

Labor Education for All Workers

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Brookwood Labor College, photo from
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“Labor Education Saves Democracy,” boldly declared educators and organizers as they gathered in Lowell, Massachusetts for the United Association of Labor Education (UALE) conference in spring of 2023.ⁱ Maybe it wasn’t such an audacious notion.

With 14.4 million union members in the United States and even more workers looking to organize, we would be a formative force if we had sufficient educational opportunities and resources to fully engage our workplaces, communities, and government.ⁱⁱ However, the labor movement has ignored its own history and abandoned robust labor education as a mechanism to empower workers to become organizers, working-class intellectuals, and further their natural and acquired powers. The labor movement currently has considerable financial reserves.ⁱⁱⁱ This, coupled with the renewed interest in organizing among workers in the US, reinvestment in labor papers, labor colleges and centers, comprehensive educational opportunities that incorporate both organizer development and critical thinking skills—is paramount.

The ability of workers to govern their own unions, workplaces and communities can only be expressed with a political project that makes such governing possible. Resurgent working-class self-activity is being expressed in new union drives, now is the time to revisit historical examples of labor education. I propose that it can not only can save democracy—but create it.

Labor Education Creates Democracy

Working-class movements have always required schools to further their interests and build the capacities of working people. In the 1920s the Workers’ Education Bureau of America provided guidance and funding to seventy labor colleges around the country.

The most well-known of these was Brookwood Labor College, just an hour north of New York City. It

existed in various forms from 1914 to 1937.^{iv} For a time, Brookwood was directed by Christian pacifist and veteran labor activist A.J. Muste, and served to educate movement greats including Ella Baker and labor bureaucrats such as Walter Reuther.^v Its first and third tenets were as such: “a new social order is needed and is coming—in fact, that it is already on the way” and “the workers are the ones who will usher in this new order.”^{vi} Such an order would require militant trade unions, incorporating “semi-skilled” workers into the labor movement, and overcoming racism and sexism within the rank-and-file. The College was a threat and was systematically defunded and destroyed by the American Federation of Labor, among other interests.

Labor colleges were simply the most institutionalized form of a whole ecosystem of educational opportunities by and for working-class peoples in the first few decades of the 20th century. Workmen’s Circles offered language acquisition and literature appreciation programs. Every socialist and left-party formation trained organizers in both basic skills and their interpretation of political economy. While the 1924 organizing manual of the Young People’s Socialist League spoke of regular “study classes” as it was an organization dedicated to:

“EDUCATION, the spontaneous development of each member to his fullest capacity, the leading forth of his power and abilities to their utmost. Each member is taught to stand intellectually on his own feet and to think honestly for himself. Classes in public speaking and parliamentary procedure, debates and declamation contests, round-table discussions, and a host of other methods are constantly used to further this aim.”^{vii}

The dated, gendered language aside, YPSL welcomed women as equal members along with black and immigrant workers.

Moreover, the manual called members to support the “labor press.” The labor movement launched its own newspapers here in the US as early as the 1820s, with thousands of papers appearing in the subsequent years. Readers encountered international news of the day, included reports on labor and industry, serialized books, provided political pronouncements, and letters from workers. Papers were often passed from reader to reader on the shop floor and street corners as part of a contiguous culture and conversation among working people.

By the 1940s both labor colleges and papers had waned as unions invested in labor-management partnerships, war labor boards, anti-communist and anti-radical crusades. The incipient poor peoples, civil rights, student, and later feminist and queer movements would look to these components of the labor movement as necessary for their own. When civil rights and student organizers returned to the factories in the 1970s, and black workers launched initiatives to fight for equality on the shop floor and in their unions, they launched their own shop and “workplace papers” and political education projects.^{viii} In fact, and at least historically, labor and neighboring social movement in the US have always endeavored to provide workers to reach their “fullest capacity” and further their “power and abilities to their utmost.”

Working-class education isn’t just about training workers to organize their workplaces and bargain strong contracts. Its purpose—Grace Lee Boggs argued in *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*—“is to keep developing our natural and acquired powers to relate to other human beings.”^{ix} Chinese American luminary and Detroit community activist, Boggs was born in 1915 and for the next one-hundred years she saw herself as belonging to our society “and responsible for changing it.”

Although workers obtain natural powers and forms of knowledge through their participation in the production process, everyday encounters with other workers and natural leaders, informal practices of mutual aid and survival, a common working-class culture, acquired powers come with education, organizing, and encounters with power—both when they confront it and when they wield it. Workers can become stewards, rank-and-file members can form caucuses and be elected to union office, and employees can seize a business and turn it into a worker cooperative. Natural talents only become fully formed with education.

While workers have the innate potential to govern, popular education provides the skills and tools for governing. Accordingly, labor education creates the possibility of real workplace and economic democracy.

Labor Education Today

With the labor movement falling down on the job when it comes to providing robust labor education, the thirty-eight university and community college-based labor centers across the US have picked this up.^x Labor centers provide both credit (courses and degrees in labor studies) and non-credit courses, workshops, trainings, and public programming in everything from labor history, collective bargaining, to strategic planning to contemporary issues facing the labor movement. Organizing basics are often complemented by innovative programming—on working-class culture, amplifying workers' voices, and labor history.

