

Labour Education and Training Research Network



York University

Centre for Research on Work and Society

Suite 276, York Lanes Bldg
York University
4700 Keele Street
North York, Ontario
M3J 1P3
Canada

Tel: (416) 736-5612
Fax: (416) 736-5916

Research and Engagement with Trade Unions: Bridging the Solitudes

by

*Carla Lipsig-Mummé
Centre for Research on Work and
Society, York University*

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Canadian Perspectives

In the 1980s it became clear, within the Canadian context, that the postwar world of work and employment was disintegrating. Both the organisation of work and employment patterns changed profoundly, but from the early 1980s through the early 1990s it was not clear what direction these changes were going in. Was this to be the brave new knowledge-based economy, freeing workers to use their minds and rediscover their craft, bringing employers to understand how fundamentally their economic well-being was based on the skill and commitment of their employees, and on their own willingness to invest in the constant betterment of those skills? Or was this a polarising work world, where some workers and some companies moved towards the liberation described above, while other companies sought market advantages by sending employees spiralling into precarious employment, deskilling, alienation and, in some instances, impoverishment? From the beginning of the 1980s there were indications that polarisation rather than generalised meliorism would characterise the new work order, but it was not until the 1990s that the concept of the 'jobless recovery' came to be widely accepted as a just description of the emerging shape of civil society.

These profound and disintegrative developments at the macro-social level foreclosed the assumptions of the 1960s and 1970s that social change would move towards greater social equality. The macro-social move rightward, weakening the power and social authority of trade unions across the developed world, also triggered profound and painful self-questioning within trade unions as to strategy, tactics, relation to the state, union democracy, militancy and eventually goals themselves (Hyman, 1999). That institutional self-questioning, common to all the OECD countries but varying in intensity and language, led in many countries to defensiveness, confused thinking about partnership, radical changes in union structure, and a weakening of union-party political links. But it also revealed the weakness of union "voice" in public debates over societal choices and the link between public weakness and the attenuation of member engagement and militancy.¹ This recognition of the weakness of union voice in the world outside the labour movement has led, in Canada in the 1990s, unions to turn towards research. It has also led unions to look inward at the link between research, education and mobilisation. And it has led them to look outward for collaboration with activist academics – as co-producers of knowledge, as educators, and as a new breed of trade unionist. In short, the rightward turn of the past decade has called upon committed academics to redefine their place and role in research. In posing a series of urgent questions about what we do, what we can do, how we work and what we should be doing, the new environment brings the question of the limits and possibilities of research by academics as action and engagement again to centre-stage.

This paper is thus located within the chilly light of the emerging millenium, being at the intersection of experience, frustration and hope. It draws particularly on my experience as an academic union activist and blue-collar union organiser in the U.S., English Canada and

Quebec, and on the experience of the Centre for Research on Work and Society at York University, one of English Canada's oldest and largest research centres in which trade unionists and academics jointly define research.² Section one sketches the changes in the world of work and employment that have created new opportunities and pressure for academic-union research partnerships. Section two looks at forms of research partnerships between trade unions and university based researchers. Section three looks at several partnership experiences in Québec and English Canada. Section four indicates conclusions and the questions they raise.

I. New Employment Patterns And The Emerging Work Order

Patterns of employment

From the matrix of the 1980s, three new patterns of employment emerged. First, employment became "feminised". The feminisation of employment is expressed through the convergence between male and female labour force participation rates and the increasing percentage of the work force that is female (Lipsig-Mummé and Laxer, 1998:5). Second, feminisation also refers to the fact that the traditional way in which women have entered the paid labour force – through part-time and other forms of precarious employment – has now been generalised to men. One-half the part-time jobs created since 1981 are involuntary, and involuntary part-time work has multiplied five-fold since 1977 (Betcherman, 1990). Third, the union membership in Canada is now almost half women: virtually all net growth in union membership between 1976 and 1992 has been from new women members (Lipsig-Mummé and Laxer, 1998: 6). Finally, there is emerging a sad convergence in the way that older men and older women cope with premature and forced retirement. In their early sixties, their fifties and even their late forties, they return to the labour market and take what jobs they can get – the McJobs, often for a pittance, in small workplaces and the garage and basement service sector. Thus the prematurely 'elderly' are becoming a reserve army of the precariously employed, as women have traditionally been.

The second dimension of employment change is the privatisation of the service economy. The growth of the public sector in Canada from the 1950s through the 1980s pioneered secure employment and decent career paths (James, Veight and Wright, 1997: 115; White, Janzen and Lipsig-Mummé, 1997). Unionising rapidly, the public sector became the most important point of entry for women into the labour movement. But from the 1980s, public employment plateaued, then began to decline and by 1997 was below 25%. Employment growth in private services, however, has continued since World War II to 52% of all employment. This sector is the 'Jekyll-Hyde' of the Canadian economy. Unionisation is lower, wages more polarised, firm size smaller, and precarious employment more rampant than in any other part of the economy. This is a chaotic, polarised world which mirrors the future.

