

## **Union Roles In Workplace Literacy**

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Today's global economy is a constantly changing, dynamic environment that has a profound impact on how we work. It has forced our businesses to downsize corporations, flatten management structures, create flexible technologies, and, most importantly, begin developing skilled workers who can compute, communicate, and operate sophisticated equipment at high levels of proficiency. These "new" workers must possess the intellectual and emotional flexibility necessary to adapt to changing situations, to understand what needs to be learned, and to learn it without disrupting performance. They must be able to cope with ambiguous situations, make good decisions quickly, and use their creative skills to solve workplace dilemmas (Carnevale, 1991). Unfortunately, many American workers do not have the skills they need to survive this new economy with their jobs intact. They have seen their jobs lost to foreign workers, automated processes, technological advances, and productivity improvement initiatives like "re-engineering the company." These workers need help but, so far, our nation has not developed an effective means for ensuring these workers have the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to succeed in today's economy.

The American Council of Competitiveness recently said: "... achieving a well-trained workforce should be the result of an integrated process that embraces developing occupational standards, improving school-to-work programs, continuing worker training on the job, and providing new government structures which offer consolidated services to workers, businesses, and training institutions." (Kleiman, 1993). This article contends organized labor unions can play a vital role in resolving our workforce deficiencies and that unions, companies, and government must rise above animosities incubated during decades of mistrust and work together to develop cooperative training initiatives. It focuses specifically on labor's responsibilities in this new relationship and examines labor's role in providing needed literacy and training programs. It describes labor's historic role in basic and workplace literacy training, lists skilled workers need in the "new" workplace, describes exemplary union-management literacy efforts, and suggests considerations unions must recognize when developing these programs for their members.

### **Labor's Historical Role**

Since the late 19th century, labor unions have helped their members manage workplace changes by making sure the education and training they needed was available. Labor leader Samuel Gompers, during a speech to the National Education Association in 1916, acknowledged labor's commitment to lifelong learning when he said: "...education must continue throughout life if the individual is to really live and make progress...unions realize that education is an attitude toward life—an ability to see and understand problems and to utilize information and forces for the best solution of life's problems" (Sarmiento, 1989). Unions have traditionally advocated equal educational opportunities, labor representation on all educational boards, federal financing for public schools, and access to all educational levels for union members and their children.

During the 1920s, the Central Labor Council established "Labor Colleges" to provide education for union members. These colleges cooperated with local universities to provide college diplomas. In 1923, the National University Extension Association set up a standing committee on labor education. As workplace change accelerated, education and training began playing a broader role in unions' strategies for helping their members. In 1947, unions pressed passage of the G.I. Bill to provide educational opportunities for returning veterans and were later able to get the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947 amended to allow employer contributions to educational benefits trust funds.

Educational trust funds have become commonplace in major collective bargaining agreements with a tuition aid program found in about 90% of all agreements. Unions have negotiated five types of programs in which these funds may be used including tuition aid programs that provide tuition support for employees, their families, and their dependents for study at educational institutions; education and training trust funds that are funded through employer contributions and support union operated training centers and colleges; educational leave programs that support union members during extended absences for educational purposes; educational loan programs that provide low interest loans for union members who elect to take qualified courses; and apprenticeship programs that provide technical skill training for younger workers. Companies have committed about \$700 million to the tuition program but only about 5% of the eligible members are participating in the program (Wojciechowska, 1989).

During the early 1980s, unions vigorously opposed the regressive federal educational policies proposed by President

Reagan stating, "What the Reagan administration has proposed is not simply a cut in programs but a reduction in the quality of education. Labor supports a massive national effort to provide quality education for all children and young people, wherever they may live, whatever their race or national background, whatever their family income. Only through such efforts can we realize our goals and objectives of providing equal opportunity for Americans to acquire the necessary tools for better life" (AFL-CIO, 1981, p. 13). Included among the reductions that the unions opposed were massive federal cuts in the basic educational aid that had been distributed to the states.

