



national
union

research

In Defense of
Public
Post-Secondary
Education

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Preamble

The National Union is an active observer and commentator of any organizational / workplace restructuring which impacts on our members and their families. In keeping with this view, the National Union's Education and Training Working Group has been monitoring the restructuring of post-secondary public education across the country. This Working Group is made up of leadership activists who represent public educators and support workers employed in the community colleges system across Canada.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy statement, which was prepared under the auspices of our Education and Training Working Group, is to assert the National Union's position with respect to the value of Canada's community colleges system. In particular this paper has three specific objectives:

- to expose the serious damage being made to the public education system through drastic spending cuts by federal and provincial governments;
- to analyse the effects of the privatization and devolution of public education and the impact of the gradual shift of the delivery of education away from public institutions to private deliverers such as businesses and some sister Unions; and
- to ensure that the entire labour movement is working in solidarity to strengthen post-secondary public education.

The attack on community colleges

Canada's public education system has played a key role in making our economy one of the top ten in the world. Our community colleges system in particular has assisted many working Canadians to become productive citizens. In the 1960s, post-secondary education was expanded in response to public demand for more advanced education and to meet the need for a well-educated and well-trained population. The colleges system not only promised and delivered quality education and training at reasonable cost to Canada's working people, its expansion also eliminated

many of the questionable private trainers of the day. The expansion ushered in a new era of optimism and success in post-secondary education. Yet, despite its past success, public education is now under attack. In order to understand the attack on public education, we need to take a closer look at the environment in which this attack is taking place.

The effect of globalization on our public sector

For the past decade or so, Canada has undergone tremendous economic and social restructuring. For the most part, these changes have been either an agent or a result of globalization. As hard as the concept of globalization is to grasp, we all know that our provincial and federal governments have bowed to global pressures. In their pursuit of global economic integration, they have decreased public services, devolved and privatized essential services such as education, health and welfare, lowered corporate taxes, discontinued public regulatory programs, slashed environmental programs and increased economic inequality and hardship.

We bring the concept of globalization closer to home when we realize that combined together, the Mulroney and Chretien governments will have cut close to \$150 billion in public education by the year 2003. While the federal government actively pursues the divestment of responsibility and funding for labour market training and education to the provinces, they in turn respond with major funding cutbacks resulting in the elimination of programs, downsizing of faculty and support staff and an uncoordinated approach to meeting the needs of the Canadian and global labour markets.

Unions educating their members within the traditional parameters

Unions have been committed from the beginning to lifelong learning, and rightly so. The traditional role of education within the labour movement context is to provide members with basic “hands-on” union-related courses such as shop steward and workplace health and safety. We recognize that Unions have, and will continue, to play a vital role in educating their members in regards to the labour movement's political agenda, and we certainly support Unions educating their members **within the traditional parameters**.

As money is moved from the public sector into the private sphere, some Unions have actively taken advantage of available funding in order to offer much needed training for their members.

Unions are using public funds

As such, some Unions have recently entered into a broader range of educational activities, including basic skills, the in-school portion of apprenticeship, occupational upgrading, and ESL/FSL. In many cases, their involvement in these activities went ahead without consultation with the public education providers because government assured the Unions they were getting money not previously destined to public education. These Unions were told they were getting “new” money. Governments made funds available, Unions took advantage of that money to educate their members, and meanwhile, public educators were losing their jobs, and courses offered in community colleges were terminated. From coast to coast there are Unions using funds that should have been allotted to public education.

Government is using sister Unions in an anti-labour agenda

We need to be clear on this issue. **Government is NOT giving money away for education and training in order to benefit the Unions, their members and families.** Government is funding the private sector and some Unions in the hope of destroying the public sector. Government wants to eventually starve those Unions that got involved in education and training, and have its way with the labour movement, leaving the privates in total control of education and training. It is important that our sister Unions know that they are being used to create chaos within the labour movement.