The third dimension of the new world of employment is insecurity, and it takes many forms. The period after World War II had been marked by the uneven deepening and broadening of worker security in Canada and elsewhere, a product of the welfare state. From the mid 1980s, however, the pendulum began to swing back. Unemployment – long-term, tenaciously high unemployment – took root and became a fact of life. It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of here-to-stay unemployment on social policy, managerial militancy, worker action, or individual understanding of personal futures. It is also difficult to underestimate how insecurity is becoming a fact of life for everyone, and security disappearing as a right and re-emerging as a privilege. Precarious employment – cloaked in the language of flexibility, autonomy, and the need to heal the artificial split between family and work – comes to be not only the employment form of choice for employers in all sectors, but is accepted as the natural form of employment by the young entering the labour market. Not only the weakly unionised private services, but also the traditional bastions of trade unionism in manufacturing and the public sector, now privilege precarious employment over secure and ongoing jobs. Creative new forms of the employment relationship have emerged, and forms thought to be obsolete have re-emerged. These include cyclical, on-commission, tips-only-, and false self-employment.³

Taken together, the growth of employment in hard-to-unionise sectors, the privatisation of formerly public jobs, and the rise and spread of employment insecurity have exploded the post-war labour market, while challenging unions to speak to and for the next working class. Research now becomes a crucial tool for union strategic repositioning.

Patterns of work

Where work is concerned, this new social order seems for us in Canada to be directed towards the undoing of the hard-won gains of a generation of strong unions and a functioning welfare state. In the Canadian context, we can identify two structuring agencies which have transformed not only patterns of employment, but patterns of work as well. The first, the uneven, but revolutionary introduction, of new technologies is shared by every industrialised or industrialising country. By their very adoption these new technologies create a whole new set of polarities, dividing industry from industry, company from company within each industry, and groups of workers into isolated individuals. Just as the choice to adopt the assembly line or not made the difference between success or stagnation for companies and industries in the 1920s, so today the new technologies – and the social mystique surrounding them – open the way to corporate experimentation with decomposing and recomposing the traditional division of labour established by the second industrial revolution. Is the hollowing out of office and factory and the contracting out of hospital services a step forward? Is it a liberation from scientific management? For some, of course, it spells liberation and a return to craftsmanship lost well before Henry Ford. (The idyllic image of the stock analyst sitting on his deck with his computer on his lap, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, comes to mind.) For others – usually women – it spells isolated work, the intensification of work and precarious employment. (The teleworker inputting data in her family room, the industrial cleaner whose government employment has been privatised, and the homemaker sewing in her bedroom,

come to mind here [Aguiar, 1999]). In Canada, there is only a weak and fragmented union presence in these sectors to negotiate its impact.

In the new technological and social divisions of labour, contradictory developments have crystallised. In manufacturing and office work, production is becoming ever more spatially decentralised, moving from manufacturer to contractor, moving out of the office and the downtown core to the suburbs, the industrial park, the home office. Work therefore becomes more isolated. As workers leave the collectivity for home or contractor, they leave behind their ties between work and civil society: through their union, their workmates, their training courses, their job mobility. On the other hand, the work that stays in the factory or office is being reorganised into teams, recomposing the division of labour fragmented by the second industrial revolution, exporting worker conflict with management to the work groups themselves, importing competition and insecurity into worker-to-worker relationships. In the private services, experimentation with work teams, polarised and endlessly changing hours of work, inter-age group competition and new taylorism have together created a most effective fragmentation and demoralisation of the enormous workforce.

The second development – the move towards continental integration – is lived differently by different countries. For Canada, the Free Trade Agreement with the U.S., followed by the North American Free Trade Agreement which added Mexico, and the imminent extension to other Latin American economies, add an unexpected dimension. By opening Canada to a nearby cheap labour zone, wages competition on a continental scale intensifies the spiralling-down pressures on manufacturing and some service industries in Canada. It encourages employers to experiment with the introduction of new technologies and the spatial reorganisation of the labour process domestically so as to compete with Mexico, undermine trade unions and employment security. They also call upon Canadian unions to make effective rather than protectionist links with U.S. and Mexican labour, to put forth complex and compelling proposals for continental regulatory institutions. Again, the need for new research to buttress new thinking is evident.

In summary, the years from 1981 to the present were marked by a polarisation of workplace change in Canada: the good jobs became better still, at least in terms of their opportunities for individual growth and autonomy, while the bad jobs got worse indeed. The search for security has become central to workers of all ages, and the omnipresence of insecurity became the ghost at the banquet for trade unions, community organisations, and public policy makers.

II. Bridging the Solitudes: Forms of Research Collaboration

However dramatic the implosion of the post-war labour market, decline in union membership in Canada has been less dramatic and more recent than elsewhere. Union density hovered around 33-35% from the mid-1970s to 1992, with the growth of labour force participation and union membership among women shoring up the decline in

participation and the stagnation in union membership among men (Lipsig-Mummé and Laxer, 1998: 3). But since 1992, female membership growth has stagnated, and overall union density has declined to 31%.

