

MERIT, INDIVIDUALISM AND SOLIDARITY: REVISITING THE
DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT IN UNION WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Linda Briskin
Professor
York University
Social Science Department/School of Women's Studies
Toronto, Ontario
Canada

lbriskin@yorku.ca

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Globalization is coincident ‘with the spread of new ideas’ including ‘neoliberalism’.¹ Bourdieu (1998) identifies the essence of neoliberalism as ‘the imposition everywhere ... of that sort of moral Darwinism that, with the cult of the winner ... institutes the struggle of all against all’ and the concomitant ‘methodical destruction of collectives’ which might serve ‘as an obstacle to the logic of the pure market’. He refers specifically to the ‘atomization of workers [and] collectives for the defence of the rights of workers’. He points to the individualization of the wage relationship via the ‘establishment of individual performance objectives [and] evaluations ... individual salary increases or granting of bonuses as a function of competence and of individual merit’. Others point to the elimination of the concepts of the public good or community and their replacement with individual responsibility (Martinez and Garcia 2000).

This paper focuses on the neoliberal values of meritocracy, individualism and heroic leadership, and the impact of such values on union reorganization and re-visioning, and, in particular, on addressing the democratic deficit in women’s leadership. Consensus is widespread that revisioning internal organizational and leadership practices will be necessary to respond effectively to globalization, decreases in union density, the decline of the standard employment relationship, and the shift in the demographic characteristics of union members (age, gender and race). Despite policies and promises, however, unions have been less than successful in addressing the democratic deficit in leadership.

The goal of this paper is to help untangle resentments around equity initiatives which are fuelled, in part, by a cluster of commonsense and widespread neoliberal values. Meritocracy, individualism and heroic leadership combine with generic union commitments to solidarity to create potent resistance to interventions which address democratic deficits. The paper suggests that pro-active politicised union education against these deep-rooted value structures may be critical not only to support equity initiatives, but also to union revitalization, particularly given the institutionalization of diversity training and hegemonic neoliberal ideas. The paper opens with a brief overview of the status of women in union leadership which is followed by a revealing narrative about the defeat of designated seats for women in Canada’s largest public sector union.

Women’s representation in union leadership

WHEREAS, The working woman, equally with the working man, has a right to share in the control of conditions under which she works; be it

RESOLVED, That we hereby call upon the United States Government, the American Federation of Labor, and all of its constituent bodies, to guarantee to women workers adequate representation by women responsible to their organizations on all policy-making councils or bureaus, boards, or committees that deal with conditions of employment or standards of life.

Resolution No. 70, National Women's Trade Union League Philadelphia, June 1919 (quoted in Eaton 1993: 171).

The struggle to increase women’s representation in leadership and decision-making is obviously a long-standing one as the 1919 resolution above indicates, and progress in North American and

European unions has often been slow. Recent research suggests fewer gains, and even backlash. In Europe many sources of documentation generally show uneven progress. The European Trade Union Confederation [ETUC] reports continuing gaps in women’s representation on the executive committees of union confederations although the 2006 figure of 29% indicates an improvement from the 20% in 1999 (Sechi 2007). A 2008 survey of UK’s ten largest unions found that ‘progress towards women becoming fully represented throughout union structures is low and patchy. In fact, at national executive level, the situation has worsened, with women’s representation actually falling and some unions also reporting a drop in representation among national and regional officials’ (‘Women’s union profile...’ 10). Although there is limited systematic documentation in Canada and the US, recent US scholarship speaks to the low numbers (Kaminska & Yakura 2008).² Sue Genge, from the Canadian Labour Congress [CLC] comments about women in leadership positions, particularly at the national level: ‘People are worried that we’re starting to slide backwards’ (quoted in Shanahan 2006:30). In New Zealand, the trajectory around women holding elected positions in union leadership has been described as ‘glacial’ (Parker & Douglas 2010:444).

This profile is particularly surprising in light of demographic changes in unions. Not only has restructuring led to declining union densities, but also to significant shifts in the sectoral, age and gender balance in union membership. For example, the European Industrial Relations Observatory [EIRO] reported in 2006 that ‘the proportion of female union members has now surpassed that of male union members in a number of EU Member States’ (Working Lives Research Institute 2006). In Canada, by 2002, women were half of the more than four million Canadian union members and since 2004, the unionization rate for women has been slightly higher than for men (‘Unionization’ 2009).

