

Their answers show a similar concern with the need for increased relevance and effectiveness, but a marked difference in best ways to achieve that end.

Teacher Unionism: Building Relevancy for the Next Decade

by Anne Rodrigue

Teacher unions are at a critical point in their evolution; education policies are impacting on their ability to influence educational change. What will be their role in the next decade?

Unions have always fulfilled two roles: as negotiators of contracts and benefits, and as professional associations. In this article, I will examine unions through two different lenses: internal and external relevancy. *Internal relevancy* is the capacity to defend and promote teacher self-interest and includes aspects of membership, responsiveness, teacher voice, and recognition of the changing nature of teacher work. *External relevancy* has been defined by researchers in differing ways: committing to education quality;¹ strategic unionism;² attuning themselves to the public;³ and extending the scope and range of union issues.⁴ External relevancy may be encoded in provincial/territorial legislation to include advancing the profession and the cause of education. My definition includes some of the above but focuses on defining standards, articulating beliefs, and extending communities.

Issues of Internal Relevancy

MEMBERSHIP

The impact of early retirement, the reduction of membership through downsizing, and an increase in associate membership have changed union demographics. Age is now a major factor, as older unionists are being replaced by younger “entrepreneurial” professionals who question union mandate, structures, and bureaucracy. Governments have exacerbated this difference by trying to divide union membership in their attempts to negotiate articles which disadvantage younger members.

Furthermore, the introduction of business practices into education has altered the relationships between teachers and administrators within the union, and poses challenges for teacher organizations representing both groups. In particular, the stratification and hierarchical positioning of administrators within management impacts on the collegial model, as evidenced by the increased number of grievances pitting teachers against their administra-

tors. At the school level, the changing role of the principal, with its emphasis on school marketing, devolution, and management practices, has moved the principal farther from the classroom teacher and created recruitment and retention issues within the ranks of principals.

These intergenerational and interpositional complexities of membership pose many challenges. Most organizations have created programs for new teachers in the areas of professional and organizational capacity building. Initiatives for administrators include needs surveys, recruitment, retention and workload programs, designated positions on bargaining teams, funding, and staffing. Meeting the needs of new teachers and administrators must continue to be a priority program area.

RESPONSIVENESS

Teacher organizations must examine how they identify, communicate and respond to teacher needs, find innovative ways to engage the membership in collaborative inquiry, and generate teacher commitment.

In fulfilling union responsibilities for responsiveness, the relationship between a staff officer and a teacher is extremely important, especially when teachers seek assistance with professional relationships, workplace issues, and stress. Although the education climate in most provinces/territories has resulted in a shift of energies and resources away from the school, teacher organizations need to balance individual needs with organizational needs by focusing on the quality of teacher/staff relationships.

TEACHER VOICE

Because of the duality of their mandate and individual reasons for union participation, unions must ensure that individual members find a niche within unionism.

Many union members are active in special associations/subject councils corresponding to the discipline or level in which they teach. In the past, such involvement may have been viewed as “soft unionism,” but with the increasing congruence of professional and industrial



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issues, unions are seeking the expertise of all members in order to effectively articulate concerns and provide innovative solutions. They are soliciting input in a more structured and systematic way and recruiting members of special councils and associations to represent the organizations on ministerial committees, to conduct research, and to provide input into collective bargaining and policy. These inclusive practices are helping organizations become more responsive.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Changing demographics within the profession requires unions to examine two aspects of leadership development: organizational and professional.

Organizational leadership focuses on developing a cadre of members willing and competent to assume roles at all levels, beginning at the school representative level. Preparation for leadership must include both organizational knowledge, including history, mandate, structure, relationships, and people skills, including conflict resolution, communication, and decision-making skills. To combat the common perception that union leadership is a "closed shop," unions must encourage all members to assume leadership roles and promote inclusionary practices.

Professional leadership encompasses the internal provision of professional learning opportunities and an external advocacy role in creating opportunities for professional development through contractual articles or other means. Special associations and councils presently fulfill this role, but it is often level- or subject-specific. Unions must expand their professional capacity and assume an increasing role in professional development by forcefully defending and extending professional development articles in contracts and by working with other partners in establishing provincial/territorial learning networks.

CHANGING NATURE OF TEACHER WORK

Contracts have traditionally addressed issues of economic advancement and due process, but they must now protect the teaching process itself because reform initiatives introduced by governments have changed the nature of teachers' work. Teacher autonomy is being challenged in curriculum and assessment, two major areas of professional expertise. Teachers are asking their organizations to address workload, inclusion, and education initiatives and to reposition educators in the decision-making process. They are also demanding that they address professional issues both at the bargaining table and in daily activities with government and school boards. The scope of bargaining needs to be expanded; the locus, techniques of bargaining, and relationship with the employer need to be redefined.