While all unions are now discussing the need for new and effective strategies to organise the young, there is still no overall labour movement strategic planning on this and other pressing issues. Above all in Canada, the influence of labour is slight at the level of federal state determination of social and economic policy. Indeed, the combination of recent membership decline following long-term stability has triggered – or revealed – a split in the labour movement’s understanding of the threat and possibility of the emergent, continental work order. Those unions which emphasise the menace of globalisation, state powerlessness and managerial militancy face off against those which emphasise the opportunities that continental economic integration offer for international worker solidarity and new forms of state-focused and supra-national power. For engaged academics, the new work environment opens up new uses for research and new ways of linking students to committed research. But it also calls for academics and unions to develop new ways to collaborate on research so that it may be linked to member education and involvement on the one hand, and to the articulation of a progressive voice in public policy on the other.

Autonomist and collaborative research traditions

Among individual Canadian unions, two distinct approaches towards research have crystallised: the *autonomist* and the *collaborative*. This section explains these concepts.

While every national labour movement is composed of diverse traditions, by the late twentieth century it is possible in most countries to identify at least a dominant culture of trade unionism. In Canada, there are three cultures which partly overlap and partly compete. These are: the formerly Catholic, presently post-confessional syndicalism of the Quebec-only trade unions; social unionism; and labourism.⁴ Business unionism, dominant for a century in the U.S., now plays a minor role in Canada. Cultural and organisational competition occurs among competing peak councils, or centrales in Quebec. In English Canada, it is played out within the Canadian Labour Congress.

In English Canada, the new importance unions accord to research on work issues was catalysed by the profound structural changes of the 1980s, but also coincided temporally with a growing nationalism within the Canadian labour movement. During the 1980s and 1990s, a number of Canadian-national unions were formed by Canadian workers disaffiliating from U.S. unions which had operated in Canada for a century – in manufacturing, mining, electrical, chemical processing, electronics, papermaking, autos, communications and other sectors. These newly decolonised unions joined the Canadian-only public sector unions to increase the size and importance of the Canadian national unions within the Canadian labour movement.⁵ The Canadian-only unions, generally in the social unionism tradition, quickly developed a full range of services, including research.

The remaining U.S.-affiliated unions in Canada – in steel, food, clothing and textiles, construction, commerce, trade and other private services – can be identified with the labourist tradition, or, occasionally, with an older business union tradition that is marginal in Canada. They continue to obtain many of their member services from their U.S. parent union. In general, both the services provided in Canada, including research, and the topics on which the unions took public positions, were correspondingly narrower in the Canadian branches of U.S. unions than they were in either the Canadian-only unions or the Quebec centrales.

In the Quebec labour movement, composed partly of U.S.-based and Canadian-national unions and partly of Quebec-only centrales, recognition of the importance of research occurs as early as the 1940s in the centrales. But it grew in importance and radicalised in content with the growth of Quebec's independence movement and the leadership of unions within it during the 1960s and after (Lipsig-Mummé, 1991). In other words, in both Quebec and English Canada, the nationalist construction of independent labour unions led to an increase in the use of research and the breadth of issues that research engaged. It also led to the development of new forms of union-university partnership.

Historically, we can identify four areas of union research, or areas in which unions need research to carry out their work: collective bargaining; social and economic policy; work organisation; and union structure and function. It is only in the current decade in the English-speaking unions that there has been a growing interest in moving beyond the 'core business' of collective bargaining to two of the other three areas of union concern – social and economic policy, and work organisation. While social and economic policy was traditionally the domain of the national or provincial labour federations, a wide range of affiliated unions now devote resources to research on policy. This research is carried out both in-house and in partnership with external intellectuals. Work organisation is new as an issue to research in English Canada, although not in Quebec. In English Canada it remains the principally the preserve of individual unions, with occasional work from the Canadian Labour Congress, and it is here that a growing number of collaborative projects between unions and academics is located. The fourth research topic –changing union structure and function –is delicate terrain. Unlike the British and American labour movements, where national, regional and sectoral union-university research collaboration on the modernisation of union structures and the locus of union power have been the subject of a number of projects, in English Canada unions have been traditionally reticent about inviting academics to help them with critical self-evaluation (Waddington and Whitston, 1993: 25). Instead, academics have carried out their critique of union structures and functions from a location somewhat removed from the movement. Again, Quebec is the exception.