Public education is brushed aside

It has become quite obvious that the government is successfully creating a huge gap between public sector Unions and their counterparts in other sectors as some of the other Unions play right into government's hand. The 1997 CLC Conference on Training was another example of how public education is being brushed aside by some sister Unions. Public education workers had to fight in order to get their point across as if they

were the new kids on the block. If we continue down this road, government is going to win its quest to pit Unions one against the other, it will weaken us all and the balance of power will have disappeared. Our members and children deserve more than that.

Development and delivery of training belong in the hands of public educators

The need for worker training is there, and as such the Union's voice should and must be heard as representative of the workers. However, **there has to be a clear recognition by all that the development and delivery of these training activities belong in the hands of public educators. Without this clear recognition, the role of public sector education is undermined and placed in jeopardy.** Many Unions fail to realize that by taking over these areas, they are adding to the demise and degradation of a healthy public system.

Qualities inherent to public education

Education and training require infrastructure and, in our society, that infrastructure is provided through institutions whose mandate is to plan, organize and deliver education and training to different groups. At its best, that education and training setting is accountable, open to new information and issues, and responsive and adaptive to changing needs. These qualities are inherent to the Canadian public education system and provide the clear rationale as to why the upgrading of the workers' basic skills and training should be left in the hands of the public education system. The entire labour movement must work with unionized public sector workers to that end. The CLC already made that very clear during its 1992 Convention.

The role of the labour movement in promoting quality public education

We agree that Unions must ensure that workers have access to lifelong learning. Equally, **the labour movement must forge a partnership with the public education system to ensure that lifelong learning is provided by a strong and healthy public education system.**

We Can Do It! Canadian Labour Congress, Nineteenth Constitutional Convention, 1992

*"The trade union movement has fought for many years for an educational system that is open to everyone so that they can gain the skills and knowledge to function fully in their lives at work, at home and in the community. **Training programs must be carried out in conjunction with public educational institutions.** Some of these institutions may have to modify their own structures and approaches but they are an invaluable resource suited to channeling training in a broader direction, sensitive to the needs of workers as clients and offering accountability to the public". **We Can Do It! Canadian Labour Congress, Nineteenth Constitutional Convention, 1992.***

Canadian Labour Congress, Seventeenth Constitutional Convention, 1988

*"THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Canadian Labour Congress continue its efforts to lobby the Federal government so that adequate funding is made available for community college training". **Canadian Labour Congress, Seventeenth Constitutional Convention, 1988.***

Canadian Labour Congress, Seventeenth Constitutional Convention, 1988

*"BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Canadian Labour Congress collaborate with affiliates and provincial federations of labour to jointly research and develop a policy on education reform for the next convention that addresses such issues as curriculum-based streaming; underfunding of institutions; reduced access through increased cost of post-secondary education; deterioration of educational facilities due to contracting out; a renewed focus on literacy, numeric and analytical skills; and the mastery of logic, language and ideas". **Canadian Labour Congress, Seventeenth Constitutional Convention, 1988.***

Democracy, Equality and Solidarity

The foundations of the labour movement are embodied in democracy, equality and solidarity. Accordingly, it is understandable that the labour movement would support and promote a universal system of public education because such a system is based on the very same principles. In fact, the labour movement has fought long and hard for public education which is accessible, affordable and accountable to workers and their families. The labour movement's determination to

ensure that all Canadian citizens, regardless of age, race, gender and socio-economic background deserve equal standards of education, has paid off. Let's not throw it all away. **Let's ensure that the entire labour movement is promoting quality public education.**

The need to support and promote public educators in Canada

In the name of solidarity, Sisters and Brothers in the entire labour movement are called upon to support the most important aspect of public education, its educators. Public educators are dedicated, knowledgeable, and most of all possess the proper skills, competence and experience to ensure that our members and their children will have the necessary skills to match the needs of a constantly changing and ever so competitive labour market. The labour movement must work closely together to strengthen and lobby for the maintenance and protection of public education.

