learn from the success of these two groups and perhaps emulate some of their policies or strategies. Unlike unions in Canada, both Hamas and Hezbollah play a proactive role in civil society. They help set up a variety of social services like hospitals and educational facilities and are heavily involved in helping the less fortunate members of their local communities. In *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein provides an example of the community rebuilding efforts, which Hezbollah engaged in after Lebanon had been heavily bombed by Israel in the 2006 war.

Within days of the ceasefire, Hezbollah’s neighborhood committees had visited many of the homes hit by the air attacks, assessed the damage and were already handing out \$12,000 in cash to displaced families to cover a year’s worth of rent and furnishings (555).

Of course, as Klein notes, the U.S. press denounced Hezbollah’s efforts as a form of bribery, and there is no question that it is a politically motivated organization, but regardless of its true motives, the fact remains that it does earn social capital while reaching out and helping fellow community members.

Conclusion

So why is this topic so important? One only needs to look back to the “Lehman Brothers crisis” in 2008. In December of that same year, the US government pledged a \$700-billion bailout package for US financial institutions. American auto executives from General Motors, Ford Motor Company, and Chrysler secured financial support or “bailout money” worth over \$14 billion. The potential collapse of the three largest auto manufacturers from the United States created panic and increased fears of a massive global economic recession. The mainstream media identified the United Auto Workers (UAW) union salaries as being partly responsible for placing the giant North American car manufacturers at a competitive disadvantage when compared to their non-unionized Japanese counterparts. All three major North American auto manufacturers streamlined their businesses and cut back on thousands of union jobs. It could be argued that General Motors, the Ford Motor Company, and Chrysler have been overproducing an incredible number of cars every year, well beyond the vital needs of consumers. Is this overproduction necessary and how did so many people become so dependent on the mass consumption of automobiles? Perhaps it is time for labour educators to take notice of western consumption habits and start focusing on teaching union workers to critically analyze their vital and false needs. If union leaders and educators focus their efforts on building social capital in civil society, they will be able to build strong grassroots connections and not be as economically reliant on governments and multinational corporations. Quite simply, union workers have faced and are still facing an unprecedented economic downturn. Adaptive and reactive strategies to the politics of globalization do not appear to be working, and therefore unions need to become more proactive and develop strategies on local levels that will ultimately help them amass social capital.

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(2022年11月1日受理、2022年11月21日採択)