Autonomist research: The goal of autonomist research is to make the union more fully independent of all external agencies. The autonomist tradition traces its roots both to the wariness about intellectuals, particularly those in universities (characteristic of North American blue-collar unionism) and to the now-outmoded idea that research is not essential to a union's core business. In the autonomist mode the union may be very

research-active, but it sets the research question, and determines what results are to be publicised and which are unacceptable. The research may be conducted by staffers, because several unions in the autonomist tradition have sizeable research departments, or it may be contracted out to labour-friendly, external research institutes or individual academics. Sometimes, the autonomist unions seek to train rank and file members as researchers (Schenk and Anderson, 1995: introduction). But whoever carries out the research, control of the research from beginning to end remains with the union. The engaged intellectual becomes a brain for hire. In recent years, the autonomist unions in English Canada have also distanced themselves from their traditional political ally, the New Democratic Party, and thus from the kind of intellectual cross-pollination so valuable for effective intervention in the wider society.

Collaborative research: The collaborative approach begins with a different goal and is anchored in a different set of beliefs. Its goal is to deepen and broaden union influence and social authority. It has several core assumptions. First, contemporary trade unions need extensive and varied links with engaged intellectuals who are not on staff, and closer and more institutionalised relationships with universities and independent research bodies if they are to articulate convincing and influential alternative visions of the organisation of work and society. Second, working with ‘external’ organisations and academics cannot be effective if the research is simply contracted out, but must engage a real partnership at each stage of a research cycle. Third, drawing external intellectuals and research institutes into research work with and for a union will make the union organisation more permeable to outside influences, and this may have repercussions for union dynamics. Research results are not always predictable. But the collaborative approach does link research to member education, and does work at developing real partnerships with intellectuals outside the union’s ranks. It is on the diverse forms of collaboration that the next sections of the paper focus.

Representative vs. affinity-based research partnerships

‘Partnership’ has become a distended and abused word, employed promiscuously. Where research on work is concerned, there are two different forms of partnership, the representative and the affinity-based, and each is linked to different ideas about power, democracy and inequality. Representative partnerships insist that all ‘stakeholders’ participate. Affinity-based partnerships link only those who share a basic world-view.

There are two different macro-social contexts for research partnerships. Representative partnerships tend to flourish in corporatist societies, while affinity-based partnerships develop in societies where polarisation and class conflict are acknowledged at all levels. Even in the latter, however, representative partnerships in workplace research are the collaborative form of choice for governments and government-funded research.

Representative partnerships are distinguished by the requirement that all socially relevant institutional stakeholders must participate. For example, the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) – a consultative and not decision-making body – was

governed by a model of representative partnership before its demise in 1999. Business and labour and equity-seeking groups participated. CLFDB chose to work by consensus rather than by formal voting. Research themes were decided by the Board, and carried out by CLFDB staff.

But even in a representative partnership, research can be a volatile political instrument. Following the submission of a draft report outlining the chaos in Canadian training provision that followed the federal government decision to decentralise training to the provinces, the business representatives withdrew from the CLFDB, causing its closure. In this case, research questions which were central to understanding where government policy was taking training were explosive to the maintenance of the representative partnership.

Sometimes representative partnerships in corporatist societies develop a larger sense of their own importance than the State is willing to allow. Thus the Consultative Board of the Société québécoise de la main d'oeuvre (Quebec Labour Force Commission) is in serious conflict with the Commission itself as to whether the 'labour market partners' make State policy or simply advise the Commission. The unions, the business community, and the community sector are all agreed that they are decisional. At stake is the whole edifice of partnership in training in Quebec, which has been absolutely crucial not only to the creation of Canada's only integrated strategy of training but also to Quebec's larger macro-political objectives.

In other words, if the representative research partnership is to remain a place of consensus rather than contested terrain, there will be silences, compromises, and adjustments that begin with the shaping of the research question, and which continue to the crystallisation of conclusions. Simply identifying the shared terrain may become an end rather than a means. But sometimes the very identification of research issues may become contested terrain if one or all of the 'stakeholders' is using the collaboration to further the struggle to take charge of defining social priorities.

Does this condemn all research partnerships to blandness or implosion? Not at all. Affinity-based partnerships are more familiar in a society which recognises that it is divided by divergent class and community interests, and in a state which has no more than a formal interest in consensus or inclusiveness. They draw together only those individuals and groups who share concerns and a world-view beyond the project in question. Affinity research partnerships tend to be small-scale, and develop through the will of the specific partners, rather than through the requirement to be representative of all stakeholders. Research projects and their solutions are shaped to respond to the issues as the partners see them, rather than as a compromise of vision. The partners collaborate at each point of what we have come to call a *research cycle*: the research cycle moves from defining the research question, to choosing method and collecting data, through popular and academic dissemination, to turning the research into education for union membership and leadership. This is, in effect, where the research partnerships I've been involved in fit in, both in Quebec and with the Centre for Research on Work and Society in English Canada, and

most recently with the Centre for Union Research and Education in Victoria. We do not assume that we are required to represent the entire spectrum of interests clustered around the subject studied, and we recognise that the inclusion of some interest groups would muddy the work. And while we certainly have internal debates and discussions and sometimes struggles, we are able to identify a shared vision and define our problematics in terms of the issues as we see them. As honest researchers we know that every researcher is influenced by her/his own social location.

