

Union Education, Union Leadership and Union Renewal: A Study of Paid Education Leave

Summary of Presentation at CRIMT Colloquium on Union Renewal, HEC Montréal,
November, 2004

Johanna Weststar, PhD Student
Centre for Industrial Relations, University of Toronto

Research Overview

This research examines the Paid Education Leave (PEL) programme, an employer-funded worker education programme operated by the Canadian Autoworkers Union (CAW). PEL's ability to foster leadership and facilitate union renewal is assessed. Qualitative and quantitative data demonstrates that PEL does address union renewal and serves to alter the perceptions and attitudes of its participants. PEL graduates return to their workplaces with an increased awareness of their role as a worker in society, an increased desire to become active in their union and community, strengthened feelings of solidarity toward other workers and community groups, broader understanding of and appreciation for the diverse composition of their union, and with tangible strategies regarding workplace change. Despite this, under-developed structures and policies surrounding PEL hamper the realization of the programme's potential. Inconsistent applicant selection processes, a lack of concrete activities and struggles in which returning graduates can become involved and uneven coverage of PEL provisions across the union result in local environments that do not provide the necessary support to maximize the benefits of the PEL programme.

Some Background

The general notion of paid education leave was established by the ILO in 1974 as Convention No. 140 and recognizes the need leave granted within working hours with adequate financial entitlement provided for training at any level, general, social and civic education and trade union education. Despite this Convention and support by the CLC, paid education leave has been slow to develop in Canada. The major champions of the programme were the Canadian Autoworkers' Union (CAW) who to date offer the most comprehensive of any paid education leave programmes in Canada. In 1977 the CAW won the first Paid Education Leave (PEL) clause through collective bargaining at the small auto parts plant of Rockwell International and soon solidified the programme by bargaining clauses with the big three automakers of Ford, General Motors and Chrysler in 1979. Today the big three contribute five cents per hour per worker into the Paid Education Leave Trust. Smaller hourly contributions and lump sum payments have also been negotiated for many of the CAW bargaining units. An account is kept of the contributions of each bargaining unit and they represent a certain number of entitlements to one, two or four-week programmes at the residential CAW Education Centre in Port Elgin, Ontario. These entitlements include the price of room and board, travel and lost time from work as well as costs for instructors, supplies and Centre staff. The interest generated by the central fund is set up as a subsidy fund to support the participation of smaller bargaining units.

The CAW offers a variety of educational programming under the banner of PEL in the form of one, two and four-week residential programmes. The four-week programme is the core PEL programme. It is the original course and carries a different message from the one and two-week programmes. Where they are ‘tool’ courses in orientation – ‘how-to’ courses that teach a certain skill or set of skills – the four-week PEL has an ideological focus and strives to create broad awareness about the world and society from a worker’s perspective. It is the primary programme of study for this research. In this core PEL workers attend four weeks of courses with each week separated by several weeks back in the workplace. The curriculum tackles issues from five over-arching perspectives: the workplace, the union, politics, economics, and human rights (social identity). Each week different aspects of these themes are explored through small group activities, classroom discussions and plenary sessions, with the expectations of analysis deepening as the topics progress over the four weeks. The programme also includes many activities outside of the classroom. Participants form committees on various topics and run events over the four weeks. A communications section focuses on public speaking. An activist project is required to be completed in the workplace between weeks three and four and a mock convention concludes the programme.

Methodology

To some degree an evaluation of internal union education programmes such as PEL is inherently biased as the information and perceptions which temper this analysis are gathered from CAW members who are closely tied to the programme and the CAW Education Department in general. Notwithstanding, care was taken to include informants with varying degrees of separation from PEL and the Education Department. To this end interviews were conducted with members of the Education Department, other national staff, past and current Education Directors, with a retired CAW senior staff member, an experienced union educator not affiliated with the CAW and four core PEL discussion leaders who hail from various locals across Canada. As well, many informal conversations were held with other discussion leaders and PEL participants during the spring 2003 session. A survey was also administered to the entire class of the Spring 2003 core PEL session (N=78). The response rate for this survey was 56 out of 78 or approximately 72 percent. Copies of the course curriculum, complete with discussion leader notes, were also closely reviewed.

Summary of Some Key Findings

PEL Successes

The table below represents participant responses when asked about their activity levels in a variety of areas. Participants were asked about these levels before they attended PEL and also about the likelihood that they would engage in these activities following PEL.

