

Workers Need their own Story Line

Priority #6: Political-Economy Training for Labour Leaders and Activists

Bill Saunders

Volume 64, Fall 2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt64pre07>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Saunders, B. (2009). Workers Need their own Story Line: Priority #6: Political-Economy Training for Labour Leaders and Activists. *Labour / Le Travail*, 64, 160–162.

going gets toughest. Even in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s, when both unemployment and political repression were more severe, workers organized and made wage gains. Successful past struggles (such as the Days of Action campaign against the Mike Harris government in Ontario in the 1990s) showed that mobilizing public sector and private sector workers, arm in arm, is not only possible – it is essential.

So this recession, with all of its negative impact on workers, provides new opportunities. Workers may be more receptive to come together and fight back. But no single local or union can do it by itself. To be successful, a fight-back campaign will require strong coalitions between private and public sector unions, together with our community allies and social partners.

Workers Need their own Story Line

Priority #6: Political-Economy Training for Labour Leaders and Activists

Bill Saunders

CAPITALISM HAS DISCREDITED itself and by any measure should be on the defensive today. Its proponents made many promises that now seem very hollow if not totally false. They claimed that if the private sector took over almost every aspect of our economic life and ran it according to the logic of profit, then efficiency would improve and living standards would rise. Supposedly we would all be better off. Finance, housing, transportation, manufacturing: all parts of our economy were subjected to this “private-sector-is-better” recipe.

How have they done? Not well at all, as is obvious from the state of the world around us. Clearly, other alternatives need to be developed and proposed.

Thus the current crisis presents an opportunity for labour, as well as a challenge. But to make the most of this opportunity (and to make sure it is the system on the defensive – not us), we need to educate ourselves, our leaders, and our activists. The labour movement needs to focus on economic alternatives that work for the average working Canadian. We need to bring this discussion about alternatives into the rank and file membership of our unions and into our communities. And in order to do that we will have to increase our level of economic literacy, so that we are confident proposing alternatives and are not fooled by the false solutions that will be offered up in the coming debate.

In short, workers need their own story line. We need our own story to tell about what caused this crisis and about its likely effects and consequences. We need to be able to reject the claims that workers somehow are responsible (through our wages or our pensions), or that governments somehow caused it (through taxes and publicly run programs). We need to defend ourselves

against the attacks that are coming at us and to arm ourselves to fight for better alternatives.

That's why I believe that systematic efforts to train our leaders and activists in economic literacy, broader political-economic analysis, and skills should be a crucial movement-building priority for labour right now.

Teaching economics to trade unionists is a hard sell, I admit. Their eyes tend to glaze over when you bring up the subject. We've been led to believe that it's too technical or abstract or just plain boring and that only the "experts" can hope to understand it. We are also very busy with all the pressing tasks of defending our members' interests every day, and often feel we don't have the time to focus on expanding our longer-term capacities.

Many also think, frankly, that economics is simply *wrong*. Most trade unionists have been told too often by one biased economist or another that they must tighten their belts, that they must accept less, or that things that seem to make perfect sense (like building homes for homeless people) just aren't economically feasible. They've come to see economics as a barrier to social progress, rather than as a tool we can pick up and use for our own purposes.

But those economists weren't working for us, of course. They were working for the other side. Economics is not neutral. There are a lot of different ways to organize economic life, not just one.

It's not enough to simply explain to our own people the specific mechanics of this particular crisis (the failures of sub-prime lending, the resulting cascade of financial failures and business collapses that produced an unprecedented global recession). Yes, we need to understand all that. We also need to understand that this crisis is just one specific example of a much deeper problem. It was produced by a set of policies and relationships (market forces) that will cause the same problem again if we don't change the rules of the game. Otherwise people will be tempted to just hunker down, to wait it out in the hope that things get better. That won't be enough.

Naomi Klein explains in *The Shock Doctrine* how ruling elites take advantage of moments of popular fear and confusion to force painful changes that people wouldn't otherwise tolerate. That's exactly what will happen again if we are not ready to push back with our own analysis of what happened, why it happened, and what we can do about it.

The Vancouver and District Labour Council recently undertook one initiative in this area of developing popular economic literacy that was important and successful. In January, we hosted a weekend-long conference on the economic crisis and some possible alternatives (co-sponsored by the BC Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives). It featured a keynote talk by Jim Stanford on his book *Economics for Everyone*; two panel discussions on what the crisis meant for BC and how labour could fight back. We left plenty of time for audience input and dialogue. We attracted 150 rank-and-file labour activists and other progressives to that event.

Then we followed up with a twelve-week structured reading group in

economic literacy for trade unionists and other activists. We used Stanford's book as a guide, but went far beyond it – with additional topics, reading material, and guest speakers.

By the end of our course we had 30 confident, capable activists who felt a lot better about taking on economic debates and talking to their co-workers and neighbours about economic issues and alternatives.

As one participant put it, "I've been waiting to have this conversation for 20 years."

That alone won't change the world, of course. But if we do more of it, we'll be better prepared ourselves to help change the world. Our participants found the discussion both interesting and useful. Indeed workers take to it instinctually. After all, when they realize what real economics is actually about – their daily lives – they understand that they already know a lot about it.

I think of political-economy training as a kind of "road map" for labour activists and socialists. Like any map, we need it for three things: to figure out where we are, where we want to go, and how to get there. I would like to see all unions, local labour councils and labour centrals step up their efforts on this front. We need to equip our leadership and activist base with a stronger critique of the current situation, and to arm them as citizens with a better understanding of the alternatives we can and must be fighting to win.

Organizing in a Global City

Priority #7: Build a Multi-Racial and Inclusive Labour Movement

John Cartwright

Since the First Nations gave Toronto the name 'a gathering place' the city and region have been the destination of choice for generations of immigrants, who come with their skills and dreams of making a better life for themselves and their families. While many found those dreams fulfilled, opportunity and prosperity were never fully shared.

Many factors contributed to our quality of life: active government engagement; a strong industrial base with middle income union jobs; a well-funded education system; cohesive public services and social programs; the struggles of women, immigrants, and racialized communities for equality; the dedication of community activists for social justice; and a deep desire for environmental sustainability. However, the growth of inequality and environmental degradation challenges us all.

THESE WORDS INTRODUCE the *Declaration on Good Jobs for All*, endorsed by one thousand participants at an extraordinary and diverse gathering: the Good Jobs Summit in Toronto in November 2008. The Declaration, like the Summit itself, was the product of months of planning and consultation. Thousands of activists were engaged in an extensive pre-Summit dialogue about the need for good jobs – both today and for the next generation.