Working in a society in which there is no assumption of social consensus makes research more difficult. It almost always means working at arms-length from the state and its quasi-governmental bodies. Does being at arms-length mean that affinity-based research partnerships are doomed to marginality? Not necessarily. In the light of the disintegrative and polarising changes the world of work is undergoing, research has become newly important to trade union strategic repositioning. The next section discusses three Canadian experiences with union-university collaboration on research.

III. Research Partnerships In Quebec And English Canada

Institutionalising Partnerships: IRAT and the Protocole

The research partnership between the Institute for Applied Labour Research (IRAT) and the Service à la Collectivité Programme in Québec is an illustration of what can be achieved in partnering arrangements. It is not merely nostalgia to reflect on the late 1970s as being a time of creative nationalism, rapid modernisation, social radicalisation, and challenging questioning of the role of both unions and the university in civil society in Québec. They were also a time of relative openness to social and political models that had been tried out elsewhere, particularly in France or in what was then called ‘the third world’. Out of that questioning, two union-university research initiatives crystallised. Both the Institute for Applied Labour Research (IRAT) and the Service to the Collectivity Programmes lasted for at least fifteen years. The former drew in all major union and universities in Quebec, but was free-standing. The latter was university-specific, and only developed at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and Laval University. Both were multi-project, and both required the unions and university administrations to create infrastructure and commit publicly and financially to the collaboration.

The logic behind both these projects was three-fold. First, universities needed to redefine their social mission in order to serve the community more democratically than they had done in the past, and trade unions, as well as women’s groups, housing co-ops and other community associations (groupes populaires) were important parts of the community. Second, academics and research students would benefit from research partnerships with community organisations of all sorts, and the flow-on nature of that benefit was just beginning to be explored. Third, in the increasingly complex and internationalised work world, unions were being forced to reconsider how much research they needed, on what topics, and who would carry it out. Because most unions had neither the expertise on staff

to confront the new questions nor the desire to transform the activist/professional ratio among their staffers, collaboration with unionised university researchers offered an interesting avenue of widening and deepening union influence. Issues of ergonomics, health and safety, women's health, organisation of work, ageing workers, pensions and benefits, and other topics were at the top of the list (Messing and Mergler, 1992; Lipsig-Mummé, 1988).

The Institute for Applied Labour Research (IRAT) was set up as an independent research centre funded by a consortium of the three principal union centrales and six Quebec universities. Its core funding came from the unions and the universities as well as the provincial Ministry of Higher Education. Its research funding came from a series of federal and provincial government and quasi-governmental sources, with occasional access to the principal government sources of funding for university-based research. IRAT was a free-standing research institute which employed a number of respected researchers to work on a big-picture research agenda defined by an Executive on which sat all the (often warring) union centrales. IRAT's research programme was negotiated at Executive level every two years, and projects were carried out by one or two staff researchers with some degree of interaction with union staff and, occasionally, with an academic. The staff researchers did not hold university appointments, which became a real obstacle to obtaining funding.

Once completed, the research was published in book form or in academic journals, became the subject of a union-university conference or workshop, and returned to the unions who might hold member education courses and/or publish shorter and more popular versions in very large numbers to disseminate to their members. Over the almost two decades until it was discontinued, IRAT set the intellectual agenda in Quebec on work reorganisation and policy issues concerning older workers, and contributed to the debate on the reform of collective bargaining legislation. It also understood that for some of its participating unions there were research no-go zones, and if it pursued these topics, backlash (in the form of union withdrawal or request to terminate ideologically troublesome staff researchers) could be paralysing.

The UQAM and Laval Universities' Service to the Collectivity programmes (popularly known as le Protocole) were also meant to develop research projects that would serve community organisations, but they were also geared to help academics develop their own (funded) research with union partners and train graduate students. UQAM created an office for the Protocole, with full-time coordinators. The university paid for the staffing and functioning of the Protocole office, as well as for certain of the start-up costs on the research. It is with the Protocole that the idea of a *research cycle*, linking academic research to union needs, member education, collective bargaining and the training of the next generation of labour-friendly university knowledge workers, first crystallised.

The general pattern was this: a union identified a research need or was helped to articulate that need by the coordinator or an activist academic. If no academic was in on the union's first contact with the Protocole, the coordinator put the union together with one or several potential academic collaborators. The university freed ('liberated' in French) the academic

from some part of her teaching in order to carry out the research. Often, the academic associated a graduate student with the research, who then completed her Masters or Doctorate on its subject. Once the research was completed, the academic and the union submitted a text to an oversight committee for review and revision. The academic prepared the project for scholarly publication. The academic and the union then collaborated on developing education modules for the union on the basis of the research. They also developed other forms of dissemination through union publications.