The stagnant numbers of women in union leadership, especially at the top, are also discouraging given extensive and illuminating research, and union interventions to tackle this democratic deficit. These have addressed barriers which prevent women from taking up leadership positions (see for example, Braithwaite and Byrne 1995; AFL 2004; Caiazza 2007); vehicles to support prospective women leaders, such as women-only education and mentoring programs (see for example, the Anna Stewart Memorial Project in Australia³ and the Starlet Programme in Denmark [Hansen 2004]; Greene and Kirton [2002]); career paths and progression through the ranks (see for example, Kirton 2006; Kaminski and Yakura 2008); women’s leadership styles (see for example, Briskin 2006); and structural strategies to increase women’s representation in leadership such as designated seats, fair and proportional representation (see for example, Healy and Kirton 2000; McBride 2001; Trades Union Congress 2007; Sechi 2007).

This overview of the status of women in union leadership is the backdrop against which the following narrative about the defeat of designated seats for women in Canada’s largest and quite progressive public sector union is set.

The defeat of designated seats in Canadian Union of Public Employees

This narrative documents the unsuccessful struggle to gain designated seats for women on the National Executive Board [NEB] of the Canadian Union of Public Employees [CUPE], Canada’s

largest public sector union, with 67% women members, and a progressive history on many issues. At the 2005 CUPE convention, the NEB recommended amending the constitution to create five additional regional vice-president positions for women in response to a dramatic decline in women’s representation (from 43 percent between 1995 and 2001 to 22 percent in 2005). The motion was defeated.

Coming out of this defeat, a resolution was passed to form a National Women’s Task Force to consult with the full diversity of union members on the broad issues of women’s equality. The sixteen-member Task Force undertook an extraordinary journey of consultation and education across Canada. Over the course of two years, it held 196 face-to-face meetings with 2300 CUPE members in 121 different communities. In addition, 4788 CUPE members responded to a membership questionnaire, and 298 CUPE locals responded to a survey. The Task Force produced an extensive report ‘Strengthening Our Union: Final Report of CUPE’s National Women’s Task Force’ (CUPE 2007) which documented its process, provided leadership statistics on CUPE, compared CUPE’s models of demographic representation to those of other major Canadian unions, and detailed the barriers which prevent women from more active involvement in the union and in leadership. ‘Our discussions went beyond the issue of women’s representation in the union to include the struggles of women for economic security and decent work. Our consultations included and acknowledged the different needs and experiences of diverse women, including lesbians, transgender women, women with disabilities, racialized women, and Aboriginal women’ (CUPE 2007: 1). Among the 54 recommendations which emerged from this process, two addressed creating a representative union structure, via gender requirements for Executive and Regional Vice-President positions. Despite impassioned pleas in favour of the two resolutions, at the 2007 National Convention, both resolutions were again defeated.

In reference to the earlier 2005 convention debate, Cheryl Stadnichuk, who later became the coordinator of CUPE's National Women's Task Force, identified the major arguments levied against having designated seats, one of which was that the election of leaders should be based on merit, not gender (quoted in Shanahan 2006:30). Jane Stinson, a long-time CUPE staffer and feminist activist in CUPE, commented on the defeat:

‘It was quite a disappointment. The arguments against included that it was discriminatory to have special measures for women, and that women can achieve equality based on merit. Women got up to say they had been elected by men at the local level and if women were to run, they would be elected at the national level. Some used the fact that we used to have two female top officers to argue that special measures aren’t needed for women in CUPE. There is a lot of work to do in our union to raise awareness about systemic barriers for women.’⁴

Despite two years of intensive work, the preparation of both video and documentary material, much the same arguments were made against the leadership recommendations during the 2007 debate at CUPE’s National Convention. Comments from the floor of the convention against the resolutions included the following, the first from a male member and the following three from women.⁵

‘My union leaders were either gay, women or men. They were elected not based gender, race or age. They were elected based on their leadership and merit ... These are not people I looked at based on their gender or sexual orientation but I saw them as individuals and for the people they are ... Having an elected position based on gender, race and sexual orientation ... is a reverse form of discrimination ... My concern is that basically labeling people into groups you are losing your individuality. By being inclusive for selective groups, you are automatically being exclusive and we are eroding the true equality in CUPE and ... weakening our solidarity.’