Unions must engage the employer in discussions about the purpose and nature of teaching. Teacher organizations must address professional rights during bargaining in spite of

employer resistance. If they are not successful, they should consider the advice of Bascia, who advocates lobbying for changes in labor laws to expand the scope of issues that may be bargained.⁵

Issues of External Relevancy

External relevancy has three major components: defining standards, articulating beliefs, and extending communities.

DEFINING STANDARDS

Polls have shown that teachers in Canada are liked and respected by the parents of the children they teach, but teacher organizations are perceived as self-serving. It is essential that teacher unions identify converging issues of self-interest and public interest and establish mechanisms for internal quality control including criteria for licensing, codes of ethics, disciplinary procedures, and standards of practice.

In order to be associated with the promotion of educational quality and recognized as professionals and experts, unions must recognize the legitimate demands of accountability and engage their membership in examining ways to protect and enhance teacher autonomy while at the same time integrating community needs and aspirations. They should work collaboratively with education partners to collectively address standards of professionalism. Achieving a balance between protectionism and accountability may require them to venture into sensitive areas such as professional codes of conduct, competency standards, and criteria for lifelong learning.

ARTICULATION OF BELIEFS

In the past, unions have not engaged in public debates on educational issues, choosing instead to respond directly to government. This targeted concentration limits external professional focus. With the introduction of major changes to education, teacher unions have an advocacy role to play in challenging the merit and feasibility of government initiatives and using their considerable resources to research and articulate alternatives. They must establish legitimacy in this role. Although some unions have established mechanisms to create a body of research in teaching and learning, they must all develop or extend their research capacities, take strong public stands on professional issues, justify their stands, and be prepared to say "no."

Nationally, the Canadian Teachers' Federation has assumed a greater advocacy role on behalf of teacher unions. Increasingly, teacher unions are initiating projects on school councils, inclusion, external assessments and teacher testing which involve educational partners. As part of this expanding dimension, unions need to position themselves and their members as providers of quality education and develop sophisticated publicity campaigns to communicate their role to the public.

EXTENDING COMMUNITIES

Teacher unions must recognize their interdependence in relation to other interested education partners, by offering expertise, partnering initiatives, and lobbying to expand learning opportunities for students. Teacher unions also have a role to play in the larger labour community by creating communities of interest to protect and enhance labour legislation.

In their role as social activists, unions should be engaged in the third dimension of power as defined by Lukes influencing the public on what they should demand from government.⁶ This does not entail defeating governments but instead involves helping the public articulate expectations of government. With the many internal and external issues challenging

EN BREF

Les syndicats d'enseignantes et d'enseignants doivent s'efforcer d'accroître leur pertinence, tant à l'interne qu'à l'externe. En d'autres mots, ils doivent continuer à défendre et à promouvoir les intérêts de leurs membres tout en reconnaissant la nécessité de mieux communiquer avec le public. L'environnement politique et démographique actuel force en quelque sorte les syndicats à s'intéresser aux craintes particulières de l'enseignante ou de l'enseignant individuel, aux questions de leadership et à l'évolution de l'enseignement. Les attentes changeantes du public les poussent également à ouvrir un débat sur diverses questions épineuses telles que les codes professionnels de conduite, les normes de compétence et les critères pour l'apprentissage à vie.

unions this may seem far removed from their mandates, but I would argue vehemently to include this third dimension.

Teacher unionism is "the expression of an idea in progress, contested and not fixed."⁷ Canadian teacher unions will rise to meet the challenges of the next decade because they are reflective, responsive to internal/external stimuli, and evolutionary.

- 1 C.T. Kerchner, J.E. Koppich and J.G. Weeres, *United Mind Workers: Unions and Teaching in the Knowledge Society* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997)
- 2 Michael Barber, Michael, "Education and the Teacher Unions," *Issues in Education* (British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data, I. Title, II. Series 331.88113711, 1992).
- 3 Stephen B. Lawton, George J. Bedard, Duncan K. MacLellan, and Li Xiaobin, *Teachers' Unions in Canada* (Detselig Enterprises Ltd, Calgary, Alberta, 1999).
- 4 Nina Bascia, "Teacher Unions and Educational Reform" in *The International Handbook of Teachers and Teaching*, eds. A.Hargreaves, A. Lieberman, M. Fullan & D. Hopkins (Kluwer Academic Publishers 1998).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 S. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974).
- 7 Martin Lawn, *Modern Times? Work, Professionalism and Citizenship in Teaching* (London: The Falmer Press, 1996), 128.

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