Over the twenty years since the Protocole has been in operation, it has completed approximately 150 projects, revolutionising union expertise in the areas of work reorganisation, training for health, safety and work reorganisation, ergonomics, women's health, health and safety, member education and other areas. It has also trained a generation of PhDs in biology and ergonomics and in sociology on union-related research topics. We can discern a research cycle here which links the research to its implementation, to education of subjects and future researchers, to democratisation of union life through sharing knowledge and to dissemination to a wider public as well. In general, Protocole projects were linked to unions' specific local or industrial needs, and were designed with that priority in mind.

At the beginning of the 1990s a combination of the IRAT and Protocole model was taken abroad: to Australia and to Ontario. In 1990, the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the then Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee signed the National Academic-Union Scheme (National Statement of Cooperation on Secondments Between Higher Education Institutions and Unions, 1990). In 1991 York University chartered the Centre for Research on Work and Society. But at the same time as the Quebec model was internationalising, IRAT began having serious funding problems. The funding crunch was compounded by an increased enthusiasm on the part of each of the three union centrales for developing union-to-employer partnerships in particular sectors, at the expense of the union-to-union-to-academic partnerships that had characterised IRAT. It was closed in the early 1990s. The Protocole continues at UQAM, albeit with less funding for coordination and for the 'liberation' of academics from ordinary university duties during their research time with the union.

Anchoring Partnerships in the University: The Centre for Research on Work and Society at York University

In the 1980s, a number of English Canadian unions created the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives to carry out social and economic policy research, at arms length from the labour movement, capable of intervening effectively in public debates, but representative of progressive labour's interests. Like IRAT it was free-standing rather than university-affiliated, drew unions and academics together, and received union contracts for research on particular topics. Like IRAT, it was not able to tap into sources of research funding open to academics, or to train graduate students on its projects. Unlike IRAT, it did not have formal university involvement or receive university funding, and had much less formal union involvement. Also unlike IRAT, CCPA did not keep a staff of researchers,

but turned to its member intellectuals to fulfill research contracts. Despite the problems which had constrained IRAT, CCPA's research agenda is ambitious and its work excellent. In its own conception, CCPA is a left-wing think tank.

In 1989 York University in Toronto began discussions with the Canadian Autoworkers to develop a Research Unit that would foster ongoing collaboration on research. For unions such as the CAW – newly seceded from the U.S.-based United Autoworkers – there was a need for substantial Canadian research projects that were one step removed from, but directly relevant to, the day-to-day industrial issues the union faced. Although the CAW was already in the forefront of Canadian unions looking at the larger questions of work restructuring, few other Canadian unions had researchers who had the time to do more than write speeches for the leadership or support collective bargaining.⁶

For academics at York and the other universities who were drawn into the Centre for Research on Work and Society (CRWS), researching directly with the union movement offered both the possibility of directing their research towards visibly useful ends and a privileged space for training students. It also required openness and sensitivity in developing research problematics, and a willingness to redefine the meaning of academic autonomy.⁷ It was assumed that CRWS research would be linked to rank and file education, to conferences and workshops, and to the training of university students. The publishing programme and the international links which developed later were not part of the original conception.

Québec's experience with IRAT and with the Service à la collectivité programme were of great importance in planning CRWS. They indicated pitfalls and possibilities. First, it was desirable to institutionalise research collaboration by creating an ongoing Research Centre rather than one by one, ad hoc research relationships. Second, CRWS should not be free-standing, but should be firmly anchored in a university. Third, CRWS was structured for recessionary times: it was assumed that there would not be a lot of money from the university or from the unions, and that the Centre would have to rely on scholarly and government research funding. Fourth, both the IRAT and Protocole indicated that the widest possible union participation should be sought, even though the English Canadian labour movement was notorious for internecine struggles between social unionism and labourism during the 1990s.

This broadening of CRWS' engagement from a small number of unions to the labour movement as a whole had a two-fold significance. Becoming a research centre in which a number of unions with competing ideologies would be prepared to leave their factions at the door to encourage the development of useful research – rather than a centre in which one union played a hegemonic role and drew in many academics – developed naturally out the unions' growing research needs and CRWS' willingness to deal even-handedly with all unions. It signified a desire to create a 'safe house' for labour research at the same time as it provided the opportunity for competing unions to discover common territory in research. Next, this broadening out to work with many unions signified a move away from the autonomist mode of union engagement with academics, and offered the space to

develop affinity-based research and real collaboration. Finally, the ideology of research activism CRWS worked with and refined was the Research Cycle.

Over the nine years since CRWS was chartered by York University, it has put the Research Cycle idea into practice, and discovered its limits. CRWS now has thirty-five Research Associates in nine countries, and about one hundred trade unionists, academics and community activists in Canada who worked on projects last year. It publishes two regular twice-yearly publications, *Training Matters* and the *CRWSnews* (circulation 1200); a Working Paper Series, a Trade-Unionist-In-Residence Programme and Trade Union Speakers' Series, and has held a number of international conferences, at which the speakers are drawn from the trade union and international academic communities. It directs a Work Internship for students with the labour movement, and is developing a specialist graduate degree.