‘As a women in 2007, I respect, I thank all the women who fought for equal pay for equal work, all of the things we stand for. And I’d like to think that women’s issues in the workplace are a thing of the past, but I am not a fool. I know they are there ... As a woman who holds an executive position at both the local and district council level, I feel that women are being discriminated against in our union, only it is not in the way that you think ... If you focus on me being a women you are discriminating against me ... I feel that I have a hostile environment ... when my right to choose who I want to represent me on the National Executive Board is taken away from me ... If you want your name to run, have someone nominate you, work for the position, don’t expect a handout, you have worked too hard for this. Remember, united we stand, divided we fall. Let’s be united and be the union we are.’

‘As a woman I do not need nor do I want, and there are many women who I have deep respect for who would be so offended, that all their hard work, their education, their passion and efforts would be reduced to a token seat. In our union local, when positions are posted, they are up for free competition, and the successful candidate is based merit, seniority and skills for that job. In our local if we start to parachute people into positions because they fulfill a specialized mandate, I tell you now we would be filing a grievance immediately. This is not going to help the women’s movement. This is not going to solidify or strengthen women within CUPE.’

‘I stand against this resolution ... As a woman I find it extremely insulting and discriminatory. This tells me that the women of this union are incapable of attaining the position of that board without the creation of open seats. I think that every woman in this union has the capability and the skills it takes to get up there if they choose to do that. I don’t think we need token seats for anyone. My local came from an all-men executive to an all-women executive and we did this through hard work, training and going out there and showing our membership, men and women, old and young, whatever race you are, whatever sexual choice you make, we showed that we could do the job and we got those positions on our own merit, not because our local decided that we should have token female seats. That is not the way it works ... There needs to be training made available for any of us who choose to pursue it and that is what we need, not these kind of resolutions. If we are truly equal as is stated in all the conventions when you read out the equality statements, then why do we continue to see these kinds of resolutions?’

These comments offer a window on the resistance to some equity initiatives. Threaded throughout are several recurring themes: merit and excellence, a commitment to gender

neutrality, heroic/charismatic leadership; a belief in the power of education to address barriers faced by individuals; solidarity rather than unity in diversity; a narrow view of what constitutes democracy; and deep commitments to individualism.

This was not the first such struggle inside CUPE. In the mid-1990s, two conventions debated designated seats on the NEB for a person of colour and an Aboriginal person, a resolution finally adopted in 1999 after ‘a great deal of negotiation and behind-the-scenes work’. The arguments about the proposal were similar: ‘[T]here were some, including members of colour, who felt that affirmative action was tokenism and they have to rely on “merit”’ (Das Gupta 1998:327-8).

‘I was working on the head table ... when the issue of the two seats came up, and it was very heart wrenching to hear the debate, some of it was very malicious and very nasty ... People are saying “I want to select the most qualified person”. Everyone wants the most qualified person, but why are they going to expect that the minority is not a qualified person’ (quoted in McLaughlin 2000:221).

Such resistance is not confined to CUPE or to Canada. Despite cultural differences, the theme of merit is not unfamiliar, and such arguments are expected, taken-for-granted, and unremarked in many contexts. For example, when the German works councils moved to a minimum quota of women, the argument that ‘gender is being given priority over performance’ was made (quoted in Klenner & Lindecke 2003:68). Irene Sundelin, the equality officer for Svenska Industritjänstemannaförbundet [SIF] commented that ‘the thought will be that she is not so good and that she got the job because she is a woman’ (quoted in Briskin 1999a:173). And in 2009, in a major report on gender equality, the International Labour Organization stated: ‘Affirmative action should never compromise the principle of merit and competency-based leadership’ (163).⁶

Unpacking the discourses

What seems clear from the CUPE narrative is that identifying barriers faced by women or highlighting patterns of under-representation, both well-documented in the Task Force report presented at the 2007 convention, did not generate alternative views around designated seats. Since many ‘assume that under-representation is due to factors other than discrimination’ (Harrison *et al* 2006:1028), exposing under-representation is not sufficient to increase support for affirmative action (Kravitz *et al* 2009).

Further, many women continue to be antagonistic to such interventions. Although not specifically on unions, American research confirms ‘resistance from members of groups the policies were designed to benefit’ (Turner & Pratkanis 1994:5). A recent study found that Hispanic and African American subgroups had ‘negative perceptions [about] being offered a position based on affirmative action’ (McMillan-Capehart, Grubb & Herdman 2009:426-7). The stigmatization of union affirmative action positions suggests that the issue is not simply one of false consciousness.

‘It is not surprising that among those who oppose positive discrimination are its intended beneficiaries ... The objections stem from feelings of being stigmatized, undervalued,

under-rated and not promotable. It can leave those who have been selected with the feeling that they have not been chosen for the right reasons, that they will never get on and that they are a token rather than a valued employee’ (Noon 2010:735).