Table 1: Activity Levels Before and After PEL

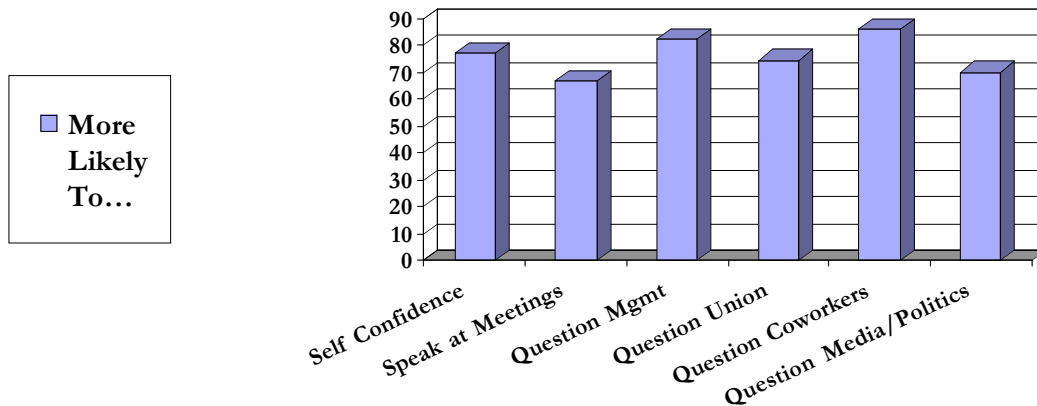
	YES Prior to PEL	NO Prior to PEL	MORE LIKELY After PEL	NOT MORE LIKELY After PEL
Steward or Committee Member	49.1%	50.9%	40.4%	59.6%
Involved in Collective Bargaining	8.8%	91.2%	33.3%	66.7%
Attend Union Meetings	75.4%	24.6%	77.2%	22.8%
Attend Union Education	64.9%	35.1%	87.7%	12.3%
Engage in Union Discussion with Friends, Family or Co-Workers	77.2%	22.8%	73.7%	26.3%
Attend Union Organized Events	64.9%	35.1%	70.2%	29.8%
Active in Community	50.0%*	50.0%*	66.7%	33.3%
Interested in Politics	43.8%*	56.2%*	63.2%	36.8%
Attend Education Outside the Union	N/A**	N/A**	42.1%	57.9%
Teach Union Education	N/A**	N/A**	49.1%	50.9%

* Numbers obtained from different question format where ‘fairly’ and ‘very’ active translate to ‘Yes’ and ‘not’ and ‘somewhat’ active translate to ‘No’

** Questions were not asked regarding prior activity in these areas

The following graph represents participant answers questions regarding the effect of PEL on their self-confidence and critical thinking. Responses to a set of questions regarding self-confidence showed that 77.2% of respondents believed that their self-confidence has increased or greatly increased as a result of PEL. Also, 66.7% of respondents reported being more likely to speak at union meetings. With reference to critical thinking, 82.5% stated that they were more likely to question management decisions. Similarly, 74.5% of the respondents indicated that they were more likely to question or think about union decisions. More than four-fifths (86.0%) expressed the opinion they were more likely to question or reflect on the views of fellow workers. A vast majority (70.2%) indicated that they have become more skeptical of the media and political commentary.

Figure 1: PEL's Affect on Confidence and Critical Thinking



The table below represents participant responses when asked about whether PEL changed their feelings of solidarity toward various groups.

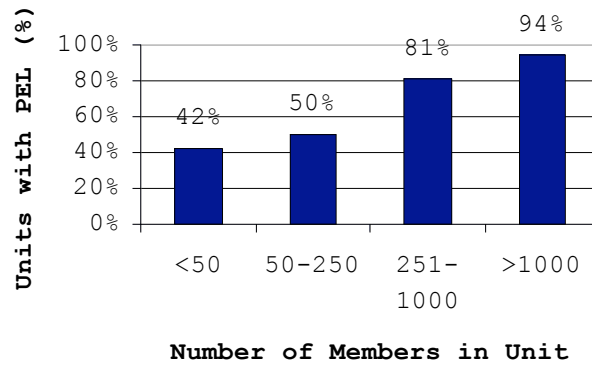
Table 2: PEL's Affect on Feelings of Solidarity toward Various Groups

	Co-worker	Local Union	National Union	Can. Mov't	Int'l Mov't	Community	Political Party	Prev. Union
Greatly Decr.	3.5%	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	1.8%	0.0%	7.1%	0.0%
Decr.	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	1.8%	0.0%
No Chg.	42.1%	29.9%	19.3%	29.8%	42.1%	33.3%	57.1%	84.2%
Incr.	42.1%	56.1%	47.4%	50.9%	43.8%	47.4%	26.8%	10.5%
Greatly Incr.	10.5%	14.0%	33.3%	17.5%	12.3%	17.5%	7.2%	5.3%
≥ Incr.	52.6%	70.1%	80.7%	68.4%	56.1%	64.9%	34.0%	15.8%