Activist research is, of course, the core. At present it has approximately 40 funded research projects throughout Canada. People associated with CRWS have been researching new union organising strategies, young workers and precarious employment, education equity for excluded youth, the dilemma young workers pose to unions, competitive organising in the hotel sector, privatisation in the public sector, changes in education industry working conditions, unions as employers, cross-border organising, survivors of downsizing, contrasting ideas of partnership in training and labour force development in Quebec and English Canada, apprenticeship.

Many of the projects are associated with Training Matters: The Labour Education and Training Research Network, funded for five years by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Examining the Political Economy of the Training Industry, this Network is a group of researchers (about 30) from fourteen universities, five community colleges and about twenty organisations. Most major trade unions are members, as are trainers and training organisations. It conducts research in seven provinces and the Yukon, and in English and French. It has German, Belgian, Australian, American and French associates

Two and one-half years into this project, it demonstrates many of the benefits, most of the pitfalls, and some of the unanswered questions of academic-union research partnership on an institutionalised, larger than project-by-project, scale. One project, in particular, may serve as an example.

The Vancouver Island Highway Project

In 1994, the British Columbia government, a New Democratic Party government, embarked on a project to build a highway for Vancouver Island. The project was to cost \$1.2 billion. Unlike most highway construction projects, it was meant to be

a laboratory for the idea that capital spending has the potential to generate major economic and social spinoffs if there is a conscious, deliberate and systematic

effort to incorporate these objectives into the planning and implementation of major capital projects. (Calvert, 1996: 9)

In other words, the government's objectives were to use public capital spending for provincial economic development, local job creation, employment equity and training. From the beginning, this narrowed down to local hiring and employment equity. The context, however, was not promising. Over the ten years preceding the project, the highway construction industry had become effectively non-union, with membership down to 20% from an earlier 65%. As unionisation rates declined, both training and apprenticeship suffered. The largely non-union industry was awash with unemployed white males, and both the private contractors competing for contracts and the construction unions would be looking to place their most senior unemployed (white, male) people first.

The provincial government, however, had decided to make the Vancouver Island Highway a lever to get women, members of Aboriginal communities, people with disabilities and visible minorities the training necessary to enter the construction trades. There is no employment equity legislation in British Columbia for the private sector, and this proactive government meant to use the Highway to prise open the construction industry. To make this happen, the government created a Crown Corporation, Highway Constructors Ltd., which became the sole employer of all workers on the new highway. Except for labour supply, private contractors acquired contracts through a competitive tendering process. Highway Constructors was responsible for allocating all workers to the private contractors who had obtained contracts to build the highway; contractors reimbursed Highway Constructors for the cost of labour it had supplied them.

The Crown Corporation, in total control of labour supply, went pro-actively after local residents and members of the four equity groups (members of Aboriginal communities, women, people with disabilities and visible minorities). This reduced the pool of qualified workers. After commissioning a study of the available skills pools in the local communities within 100 km of the Highway, it was determined that there were not enough qualified people. Training programmes therefore had to be created from scratch by the Crown Corporation in order to obtain the local and equity trainees to which the project was committed. The unions helped with designing the courses and the community colleges with delivering them. By March of 1996, as the project entered its third year, there were 9,249 applicants for training, of whom 2,522 were from the four designated groups. By May, 1996, 18% of all workers on the highway were members of the equity groups, and the hours matched up as well.

This was not easy to sell to the unions or the contractors. The private, non-union contractors fought it through the courts, and lost. The unions were ambivalent. On the one hand, the government offered them union recognition and required trainees and workers to become union members upon obtaining work. On the other hand, unions were faced with outrage from their unemployed members from all over the province. These were members who were out of work, who had considerable seniority, and who wanted to know why the unions thought they could give their jobs away. The no-strike, no-lockout agreement was

not a source of contention, but the agreement on wages that were \$2 below the standard rate for the province was. In defense, both unions and the Crown Corporation noted that the unions themselves had been widely negotiating under-standard wages for several years.

What role is there for research in this unusual, and to date quite effective, mega-partnership? On the face of it, not much. The government person responsible for this project presented it for the first time to CRWS's conference on *The Service Sector Revolutions* in November, 1995. When he was asked about the role of research, he began by saying that the minister responsible had been committed to the project from the beginning and didn't need research to back him up. But as he talked further, we discovered that research had had an important, but modest role. As the government sought out the four, traditional equity groups to make the idea of training for these unconventional occupations interesting to them, it found that it did not have the wherewithal to reach some of them on its own. It turned, instead, to research on the skill pools in the local communities, research that was painstaking, detailed, and carefully respectful of the groups it was reaching out to. It also turned to the Women's Bureau of the government and Women in Trades and Technology. Research became community outreach, became dialogue, became an ongoing community monitoring process of the Highway project. As the training programmes were set up and started to function, an Employee Equity Plan was established. It had five dimensions: education and awareness; outreach, skills development; bridging programmes; and removal of barriers. Out of this plan, an Equity Integration Committee was established. Working within the Equity Plan, the Committee not only selected the applicants to be given training, and monitored progress on the five dimensions of the Equity Plan, but it also created a sophisticated data base for monitoring the progress of equity trainees and employees. The major failure here was that people with disabilities did not participate in the Committee.