In Canada, women who fill such positions face resistance, and often find their credibility and legitimacy challenged and their ability to fill their mandate hampered by their association with affirmative action. Research shows that they may encounter systematic exclusion from information networks, and from formal and informal decision-making processes; marginalization and isolation, ghettoization in narrowly defined areas of ‘women’s issues’, and feminist and lesbian-baiting (Briskin 1990; Cuneo 1993). People of colour who attain leadership positions in Canadian unions ‘frequently experience isolation, exclusion, and alienation from white members, and their effectiveness is often compromised by lack of resources. These problems point to the potential ineffectiveness of affirmative action programs. They also indicate that affirmative action may be a tokenistic gesture if unionists of colour in elected positions are made ineffective by lack of support’ (Das Gupta 2007:203; see also Edelson 2009; Walker 2009).

At the same time, American research finds significant differences in attitudes around affirmative action between Blacks and women.

‘Black affirmative action recipients ... may be more likely than women to feel entitled rather than unfairly helped (201) ... Blacks are much more likely than Whites to believe that there is systemic discrimination against Blacks ... This is due to Blacks’ awareness of the history of discrimination against their group, the development of self-protective strategies to shield group members from prejudice and discrimination, and the existence of a more cohesive Black group identity ... Women as a rule do not ... see themselves personally as targets of discrimination’ (Eberhardt & Fiske 1994:209-10).

Exploring the differences in patterns of resistance among various equity-seeking groups would both enrich understanding of hostilities to interventions to address democratic deficits, and help develop support for them.

Cockburn’s notion of ‘coerced identities’ may also help untangle women’s ambivalence. Her examination of the often-coercive and always essentializing nature of collective identities in nationalist struggles is also relevant in the union context: ‘Many (sometimes it seems most) identity processes are coercive. We are labeled, named, known by identities that confine us, regulate us and reduce our complexity. The subtleties in our sense of self are difficult to convey in the terms available to us. We often feel misunderstood and misrepresented’ (1998:216). Snitow (1990:9-10) points to ‘the common divide between the need to build the identity “woman” and give it a solid political meaning and the need to tear down the very category “woman” and dismantle its all-too-solid history ... From moment to moment we perform subtle ... negotiations about how gendered we choose to be. This tension -- between needing to act as women and needing an identity not overdetermined by gender -- is as old as Western feminism.’

Despite the coincident recognition that women are discriminated against as women and may need special measures to make integration possible, women activists may also feel ambivalence, even shame about what is often named as special treatment, and may internalise the assumption

that individuals should be able to make it on their own. In calling for equity training for union executives, Marie Clarke Walker, Vice-President of the CLC (2009:91) points out ‘Even members of equity-seeking groups require this education because oppression is frequently internalized.’

Against this backdrop, the next section attempts to untangle additional threads of resistance by deconstructing the themes of merit and excellence, tolerance and gender neutrality, and the belief in the power of education to address barriers faced by individuals, each of which is informed by abiding commitments to individualism. Individualism prizes the rights of individuals over collective or group rights, conflates social progress with individual advancement, disavows the significance of social identities and thus assumes that ‘any group requiring special help must in some way be deficient’ (Noon 2010:735), and presupposes meritocracy. Commonsense thinking takes for granted that individual and collective rights are in conflict. Individualism is often confused with the development of individual potential, and by extension, it is assumed that the supporting individuality depends on individualism.

Not only does individualism work against union equity initiatives, it undermines the social justice tenets of unions, and their political and economic agendas. At the same time, although notions of solidarity which emerged in the CUPE convention debate directly challenge individualism, the assumption that solidarity is based on commonality and sameness contributes another thread of opposition to interventions targeting specific groups such as women.

i) Merit and individualism

Commonsense notions of merit assume that individuals are rewarded, and by extension chosen to be leaders, on the basis of unbiased assessments of excellence. People get what they deserve, and those who do not succeed have only themselves to blame. These widespread, and deeply-rooted ideas are used against (and often internalized by) working people and equity-seeking groups. Such views blame individuals for poverty, illness and unemployment and hide systemic barriers. Concomitantly, they argue against structured interventions to address such barriers, and against collective organizing (since only the weak need the support of the group). The social construction of ideas about merit (who decides what is meritorious and what is rewarded), the fact that hard work pays off more for some than others given socially-constructed barriers, and the link between ideas of merit and radical individualism are easily made invisible.