Unions also recognized during this period that government and employer sponsored training programs would not provide the skills their members really needed and began developing an unprecedented number of worker education and training programs. State AFL-CIO federations in Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin developed significant programs during this time with eight federations receiving federal funds for their programs. These programs were among the most innovative developed during this decade and often used actual job materials to help workers learn within a functional context (Sarmiento, 1989, p. 3). In some companies, cooperative company-union literacy programs were begun during this period and were tied to a broader strategy to promote job security and advancement. The companies and unions involved in these programs recognized that raising an individual worker's basic technical skill levels could also benefit the employer and the union. The individual workers gained job security as they gained skills, the employers experienced productivity increases and higher profits, and the unions continued to improve the lives of their members by improving their working conditions and insuring respect for their dignity and rights as workers. In these stable environments, literacy programs flourished and are now institutionalized. A limited number of these programs are described in another section of this paper.

#### **Skills Workers Need in the "New" Workplace**

Current reports estimate 27 million American adults are functionally illiterate and 45 million adults are marginally literate (Jurmo, 1989). Unfortunately, no universally applicable definition of "literacy" and "workplace literacy" exists and most educational researchers have concluded that these terms must be defined within the context of a specific business' skill needs to be relevant.

During the past 10 years, three blue ribbon panels have suggested multidimensional skill sets they believe workers must have to be effective in today's work environment. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), a research project established by Congress, defined literacy in a 1985 report as "...using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (National Assessment of Education Progress, 1985). In *Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want*, (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1988), the American Society for Training and Development proposed that workers needed communication skills, decision making capabilities, and internal motivations as well as strong basic skills to be effective. The United States Department of Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, in *What Work Requires of Schools* (United States Department of Labor, 1991), suggested effective workers needed advanced personal management, group communication, and information management skills in addition to being able to read, write, compute, listen, and speak at effective levels. This report also stated that decision making would be an important skill and that effective workers must be able to reason through a problem and apply creative solutions.

Resourceful companies establish their own "contextual" workplace literacy definition based on their specific needs and work with their unions to develop appropriate programs. Unfortunately, most companies have provided only limited assistance according to a 1989 study by the Commission on Workforce Quality and Labor Market Efficiency. Employers invested only 1½% of their total payroll in formal worker training courses. Though this \$30 billion investment seems formidable, it represents only \$278 per employee and is spread unevenly among employee classifications. Production and assembly workers benefited from only 14% of the formal, employer sponsored training courses during this period. A vast majority of employer investment was made in higher wage clerical, sales, marketing, or management employees (Commission on Workforce Quality and Labor Market Efficiency, 1989). A study conducted during the same period by the Society For Human Resource Management showed only one in four companies was offering remedial reading, writing, or arithmetic courses for workers. Most companies contended they did not have the expertise or funds for offering such courses indicating, suggests the Society, that most firms did not see 'the basic skills crisis' as their problem yet (Labor Notes, 1989).

### **The Union's Stake in Education and Training Programs**

Union sponsored education and training programs can be key parts of a broad union agenda for responding to change in the workplace and can significantly impact union members. Unions are the most natural vehicle for developing the trained, empowered workforce our country needs to regain its productivity and competitiveness for three reasons. First, union members go to their union for help with many different workplace problems. They are comfortable receiving advice from union brethren and have a high trust level. Extending this relationship to include counseling regarding education, training, and career development would be natural. Second, the union is the one organization that unconditionally represents the potential learners' interests and is an organization the workers have elected themselves. They trust it to make decisions on their behalf. Third, unions understand a given job's requirements and can provide qualified answers to questions management must resolve when planning changes. Without union involvement in the planning stages, work rules or process changes may create unsafe, unproductive processes and could demoralize a company's workforce. Fourth, unions are more likely to involve their members in planning, designing, and implementing a program. Through this process, the union can ensure workers develop supportive attitudes. This validation process is helpful in creating members' acceptance and minimizes disruption, reduces productivity losses, limits costly grievances, and smoothes negotiations.