In 1997, an additional dimension was added to the role of research. The Training Matters Network funded a research project on the experience of women with training in the Vancouver Island Highway Project (Cohen and Braid, 1998). Although the unions which had greeted the Highway Project with ambivalence initially responded similarly to this evaluative research project, they were drawn in by presentations of the research to examine the larger issues of women, apprenticeships and training in the trades. They are now participating in a subsequent project on that subject. The original Training Matters project, in turn, is being used to document best practices in training women for the trades. And it has been linked to three subsequent studies on retention of women in apprenticeships – in the national postal service, construction, and the national apprenticed trades survey (Little and Pajot; Gibson; Anisef, Ling and Sweet, forthcoming).

IV. Conclusions and the Questions They Raise

Good and useful activist research creates a research cycle to bridge the solitudes in three directions: inward to the labour movement, outward to the university, and outward to the wider public. Within a union, or the union movement, research is developed with the

people it studies and will affect, and then the results are brought back to the rank and file who participated in shaping the project, through workshops, roundtables, and publications. It is also used to acquaint the wider union with the issues facing the group in question. It may be used to shape collective bargaining demands, or wider mobilisation. Thus when Canada Post privatised admail and terminated 9,500 workers, the union got involved with a study of that termination which analysed corporate strategy, the profile of the terminated workers and their fates six months later. (White, Janzen, Lipsig-Mummé, 1998). The admail workers responded to the study of their experience with an astonishing 87% response rate. The union printed 20,000 copies of the results in both summary and extended form. These were distributed not only to the admail workers but to union activists throughout the country, and then used as an orientation document to analyse the limits and possibilities of action.

Within universities, the research cycle contributes to the training of students and the creation of a labour-friendly, multi-disciplinary stream of teaching, graduate programmes and research. While most graduate students will not go on to work for unions, they will have developed their research skills by taking workers into consideration from the outset. Working on a problematic they know to be of concrete use to a group of workers, they will finish their training with a clear and unromantic view of the obstacles facing worker defense and mobilisation.

In the wider public arena, the research cycle insists that useful and grounded research not only be transformed into education and mobilisation, but contribute to public education as well. This may be accomplished through ordinary publishing, but it more usually occurs through unconventional intrusion on the public attention. Thus in the admail study discussed above, the researchers ensured that there was newspaper and electronic media coverage of the study. In a 1993 study of garment homeworkers in Toronto, the researchers and the worker participants attended a government committee hearing wearing garments to which two price tags were attached: the store price of the garment and the amount the homeworker had been paid. There are many examples.

For activist research to fulfil its role, it needs to be both useful and embedded in a Research Cycle which links research and discovery to training, education and implementation. For research to realise its potential, it must not only awaken and mobilise, shake things up, but it must also sow the seeds of the next generation of discovery, education, mobilisation, social and political change, and, of course, further research.

NOTES

¹ For the first time in some countries, like Canada.

² It also takes into account my long-term contact with the Australian labour movement and activist research institutes in Sydney and Melbourne.

³ This latter applies to a situation in which the worker is defined as a small business rather than the vulnerable employee she in reality is.

⁴ “Post-confessional syndicalism” describes the ideology and practice of formerly Catholic unions which have secularised (post-confessional), and which espouse the belief that unions should not take electoral positions or fund parties because trade unions are the natural leaders of the working class (syndicalism). The Quebec union confederations, the CSN and the CEQ, are examples of post-confessional syndicalism. “Social unionism” is a trade union ideology and a form of union practice which is based in the belief that unions must involve themselves in issues of social justice that are broader than the workplace, and must develop the alliances and the practices necessary to link social justice issues with bread and butter issues. The CIO unions in the US in the 1930s were social unions, as are many industrial and public sector unions in Canada today. “Labourism” is a philosophy of trade unionism which defines the union and the social democratic party as the industrial and political arms of the working class. Both are necessary, and they should work complementarily. The political vision of labourism is usually social democratic: reliant on a vigorous state, evolutionary rather than revolutionary, espousing trade unions' extensive involvement in politics through a labour or social democratic party. The classic expression of labourism is to be found in the Australian and the British trade union movements, and in the United Steelworkers in Canada.

⁵ In 1962, about two in three Canadian unionists belonged to U.S. based unions. In 1992, only three in ten.

⁶ One notable exception is the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

⁷ For some English Canadian academics, researching with unions offered the tempting possibility of an easy way in to influencing the unions' larger social agenda. The English Canadian unions, still not too distant from their own historic anti-intellectualism, tend to be more than cynical towards these researchers, and in general keep them at arms' length.

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