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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**

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**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.

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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**

<b>DOL</b>	<b>Department of Labour</b>
<b>ECA</b>	<b>Employment Contracts Act</b>
<b>EPMU</b>	<b>Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union</b>
<b>ERA</b>	<b>Employment Relations Act 2000</b>
<b>ERE</b>	<b>Employment Relations Education</b>
<b>EREL</b>	<b>Employment Relations Education Leave</b>
<b>ILO</b>	<b>International Labour Organisation</b>
<b>MECA</b>	<b>Multi-Employer Collective Agreement</b>
<b>PEL</b>	<b>Paid Education Leave</b>
<b>NZCTU</b>	<b>New Zealand Council of Trade Unions</b>
<b>SFWU</b>	<b>Service &amp; Food Workers Union – Nga Ringa Tota</b>
<b>TUEA</b>	<b>Trade Union Education Authority</b>
<b>TUTB</b>	<b>Trade Union Training Board</b>
<b>UREL</b>	<b>Union Representatives Education Leave Act</b>

*"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**