In fact, even those who support affirmative action policies often do so on the basis of the merit principle. In research on those who support and those who oppose affirmative action, both groups were found to be

‘concerned about merit principles ... but the difference in support lies in whether or not an individual believes that affirmative action policies are using merit as a criterion ... Supporters see affirmative action as involving programs that promote qualified minorities; however, opponents see the policy as promoting diversity at the expense of merit, fairness, and qualification. Despite these diametric views ... both camps support programs that provide opportunities to qualified minorities, and they both eschew programs that violate the merit principle’ (Reyna, Tucker, Korfmacher & Henry

2005:679).

Inside unions, notions of merit are not invoked when ensuring regional representation. In fact, the [CUPE] Rainbow Committee spearheading the earlier initiative (for designated seats for people of colour) made the point that ‘minority representation didn't represent a great divergence from the democratic tradition of ensuring that different geographic areas were represented to ensure the representation of different communities of interest’ (McLaughlin 2000:222). Issues of merit are also not raised in relation to the elections whose results favour men. In fact the ‘myth of merit-based selection’ contributes to the

‘blind acceptance of the idea that, absent an explicit affirmative-action policy targeting minorities and women, the selection criteria are fair, just, and culture-free ... Yet ... one sees that perceptions of merit-based qualifications fluctuate with the social status of the person being evaluated and are thus necessarily linked to group membership ... Achievements of powerful group members are thought to be merit based, whereas achievements of less powerful group members are viewed as group-based benefits (Eberhardt and Fiske 1994:205).

To what extent is the invocation of the language of merit around affirmative action interventions a cover for sexism or racism? This question has been widely researched in attitudes to affirmative action for blacks in the United States. Many argue that ‘opposition to affirmative action is the result of racial prejudice ... Instead of expressing their hostility directly, however, it is expressed indirectly as a romanticization of “traditional American values” and as opposition to programs such as affirmative action’ (Strolovitch 1998:43 and 34; see also Turner and Pratkanis 1994). Such views are linked to what are seen as new and less overt forms of racism: ‘New racists may genuinely oppose racism and believe they are not prejudiced. They are most likely to take a prejudicial action when it can be attributed to a nonprejudicial cause, as is the case with opposing more prescriptive forms of affirmative action that can be said to violate norms of justice (i.e., merit or equity)’ (Harrison *et al* 2006:1016).

Parallel thinking is evident in new forms of sexism. Neosexists ‘tend to deny the existence of discrimination against women, resent complaints about discrimination, and resent special “favors” for women’ (Swim & Cohen quoted in Martinez *et al* 2010:3). Those who ‘oppose programs of affirmative action are not necessarily opposed to equality’ and may even themselves adopt non-traditional gender roles. In fact, neo-sexism may be more strongly espoused by women (Martinez *et al* 2010:3). Neosexism, then, may help explain resistance to designated seats. For example, in the Public Service Alliance of Canada [PSAC] which has a majority of women members. Mariam Abou-Dib, PSAC’s women's and human rights officer commented: ‘There's a perception that women have pretty much made it and there's no need to be looking at representation where women are concerned ... [W]e've never had designated positions for women ... It's extremely controversial, and the resolutions calling for equity seats on the board have been voted down at conventions’ (quoted in Shanahan 2006:31).

Further research would enrich understanding of the resonance of such discourses in different cultural and political contexts, and in particular, their positioning in what are understood to be more collectivist and less adversarial cultures.⁷ A comparative study of trade union views of

diversity and diversity management in the UK and Denmark found, perhaps counterintuitively, that in the more consensus-oriented Denmark, the discourses of merit and individual deficits, and opposition to positive action initiatives were stronger. Ethnic inequality was seen to be ‘related to deficits in the minority ethnic communities themselves ... This contrasts directly with the underlying assumption in Britain of the existence of racism and discrimination as processes of exclusion, and hence the stronger focus on changing structures and policing behaviour’ (Greene, Kirton & Wrench 2005:192-2).

Research on the ‘target group effect’ shows more support for affirmative action for women (see, for example, Strolovitch 1998; Murrell *et al* 1994).⁸ In the union context, however, some suggestive, although often anecdotal evidence, indicates that the backlash against equity may affect women more than people of colour. For example, the TUC Equity Audit (2007:23) reports that unions were ‘more likely to have reserved seats on their national executive committee for black members than for women’, a pattern which is also evident in CUPE and merits further investigation. Interviews with women union activists in Canada identified a ‘perceived backlash against feminists ... accompanied by a desire to reverse some of the gains achieved’ (Foley 2009:129).

