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Employment Relations Education: Learning for a Change?

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Adult Education) at Massey University

Ross Teppett

2008
Dedicated to the memory of

Ada Joyce Marsden

6 September 1915 – 23 November 2008
“My life is so much better because of the EREL training and being a union delegate. It is amazing how much confidence you get and how that can change your life and the lives of your family.”

Polly
Research Cohort Participant
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ABSTRACT

Trade union education constitutes a significant practice within the adult and community education sector in New Zealand, but rarely is the subject of academic research. This study examines one major domain of trade union education in this country, Employment Relations Education (ERE). Working collaboratively with a small group of member-activists from a large private sector trade union, the study investigates the evidence of transformational changes that may emerge as a result of their participation in ERE courses and workshops. An appropriate definition of transformation is used for a trade union context. This refers to that change occurring at the micro and macro levels of union activity that in turn leads to the twin goals of wage and social justice through the building of union influence and power – at the workplace and community levels. The study examines the nature and role of union education within the broader trade union context, particularly the ERE provisions of Employment Relations Act 2000 (ERA), enacted in response to a decade of significant labour market deregulation and marginalisation of unions under the auspices of the Employment Contracts Act (ECA). The study is located within the critical paradigm of qualitative social research, using a range of collaborative methods such as focused conversation, personal journals and photography, and, as such becomes a critical learning journey in itself for some participants. The study concludes by affirming that ERE plays an important role in augmenting the learning and development of member-activists in their daily struggle to improve the working lives and social outcomes for members through collective agency.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Six years ago I embarked on a challenging balancing act; to study for a Masters degree while working in fulltime employment as well as leading an active family and community life. The completion of my studies, culminating in this thesis, would not have been possible without the incredible love, support and immense tolerance of my partner, Kirsty. I also acknowledge the encouragement and patience afforded me by my children Jack, Finnius and Sylvia. For this, my family, you have my promise I will definitely be spending more time with you all in the future.

My sincere thanks go to my workmates and comrades at the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union who have been fully supportive of me from the beginning of this endeavour. My union has given me the time, space, encouragement and resources to help me with my studies and complete this work. Thank you to the Service and Food Workers’ Union’s John Ryall and Jody Anderson for enthusiastically facilitating this research project from the beginning, and for their participation in the study. I sincerely acknowledge the contribution made to this project by the six Service and Food Workers’ Union member-activists central to this study who participated so willingly and energetically – giving up their precious time, and at personal cost, to be involved in this work. This is a collaborative work. This is also your work. I also acknowledge the keen support and skilled guidance of my supervisors for this study, Dr Marg Gilling (Massey University) and Dr Mike Law (University of Waikato).

I acknowledge there will be personal gain with this Masters thesis; the recognition that can go with such credentialism; the great joy and satisfaction of having traversed a long and enlightening journey of personal learning. However, most importantly, I want this study to be useful and insightful to those who have so freely offered their time, collaboration and commitment to participate in its production, and to the many union activists throughout New Zealand who may be able to enhance their own learning and understanding by studying and critiquing this work.
GLOSSARY

DOL  Department of Labour
ECA  Employment Contracts Act
EPMU  Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union
ERA  Employment Relations Act 2000
ERE  Employment Relations Education
EREL  Employment Relations Education Leave
ILO  International Labour Organisation
MECA  Multi-Employer Collective Agreement
PEL  Paid Education Leave
NZCTU  New Zealand Council of Trade Unions
SFWU  Service & Food Workers Union – Nga Ringa Tota
TUEA  Trade Union Education Authority
TUTB  Trade Union Training Board
UREL  Union Representatives Education Leave Act
"The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute and, above all, new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation; they resisted it until they were overcome. When in the thirties the wave of union organization crested over the nation, it carried to secure shores not only itself but the whole society."

Martin Luther King Jr.

Speech to the state convention of the Illinois AFL-CIO,

October 7, 1965