Community Skills Centres

The establishment of Community Skills Centres is a further example of the withdrawal of support and funding from the publicly-owned post-secondary college sector across Canada.

Privatization of publicly funded education

Initiated by Human Resources Development Canada in the early 1990s, this act of privatization of publicly funded education was supported by provincial governments with the promise of money. HRDC rationalized the establishment of Community Skills Centres in a number of ways. These included the proposition that colleges were not doing the job, not providing access to those who sought it, too costly, too slow to react and all the other arguments that have been put forward as a result of the government's deficit mania and the slashing of funding for the public post-secondary system. HRDC did not seem to have any shortage of money to give the provinces for the establishment of the Skills Centres.

Community Skills Centres are claiming what belongs to publicly funded community colleges

However, when one examines the programs offered by the private Community Skills Centres, there is little difference in the programming to that offered by the publicly funded community colleges. Very little has been made of the duplication of programming, its extra

expense or the fact that much of the programming has been commandeered from the existing well established regional colleges programs. Program outlines, content and developed curriculum from the public system has also been surreptitiously taken from the public system and is now claimed by the Community Skills Centres.

Adult Basic Education programs, reading, writing and communication skills programs, language skills, introductory computer skills programs put on by the Community Skills Centres are now being touted as filling the community needs that the publicly funded post-secondary college sector was not meeting.

False justification and misleading information

Store-front Skills Centres for those who are too far away from a college, or those who are not ready to return to college, or those who feel more comfortable in getting back into learning and skill development in a small, cozy atmosphere of the Community Skills Centres, are being put forward as part of the justification for the bashing of colleges and their workers that has been going on for some time.

Community Skills Centres have been set up in an undemocratic fashion

Not once did anyone ask the colleges to set up store-front campus locations and take college programs to remote or distant locations for those who had difficulty getting to, or getting enrolled in a regional college. Not once have college instructors from the public system been asked to set up and work in locations that may be at a place other than the college location in order to put in place an outreach program strategy for community colleges.

Privatization and de-unionization of post-secondary education

Plain and simple, Community Skills Centres are a form of privatization and de-unionization of what really are program areas that in other days would have been seen as a matter of course work that the public post-secondary system should be doing and has been funded to do so.

In a recent review by a senior official directed by HRDC to oversee the first 5 years of operation of Community Skills Centres, the recommendation is that they should continue to be funded so that they are able to fully meet their objectives – which to any reasonable person looking at them is to undercut and weaken the mandate

Our position

and the work of the public post-secondary system.

The National Union of Public and General Employees and its 310,000 members across the country are strong advocates for a Canadian public education system that is accessible, affordable and accountable.

We will continue working to ensure that all working people and their families have access to quality public education.

We will also work with other Unions to ensure that their members have access to quality training and upgrading that of their current skills in a responsive manner as possible.

Unions, as representatives of working people, should play a role in defining the training needs of their members. We support Union-sponsored and/or joint Union-management sponsored training programs that rely on and promote public education.

All Unions, however, **must** work with public educators to determine the direction of training and education and to ensure that public sector educators are the providers of any Union-sponsored and/or joint Union-management sponsored training programs.

The National Union will support its members who are public educators and promote their bargaining agenda, which aims to ensure that quality public education remains accessible, affordable and accountable.

To that end it is the position of the National Union that:

- All public funding must be directed to public institutions.
- The federal and provincial governments must restore funding to public institutions to pre-CHST levels.
- The public education system is the prime provider of basic skills, in-school apprenticeship, skills training and employment services.

- A post-secondary system should be open to every person.
- Spending public funds allows greater public scrutiny as well as increased public access to information and decision-making.
- Generically well-trained individuals not only can take their skills to a variety of employers, but also are free to move to different parts of the country to gain employment.
- Pooling public funds results in gains from substantial economies of scale.

An educated citizenry ensures a nation of assertive, confident and powerful people. **The fight for quality public education is a fight for the dignity and future of all working people and their children.**