Challenges for PEL

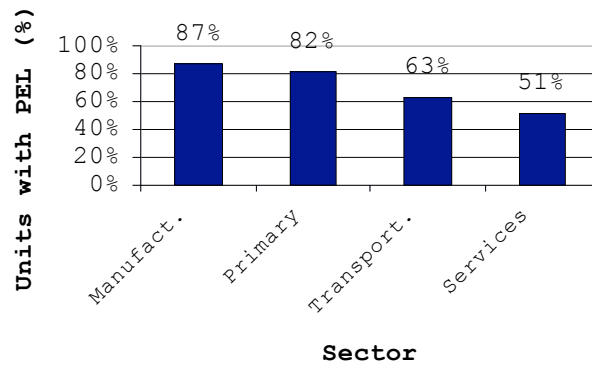
The main challenges facing the PEL programme fall in three areas: 1) coverage, 2) applicant selection, and 3) agenda for graduates. Coverage refers to the fact that the CAW has gained considerably more bargaining units in the last ten years through mergers and new organizing. Many of these units are smaller and outside of the core regions and industries of the CAW. As the three figures show below, the spread of PEL clauses to these areas is lower.

Figure 2: PEL Coverage by Bargaining Unit Size



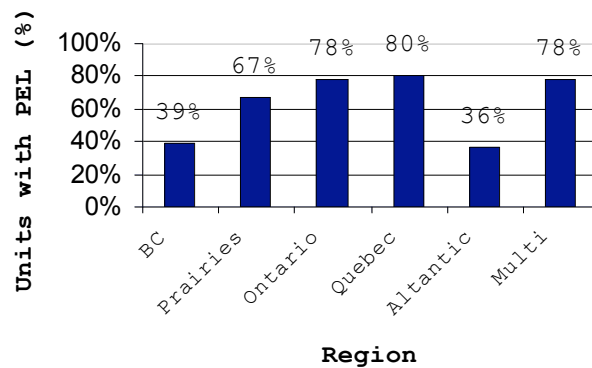
Source: Internal document on PEL coverage.

Figure 3: PEL Coverage by Sector



Source: Internal document on PEL coverage.

Figure 4: PEL Coverage by Region



Source: Internal document on PEL coverage.

The challenge of applicant selection relates to the fact that individual locals have very disparate and sometimes opaque applicant selection processes. Also, the applicants are a mix of activists and more green rank and filers which causes difficulty in terms of delivery of course content, classroom management and also draws into question the purpose and vision of PEL and its target population.

The last challenge is the most substantial and concerns the opportunities for PEL graduates. Following a 4 week course these graduates return to their workplaces fired-up and ready for action, however this passion is quickly lost in the routine of every day work. The National and Local unions have not created an adequate agenda for the activists created at PEL and as a result most graduates are unable to plug-in to their union and begin applying their new skills, knowledge and passions.

Conclusion

The statement on the back of the CAW name cards given to students attending PEL at Port Elgin, exemplifies the vision that the CAW leadership holds for PEL and union education:

We can only remain a strong, articulate union if we have an informed and active membership from which to develop the dynamic leaders required to meet head on the challenges of tomorrow. We can only develop those leaders through education.

It can be concluded that the core four-week PEL does strengthen the membership and build leadership. Participants become invigorated and develop activist tendencies in a multitude of areas, both within and outside the workplace. They develop close bonds with each other and also feel increased solidarity toward other workers and their communities. PEL unites people from across Canada and delves deeply into issues of social identity, diversity and the importance of finding commonality among workers. PEL also provides ample opportunity for student participation and allows workers to share experiences and strategies about workplace change and other workplace issues.

However, despite the success of PEL in planting the seeds of activism and solidarity, these tendencies and teachings are not adequately supported following return to the workplace. If the union is to maximize PEL's ability to generate workers ready to re-invent and re-invigorate the labour movement and incorporate it into broader struggles, the union must develop a clearer agenda on the use and purpose of PEL graduates. To maintain the enthusiasm, motivation and knowledge generated at Port Elgin, local unions must have concrete struggles, tasks and agendas in which to 'plug in' returning workers.

Please note: In response to this research the CAW has already made some key changes to the PEL programme to address the above three challenges. These changes and their likely impact will be discussed more fully in my chapter contribution to Pradeep Kumar and Chris Schenk's upcoming book on union renewal in Canada.