Tolerance and gender neutrality

The emphasis on personal achievements and excellence is bolstered by gender blindness. The view that tolerance and acceptance is expressed by ignoring differences based on gender, race, sexuality and ability is widespread ‘To ignore race and gender bolsters people's sense of themselves as not thinking in a prejudiced manner’ (Eberhardt & Fiske 1994:216). Such thinking assumes that gender and race are, or should be irrelevant characteristics of individuals rather than hierarchical systems of power and privilege. ‘People view affirmative action negatively in part because they see it as replacing a race-neutral and gender-neutral status quo with a group-based reward system that considers group membership to the exclusion of merit’ (Eberhardt and Fiske 1994).

Heroic and charismatic leadership

The continued focus on charismatic and heroic leaders, and on the success of the few women, people of colour or Aboriginal people who attain leadership positions can reinforce the commonsense view that leadership is a personality capacity or characteristic of an individual, even if one that can be trained and encouraged (Briskin 2011). It also buttresses commonsense discourses of individualism and meritocracy. The emphasis on career paths of individual union leaders, personal success stories, and critical acts enacted by critical actors (Hopkins, Roarty and Sagers 2008) can make less visible the ways in which leadership is a materially-grounded social construction, and set of shifting and contextual practices (Briskin 2006).

Education and human capital theory

Commonsense thinking, promoted by right wing governments and employers, promotes the view that improving individual educational qualifications is the key vehicle for self-improvement, and a solution to poverty and pay inequities. Such an approach makes invisible systemic barriers that remained untouched by individuals enhancing their human or personal capital.

The discursive themes of merit, heroic leadership, human capital theory and gender blindness all

emphasize individualism, and yet trade union discourse is commonly associated with solidarity.

ii) Solidarity

The language of solidarity offered in the comments by CUPE members provides an alternative to individualism. In fact, union solidarity has always been seen as a direct challenge to individualism: ‘Solidarity traditionally means workers putting the interests of the community above those of the individual, in banding together against employers’ (McLaughlin 2000:225). However, a solidaristic union discourse may exacerbate views that affirmative action measures, seen as special treatment, are inequitable. The common claim that special measures such as designated seats or constituency committees divide memberships, challenge fundamental equality and risk solidarity rests on assumptions of a generic worker with a homogeneous and self-evident set of common interests. Indeed, continued ambivalence among union women to affirmative action may reflect uneasiness about highlighting women’s ‘differences’ in the context of solidaristic union discourses.

Despite diversifying memberships, the traditional framing of solidarity which calls on commonality and sameness was still evident in CUPE membership comments and also in recent scholarship. For example, in a discussion of union collectivism (which is equated with class solidarity), not only does Peetz avoid the complexity of solidaristic intersectionality, but equates the identities arising from ‘the feminist revolution ... [and] gay and lesbian sexuality’ with ‘the rise of dance club culture’ (2010:388).

Currently the language of union solidarity is being invoked in new contexts, for example, in discourses of ‘transnational solidarity’ (see, for example, Gordon and Turner 2000; Bieler *et al* 2008) and in the ‘new solidarity’ of coalition building (Frege, Heery and Turner 2004). Undoubtedly, solidarity needs to be re-visioned to address its complexity in a global context. However, it is not clear to what extent such new discourses buttress or challenge traditional notions of solidarity, that is, create less or more space for a vision of solidarity based on difference. In contrast, the intersectional perspective of ‘unity in diversity’ argues that special measures do not divide memberships but rather build stronger unions by recognizing the already-existing differences among members (Briskin 2002). In her study of the struggles of three clerical workers’ unions at Harvard, Columbia and Yale University, Kurtz concludes that ‘the unavoidable task, then, of each movement is to build internal coalitions’ using ‘a multi-identity politics’ (2002:xviii).

Eminent Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor (2010) speaks to the issue of solidarity and difference:

‘Solidarity is essential to democratic societies; otherwise, they fall apart ... Many view the development of an individualistic outlook as the greatest threat to solidarity nowadays. But this is closely linked to a diminishing sense of common identity. The challenge nowadays is to maintain that sense of intense solidarity amid diversifying populations ... We face a challenge that is unprecedented in human history: creation of a powerful political ethic of solidarity self-consciously grounded on the presence and acceptance of very different views.’