For unions, workplace changes can directly support their fundamental mission of service to their members. Through participation with management, unions can protect their members' employment rights in the face of a changing work environment and, in fact, may improve their job security through additional training or new work rules. This opportunity for additional job security and advancement extends across all three aspects of work—the physical equipment, the content of workers' jobs, and the skills workers use. Management should value unions' eagerness to accept greater responsibility and accountability since most studies clearly indicate productivity increases can be directly linked to workers' perceived involvement levels.

Workplace literacy programs, as part of a broad education and training effort, can further a union's local objectives as well as serve its members. A union sponsored education or training program that includes basic literacy skills can help a union attain six fundamental objectives: protecting union members' employment security by providing skills to help them

pass licensing or certification tests; increasing members' job advancement opportunities with their current employer by negotiating new career opportunities that allow their members to use their newly acquired skills to take advantage of the job restructuring that is occurring at many companies; increasing members' basic wage levels and security like those union members studied by Rand Corporation who found that on-the-job training participants earned 16.9% more than their counterparts and were less vulnerable to layoffs; helping members qualify for new jobs while protecting their occupational health by diversifying their skills through advocating high quality education public education to guarantee all citizens achieve a literacy level that ensures they will have equal opportunity for gainful employment; and recruiting new members and retaining current members by establishing educational benefits and training programs that meet union members' diverse career and personal development needs (Indiana AFL-CIO, 1990, pp. 2-5; Sarmiento, 1990, p. 2-6).

Recent national attention on the value of increased worker skills may give unions a stronger position for leveraging employer support for new or broader programs. Edward Denison, in a 1987 worker productivity study, concluded that advances in knowledge enhanced productivity by 54% while worker education resulted in a 26% increase. By comparison, increases in machinery, plant, and equipment investments yielded only 15% productivity growth (Cunningham, 1988). Ideally, management and unions can both "win" if they coordinate their training efforts and increase workers' knowledge and skills.

#### **Worker-Centered Strategies**

Anthony Sarmiento, a respected labor educator, has long advocated union sponsored educational strategies that are "worker-centered" or based on the comprehensive needs of the union's members. Worker-centered strategies acknowledge that learning is a democratic, open process of exchange and encourage program content that supports personal as well as professional growth. Individual needs and differences are respected with each learner or union member taking responsibility for setting personal learning goals. This approach allows workers to meet a wide variety of needs, prepare for difficult life situations, gain much needed confidence, and exert control over their own lives.

Sarmiento has developed seven key concepts unions must recognize when developing "worker-centered" programs. First, worker-centered approaches should build on what workers already know and should emphasize worker strengths, knowledge, and skills

rather than deficiencies. This requires that the providers conduct individualized assessments to ensure union members' individual goals are met. Second, worker-centered approaches should seek to educate the "whole" union member rather than focusing on a narrow skill set needed to succeed in the workplace. It enriches their abilities as parents, mates, citizens, unionists, and employees. Third, worker-centered approaches should involve workers in all planning, designing, programming, delivering, and evaluating steps for the entire program. Decision making is a participatory rather than paternal process that ensures the program is developed using the "bottom-up" approach (Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989). Fourth, worker-centered approaches should ensure equal program access for all union members. Regardless of their skill levels or job classifications, all members should have equal access to program opportunities if funding is available. Fifth, worker-centered strategies should be adult oriented. The curriculum content, delivery structure, and teaching style should be compatible with accepted adult learning theories. Participants should be responsible for developing their own educational goals to build their self-esteem as they achieve these goals. Teachers and participants should be cast as equals (Sarmiento, 1989, p. 9). Sixth, worker-centered approaches should ensure all records are confidential. Program records should not be available to managers for evaluation or assessment needs. Some participants will also be leery of involving themselves in a literacy program due to embarrassment over "not being as smart as the others." Their right to privacy must be protected at any cost. Seventh, worker-centered approaches should integrate basic literacy development programs into broader worker-centered education and training strategies. These strategies may be coordinated with an even broader, cooperative strategy with management (Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989).