12.5 million workers, out of the 14.4 million total in the US, are organized into unions that are affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and Council of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). Not surprisingly many union members have access to trainings in internal organizing—that is, organizing at workplaces with existing unions to bargain and enforce contracts, file grievances, and build a union culture—through the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute. International unions, state federations, many large locals offer membership organizing institutes and staff trainings, as limited and deferential to the unions existing leadership as they are.

Every year the UALE, together in concert with labor centers, holds four institutes for Union Women. These include the Western Summer Institute on Union Women, Midwest School for Women Workers, Northeast School for Women in Unions and Worker Organizations, and the Southern Women Worker Summer School. Additionally, neighboring trainings are offered by BIPOC and LGBTQIA2s+ union caucuses.

Moreover, labor education and organizing are increasingly taking place outside of established channels. Workshops and trainings are being offered by *Labor Notes*, Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee, Bargaining for the Common Good Network, and the popular Organizing for Power series. Currently, these organizations offer robust instruction in organizing skills and critical thinking.

When considered in their entirety, it might initially appear that there are labor education opportunities for all workers today. Not only does demand far exceed the supply, opportunities are being missed every day and additional offerings are required to make said governing possible.

Labor Education for All Workers

When we consider the need for labor education, historical examples, available resources (properly deployed of course), current state of and “maximum programme” for labor education, and the charge to save and create democracy, we are left with one practical question: How do we create labor education opportunities for *all* workers?

Labor Education Opportunities for (Non-Union) Workers:

As workers build power, cooperative educational efforts will aid them to better understand what they are fighting against and fighting for. To express their fullest capacities, workers will need to acquire economic literacy, develop political visions, participate in writing and public speaking workshops, inquire into their “conditions of work [and] also how to fight them,” and receive instruction in labor and working-class history as well as related social movements.^{xi} The content will need to be broad-based, ecumenical, philosophical, richly historical, and not ideologically driven. Beyond organizing workers and providing training for workers own self-organizing, “a new social order is needed” and education is required to usher in and govern this social order of economic and workplace democracy.

For workers without direct union support, labor centers and independent organization are the two options for gaining skills and resources for workplace organizing, at least currently. Existing independent organizing campaigns should incorporate educational components beyond skills development for workers. Unions conducting new unionization campaigns need to provide resources and staff time to aid workers in more than just the nuts and bolts of winning a campaign. A simple fix is to enrich organizing committee members with components on campaign development, strategic planning, economic literacy, labor history, and anti-oppression politics and practices.

Affinity or study groups have been part of working-class movements throughout history and could be more numerous today. Reading with other workers not only motivates participants but builds political affinity, understanding, and solidarity. Labor unions and related organizations such as mutual aid societies, student and activist groups, nonprofit and grassroots member-based organizations, independent unions, informal collectives, and workers centers should be offering regular study groups to members and those in their orbit.

Labor publications such as shop and workplace papers, community bulletins, and targeted newsletters—for instance, coordinating a newsletter by and for service industry workers in your region—are organizing and educational tools that build class consciousness for workers. Historically, such papers appeared on a daily and weekly basis, often in multiple languages. Even regularly appearing online and print newsletters can have an impact with worker stories, organizing accounts, interviews with workers, chronicle labor history, reprints from *Labor Notes* or other publications. Bulletins and newsletters are educational and organizing tools sorely missing from the present moment; even with a resurgence in labor journalism and podcasts.

Union halls are a terribly underused resource, often sitting empty at all hours, and they should be opened as to provide wider programming and as a home for labor education programs, labor papers, day care, summer camps, and other services. Another missing model are workers’ assemblies, where non-union and union workers across industries meet to discuss their common problems, offers opportunities for collaboration, discussion, and learning in common. Every time workers meet one another, outside of social and celebratory events, labor education components should be incorporated.

As meeting participants arrive and wait for the meeting to begin, have them each read a short article on a contemporary economic issue from *Dollars & Sense* and *New Politics* or a news clipping about recent labor movement development, followed by a few minutes of discussion. Each meeting can then be opened with a five to ten minute “labor history moment,” where a participant shares a short summary of an important event in labor history. Too often we rush through to get to the business of a meeting or a packed agenda without taking the time to learn together.

While providing labor education to non-union workers is more logistically challenging than their union counterparts, we must not squander opportunities to engage with and educate workers. It's been said that there are no shortcuts in organizing. And there are no shortcuts in developing the "power and abilities" of the working-class peoples to their "utmost."

Labor Education Opportunities for Union Members:

As we have noted, there was a time when the labor movement educated millions of working people and provided the basis for a working-class intellectual culture. Institutional and cultural barriers in our unions need to be addressed collectively by militants and rank-and-file leaders, be it: the fear that leadership development will lead to replacing entrenched leadership, simultaneous withdrawal of funds from organizing on the shop floor and overinvestment in centrist Democrats, quick-and-dirty organizing models that lead to high staff turnover coupled with volunteer member organizers who receive little training, and the nonprofitization of the labor movement, which focuses on short term successes and contract cycles over long term vision and worker power. While the reasons for this are complex, it can be summarized as such: much of the labor movement, as with the political and Liberal establishment, has a fear of the crowd, of its own members, and an autonomous and insurgent movement of poor and working-class peoples. But there are rumblings from below.

