

Challenges and Solutions for Unions in Labour Adjustment

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Labour adjustment, a term that has become familiar to many of us in the union movement to describe programs to help laid off workers reintegrate into the labour market. These programs include, among others, needs assessment and employability workshops like resume writing, interview skills, labour market research and so on.

But the term “adjustment” also carries with it a set of assumptions about the labour market that have shaped by decades of government policy and programs.

Beginning with the first FTA agreement the federal government made a fundamental shift in labour market policy. They signalled this shift very openly with a report called “Adjusting to Win”. The report warned that workers would be dislocated because of trade liberalization, but that instead of resorting to previously favoured job creation and economic development programs governments and individuals should focus on building up human capital that could be adapted to the new realities. In other words, to quote from the report, workers should not passively wait for governments to solve labour market problems: they should retool themselves with new skills and attitudes and view labour market programs not as a safety net, but a trampoline that would bounce them back into the brave new world of work.

The problem, as we all know, is that neo liberal economic policy has resulted not so much in a knowledge economy as an ever sharper divide between good and bad jobs and polarization of incomes. The story of job losses from free trade that began and continues unabated in manufacturing has since cascaded over every other sector imaginable – health, retail, service – is familiar to everyone here, and does not need elaborating. Nor do the effects. So let’s talk instead about the types of labour market programs that neo liberal governments have put forward as solutions, including adjustment.

Beginning with Mulroney, and reaching its height under Paul Martin, labour market policy has shifted fundamentally from “adjusting” economies through job creation schemes to “adjusting” individuals no matter how completely impossible it actually is for them to make the transformation from, say, a steelworker or garment worker to a computer programmer or manager. The great lie was that the good new jobs would be available, if only workers let go of their past expectations and retrained themselves.

However the other lie was that there was training to be had. In fact, it has been decades since either the province or the federal government invested in actual skills training programs. Instead there has been a systematic disinvestment in training starting with the Martin inspired cuts to social spending in 1996. Not only

was UI income support slashed, resulting in today's grotesque surplus and virtual inaccessibility to benefits, the program segregated "special benefits" like job training by taking funds away from community colleges and introducing a bureaucratic process of individual applications that virtually guarantees a worker will give up before they ever complete it.

Hard skills training that actually leads to greater job opportunities for workers in the labour market was virtually eliminated and replaced with "employability skills" programs geared toward individual adaptation and re-tuning. Employment counselling was contracted out to non-profit groups and over time, more and more private trainers, whose funding agreements limited them to endless resume writing programs, practicing job interviews for jobs that didn't exist, and "life skills" seminars that placed the onus of reemployment on the worker. Needless to say, all of this has been accompanied by a fair amount of "blaming the victim" – subtle but persistent and constantly iterated by government bureaucrats and employment counsellors who hector workers to take a job, any job.

So why should labour want to engage in this charade? Many affiliates legitimately argue that to do so diverts us from a broader political purpose, and worse, co-opts us into tacitly supporting both an ideological and policy framework that we claim to reject. However, I have never been able to reconcile myself to this position, though I think it is certainly valid and should always be forefront in our minds and our debates. Rather, I think the notion of helping laid off workers and fighting the system are not mutually exclusive. And there are broader union solutions to labour market problems that we can pursue.

Why unions and adjustment?

First, every principle of trade unionism and working class solidarity suggests to me that we cannot simply abandon members who no longer pay dues. To do so reduces our unionism to an insurance policy that once lapsed severs our relationship with each other. To not attempt some kind of response, however impossible the challenges, is to leave our members vulnerable to the indignity and ineptitude of much of the "adjustment industry". We have a responsibility to prevent this.

Second, we must confront the reality that just as the labour market has permanently altered our notions of employment – standard, secure, full time and well paid – so too must it change our concept of unionism. If we acknowledge that jobs are precarious; that workers will cycle in and out of employment constantly in their lifetimes; and that new forms of employment relationships will continue to grow, so too must our notions of union representation. The sharp divide between employed and unemployed where layoffs are viewed as an unexpected calamity the union and its members are unprepared for and struggle to get through before parting ways no longer reflects the reality of the labour market. To say this is no way to accept that the loss of good secure jobs is

acceptable – clearly we must bring every resource to fighting neoliberal economies – it is only to say, we should develop our own responses to assisting members in any way possible to ride the rollercoaster.

How do we do this? I think we can learn some interesting lessons from the building trades in terms of both our relationship to members and the value of union-led skills training. In my own union we are negotiating collective agreements that oblige hotel owners to contribute to an equal opportunity training fund and to participate in joint training committees at the workplace.

The concept of the training centre and hiring hall is one that could take root in other sectors as well. In this model the relationship between the member is intact whether she is employed or not. The hiring hall works to secure employment opportunities and dispatch workers to them. This is linked, as it must be, to ensuring that workers have the skills and abilities to perform the job through continuous and high quality training. This kind of approach is a fundamental departure both ideologically and practically from adjustment programs that insist workers take responsibility for their own training and focus on attitude adjustment. No amount of enthusiasm and parchment paper resumes will result in a job that one is not even remotely qualified to hold. It's a lie, and we need to keep saying it's a lie to government and corporations.

Training is not a cure all, but it is a fact that possessing basic skills, such as the ability to speak English, hard job skills, or trade qualifications does widen the scope of employment available to our members. And there is another crucial aspect but often overlooked benefit to union led training and that is *union building*. Union led training provides us with limitless opportunities to expose neoliberal ideology and build working class consciousness and solidarity. Union training and education are not two separate and stand alone processes – they can and must be integrated. This is well understood in literacy programs where certainly language skills are acquired, but so too are union values and goals.

Other measures that we can push for will obligate employers and governments to respond to the needs of workers.

Investment in training is appallingly low in Canada, even when compared to the U.S. Volunteerism is not working. Employers must be obligated legislatively to pay a training tax similar to the one in Quebec. Even extending EI benefits for training will not resolve the issue of how training delivery is to be paid for. To pay direct delivery costs, a training tax is needed.

Once funded, training must be jointly governed by business and labour at the workplace. Otherwise training may be of dubious value, selectively offered, and inadequately monitored.

Governments must reinvest by restoring EI income support benefits labour market programs that offer real skills training rather than false promises based on attitude adjustment. Programs supported by public dollars should be delivered by community colleges and school boards and non-profit organizations according to guidelines that are set and monitored by multipartite consultation with labour as the institutional representative of workers interests.

There is much to be done, but our ability to force corporations and governments in neoliberal economies can only be accomplished by building working class power in our unions and with the community. This must remain our central goal. Persuasion, reasonableness, or minor program tinkering will not bring the changes we are seeking. Only an organized, renewed and re-energized labour movement can do that.

Thank you.