The discursive analyses presented above points to contradictory values often held simultaneously, and particularly to tensions between mainstream individualistic, and union collectivist and solidaristic values. Fletcher and Gapasin (2008:206-7) claim that consistency should not be expected: ‘[A] member who is strongly anti-corporate may also be a right-wing populist and hold racist ideas. Another member may be a staunch fighter against racist harassment but oppose affirmative action.’

Although Peetz (2010:394) recognizes that ‘most people simultaneously possess individualistic and collectivist characteristics’, his discussion of the possible ascendancy of individualism and decline of collectivism treats these values on a continuum, and concludes that the values of collectivism have not declined. In so doing, he makes invisible the powerful embeddedness of individualism and meritocracy. In contrast, this paper highlights a simultaneous commitment to both collectivism/solidarity and individualism, a combination which can create potent resistance to equity initiatives. Gramsci’s notion of commonsense may help to illuminate this complex cluster of values: ‘Common sense ... is pragmatic, uncritical, implicit, disjointed, contradictory and is specifically non-theoretical, and often anti-theoretical ... [C]ommon sense is determined by conviction rather than by reason, even in the face of evidence to the contrary (Danieli 2006:337, 339). In a telling interview, an ETUC Political Assistant identified ‘men’s stubborn refusal to learn the relevant facts about women or apply a gender analysis’ as the clearest expression of men’s resistance (quoted in Cockburn 1997:464), an example of masculinized commonsense forms of resistance (Daniele 2006; Ledwith 2009). Optimistically, the very existence of contradictory ideologies among union members may be the ground to create a ‘rupture’ and a shift in consciousness,⁹ that is, one set of ideological views may be used to unsettle the other.

Union education, however, must also confront widespread anti-intellectualism. One participant in a political union education course in SEIU commented: ‘Helping people to build an analysis of the right-wing agenda is an interesting but academic exercise ... People respond to issues, not ideology; to what immediately impacts them, not the big picture. Our members don’t need analysis, they need specific tools for action’ (quoted in Geronimo 2004: 03). Willful ignorance combined with widespread anti-intellectualism offer a challenge, given the necessity for unions to confront and contest hegemonic knowledge.

Given the lack of responsiveness of CUPE members to the documentation in the Task Force, the issue of evidence -- what is believable and who, and what is seen to be relevant -- is of particular importance. Himelfarb (2010) notes ‘the unseemly and even dangerous ... assault on evidence and experts especially coming from our political leaders.’ He concludes that as ‘long as people feel shut out, they will distrust the evidence and the experts.’ Does his conclusion have any resonance for unions? Does it speak to the relationship between leadership and rank-and-file?

Educating for equity and union renewal

Pro-active union education to expose and unsettle the cluster of contradictory values may be critical not only to equity initiatives but also to union revitalisation. In fact, it may be an important tool in the arsenal of renewal initiatives which have, to date, focussed on organizing, rank and file participation, democratizing unions, cross border solidarity, coalition building,

political campaigns and improving labour law. However, evidence suggests that politicized union education has been sidelined by these other renewal initiatives, dangerously so in a context where right wing and neoliberal ideas are gaining a larger foothold among working people. ‘The truth is that right-wing ideas are gaining ground in the minds of our members. Large numbers of our members don’t see themselves as working class people. They are not clear about where their interests really lie. Many are voting for politicians and parties that take action against the interests of workers and unions’ (CUPE 1995:3). Needleman points to similar problems in the US (2004:106):

‘Workers’ ideas about patriotism, family values, foreign policies, and individual rights often set workers against each other and against workers in other countries, against issues of great importance to working women and people of color, immigrants, and younger workers ... the greatest challenge is to win the hearts and minds of workers from the right-wing assault on union values ... and take on the individualistic, antiunion culture of our society.’

Workplace and market restructuring fuels such thinking. A Canadian study (Pupo, Wells and White 1998: 4) highlighted the gap between ‘an increasing commitment, albeit sometimes merely rhetorical, to social movement unionism and social democratic politics at the top ... and a resurgence of what appears to be a microcorporatist variety of business unionism at the bottom.’ What the authors call ‘neo-feudalism’ encourages ‘local leaders and members [to] strategically align themselves with their managements as their first line of defense within a precarious work arrangement’ (49). In the UK, reduced bargaining power is shifting the union from collective bargaining to ‘defending individual rights in the workplace’ (Moore, Thomson & Watson 2010:2).