#### **Exemplary Programs**

The collective bargaining environment is an arena in which exemplary workplace literacy programs can be developed as labor and management find common ground and establish approaches that meet both the economic needs of the company and the career needs of the individual union members. Clearly stating company needs; determining current workers' proficiencies; developing agreed upon remedies; and funding programs that can benefit employees, employers, and unions are common actions within the collective bargaining process and can occur in a way that does not threaten either company or union interests.

In a union environment, the collective bargaining agreement

protects workers who choose to participate in personal development programs and provides the job security they need to be willing to increase productivity. Workers trust union sponsored programs because they know they fit into a well-established labor-management relationship. Examples of workplace literacy or training programs that have benefited both management and labor interests follow.

#### **United Steelworkers - Bethlehem Steel Corporation**

In their recent agreement, the United Steelworkers of America and Bethlehem Steel Corporation agreed to set aside at least \$300,000 per month for the four-year duration of their contract to fund supplementary training for their workers. The parties agreed they shared a vision that "...workers must play a significant role in the design and development of their jobs, their training and education, and their working environment. In a world economy, many changes are unforeseen and unpredictable. Corporate success, worker security, and employee satisfaction all require that workforce and individual workers be capable of reacting to change, challenge, and opportunity (Sarmiento, 1989). The \$14.4 million allocated to supporting this additional training is, curiously, more than the United States Department of Education's 1991 budget for its national workplace literacy program.

#### **Communications Workers of America, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and American Telephone and Telegraph**

During the mid-1980s, the Communications Workers of America, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and American Telephone and Telegraph formed a nonprofit foundation, the Alliance For Employee Growth and Productivity, to provide retraining programs for workers dislocated through the company's downsizing. Over 100,000 workers have received funding assistance through this foundation with services ranging from resume preparation to full funding for three years at the Oklahoma City University School of Law (Indiana AFL-CIO, 1990). The Alliance's programs emphasize solid career counseling and do not provide job-specific training for new careers within the company structure.

#### **American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees and City of New York**

The AFSCME has operated a comprehensive educational program in conjunction with New York City's municipal government since 1971. A learning center was established near union headquarters and provides members with basic skills training, occupational skills courses, and personal interest classes. Funded through the



union's collective bargaining agreement, the union and the city have agreed it is in their mutual interests to "enable, encourage, and support workers to achieve educational goals ranging from a GED to a college diploma" (Indiana AFL-CIO, 1990, p. 3). In 1981, there was \$2 million available for use by the 16,000 workers eligible to participate in this union sponsored effort (Wojciechowska, 1989).

#### **United Auto Workers and the "Big Three" Automakers**

In 1982, the United Auto Workers negotiated a collective bargaining agreement with the Big Three automakers that fully funded training and education opportunities for their members. The agreement holds that for every hour worked by an employee, five cents would be set aside in a jointly administered education and training fund. In 1989, the contract called for the employers to contribute 19 cents for every hour worked. The vote authorizing this increase means union members voluntarily elected to include this 19 cents in their jointly held education and training trust rather than include this money in their contract as wages (Fierman, 1991).

#### **United Auto Workers and Ford Motor Company**

In 1979, Eastern Michigan University received a federal grant to establish a basic skills literacy center through the Right-To-Read program. The "Academy" developed a learner centered, research based approach aimed at upgrading adult literacy in nearby counties. In 1984, union and management from a nearby Ford plant invited the Academy to set up a basic skills training center for its hourly workers. These workers had been out of school for 10 to 20 years and were being hit with workplace changes that were part of Ford's quality initiatives. The program concentrated on applied math since the plant was introducing statistical process controls. The program also helped workers understand the new participatory management styles that were being introduced (Jurmo, 1989).

#### **Conclusion**

Our nation's employees, employers, and unions must put aside their outdated, adversarial relationships and begin working together to solve our workplace problems. Though literacy programs are not a panacea for all workplace problems, they will help provide a competitive edge our companies can use to survive and thrive in the "new" economy. More importantly, however, these programs will provide a mutually beneficial platform upon which management and labor can begin working together to build a new American workplace in which mutual trust, fairness, respect, dignity, accountability, and responsibility are unalienable

tenets.

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