Part of labor's resurgence will need to be grounded in returning to these practices and providing all workers with a robust education in labor history, economics, and related issues. Since unions—through staffers, elected leaders, and rank-and-file activists—have regular, at times daily, contact with workers they are the central force in society that can provide substantive labor education to working-class people.

Labor leaders can use an article or two to open discussion during regular staff or board meetings. Stewards can incorporate group readings or a "labor history moment" into every steward council. Union organizers can pass along articles to aid workplace conversations and, even informally, use them to educate rank-and-file members about contemporary labor and economic issues. A staff organizer's role is to accompany workers on their union journey and organize so that members increasingly take on tasks as to run their own unions and workplaces, and this only happens through education and skills development. We can make it a criteria that labor leaders who do not dedicate considerable resources—organizer staff time, hire labor educators, funding labor education programs—to prioritizing education in their own unions, in addition to organizing, should be voted out and replaced.

Actually, there are quite easy and routine things that all unionists can do to aid educational initiatives. Create an article and news collection on your union's website for members to learn about the labor movement, economic issues, and their unions own storied history. You could use your union's social media profiles to extend the reach of this collection. Social media can be used for general education in addition to announcements. Repost stories from labor publications that can be used to educate members about larger movement dynamics and developments. Email announcements and blasts can also incorporate summaries and links to this material as well, don't miss an opportunity for education.

As with electronic media, union bulletin boards in workplaces, union and hiring halls are resources for outreach, communication, and education of members. Print articles can be pinned to union bulletin boards, distributed in breakrooms, used by steward to set up lunch time discussions and solidarity coffee breaks about contemporary issues. These discussions could be facilitated by reading a recent "Stewards Corner" column from *Labor Notes*. Handbills and flyers can include links to educational opportunities in addition to contact information.

Labor education and labor history moments could be incorporated into all union meetings—membership meetings, organizing committees, steward councils, bargaining and contract action team, central labor councils, executive boards. Readings can be supplemented with resources such as the Celebrate People’s History poster series curated by the Justseeds Art Collective to educate members about labor and people’s history, which can be hung in the union hall after the meeting. The *Labor Notes* book *Secrets of Successful Organizers* or another organizing manual can be serialized by using a chapter for each meeting over a period to teach democratic skills and build the capacity of all union members. Furthermore, labor education tracks should be incorporated into business conventions, conferences, and larger events not just for delegates but for rank-and-file members.

Workplace and Community Democracy

Incorporating labor education components into existing activities is one thing. However, unions need to dedicate resources to funding regular educational endeavors such workers schools, study and reading groups, writing workshops, speak outs and story-telling nights. Hosting public programs and working-class cultural events in the union’s hall extends the unions reach into the community at a time when union teachers and library workers, healthcare and essential workers need community support for workplace and contract campaigns.

Moreover, union organizers and rank-and-file members could coordinate with supportive classroom instructors, labor centers, and other venues for labor education in your community to offer regular trainings, writing workshops, and political education sessions. Attend open enrollment skills-based workshops offered by labor center and *Labor Notes*, and recruit other members to join you. Acquiring organizing skills should not be limited to paid staff organizers or elected union leadership.

Political education funds, often called Committee on Political Education (COPE) or Citizen Action for Political Education (CAPE), should be used to educate union members about contemporary issues, not just to support legislation and candidates for office. In fact, the bulk of COPE funds, kept in a 501(c)4 separate from the union itself, can be spent promoting “social welfare” with as much as 49% on direct political endorsements. Union associated COPE funds with by-laws or articles of incorporation that don’t prioritize education can be changed.

In the long-term, as a “maximum programme,” unions are going to need to reinvest in labor education by hiring labor educators in larger locals and state federations, expanding funding and programing at university-based labor centers, supporting summer institutes and liberal arts education for workers, and contributing financially to launching labor papers.

In the short-term, as a “minimum programme,” every union needs a regularly appearing, if not weekly or monthly, newsletter, workplaces need shop and workplace papers, industries in regions need bulletins. Newsletters and bulletins are vital organs of communication that build class consciousness, educate workers on contemporary issues and the labor news of day, allow workers to see themselves as part of a larger movement, and illustrate to members that the union is present on the shop floor. They can do this by celebrating grievance wins that are usually only known by a few stewards and staffers. The working-class cannot cede any workplace, industry, community, or conversation to the bosses.

What is more, it is the role of militants and rank-and-file leaders to enact this minimum programme, fight for resources in existing labor unions and related organizations, extend said resources beyond members of the self-identified activist left into the larger working-class, and amplify the voices of workers in struggle.

As the cause of labor has long declared “a new social order is needed.” Labor education will help create the possibility for this new social order—democratic control of our workplaces and communities—to emerge.

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