Undoubtedly, corporate values influence union members: ‘The values of justice, equality, and social responsibility find little echo in an increasingly right-wing media ... This means that our thinking as workers and citizens is often infiltrated with views that directly contradict our deeper values – resentment of “welfare bums,” “aggressive feminists,” “lying refugees” and “lazy government bureaucrats”’ (Burke *et al.* 2002:30). The authors conclude that ‘Union education can help counter the increasing individualism and isolation amongst our members, build solidarity and inclusion towards a stronger and less divided social movement [and] support workers to understand how global power functions’ (31). Fletcher and Gapasin see membership education as ‘the lifeblood of the union. It cannot sit on the margins’ (2008:206-7).

Reclaiming politicized union education is also of considerable importance given the widespread institutionalization of diversity management and training which is replacing both the language of equal opportunities and pro-active structural initiatives to address discrimination (Wrench 2005). Diversity management ‘mystifies and obscures genuine social inequalities and ignores their structural bases’ (Wrench 2005:80). It focuses on ‘individual difference, rather than social group difference ... dissolving collective identity and with it collective strength’ (Kirton and Greene 2005:433, 8). Given a commitment to ‘a celebratory narrative of a multicultural workplace’, diversity management focuses not only on those who are traditionally excluded or underrepresented but includes ‘all the ways in which individuals differ, for example, personality and work style’ (Swan 2009:312). The motivators of equality, fairness and social justice are

replaced with business rationales, for example, arguments that diversity leads to efficient utilization of human resources (see Wrench 2005; Kirton and Greene 2005). Based on interviews with trade union equality officers, Kirton and Greene (2005:444) conclude that ‘it is no surprise to find unions suspicious of the individualist diversity discourse, which threatens to position employees as individuals rather than as members of social groups.’ The question raised here is whether unions are counteracting these individualistic discourses in union education programs.

Politicized and collectivist education is a key social justice vehicle, and most unions have programs for educating activists, training leaders, promoting women’s leadership, and in some cases, teaching transformational leadership. However, despite innovative and often very successful educational programs, what may be absent is *direct* engagement with widespread, commonsense and naturalized views about meritocracy, individualism and heroic/charismatic leadership. Lack of attention to this ideological cluster may help explain the continuing and considerable resistance to equity interventions around leadership demographics, and may also weaken union renewal initiatives.

Research highlights the difficulty of correcting false or unsubstantiated beliefs (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). One study found that ‘the least informed people expressed the highest confidence in their answers; and that providing the relevant facts to respondents had no effect on their ... opinions’ (305). In fact,

‘people tend to display bias in evaluating political arguments and evidence, favoring those that reinforce their existing views and disparaging those that contradict their views’ (307) ... [Furthermore], individuals who receive unwelcome information may not simply resist challenges to their views. Instead, they may come to support their original opinion even more strongly—what we call a “backfire effect” (305-307).

Such research, however, was not done in a union or collective context. Collective, explicitly political union education offers a sharp contrast to forms of education which focus on individuals increasing their human capital. Although union education is not a panacea, it has been successful in changing attitudes and practices. Recent research on the PEL (paid educational leave) program of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), a leadership training course which focuses on ‘mobilizing, encouraging critical analysis skills in the leadership, fostering equity, and providing a democratic and participatory forum to explore issues’ (Weststar 2006:310) offers evidence in this regard.

‘Though 59.7% of the spring 2003 participants already considered themselves to be fairly or very active in their union before attending, 91.2% responded that PEL either increased or greatly increased their interest level in the union ... [R]espondents indicate that PEL has greatly increased their likelihood of attending union meetings, enrolling in other union education courses, becoming vocal about union-related issues, and participating in union organized events ... PEL has also influenced -respondents' level of activity in their community and their interest in political affairs ... With reference to critical thinking, the majority of participants stated that they were more likely to question management decisions (82.5%), union decisions (74.5%), the views of fellow workers (86%), and media and political commentary (70.2%) (312) ... PEL also has an impact on diversity

awareness based on social identity factors: 79% of participants indicated that their awareness had increased on gender issues, and 75.4% on race and ethnicity issues’ (314).

Yet trajectories in the UK and the US suggest a serious decline in politicized union education. In the UK, union education is now seen as a vehicle to enhance union retention by offering additional membership services to make unions more attractive to members, and by offering training and education to help recruit new members such as migrant workers (Moore 2009; Mustchin 2010). Further, the government’s creation of the Union Learning Fund¹⁰ in 1998 increased the focus of union education on employability, professional and personal development and employer-union partnerships, a human capital approach which supports individualism. Forrester (2004) claims ‘that the conception of employability, with its uncritical focus on skill formation, has resulted in an undue narrowness of learning concerns’ (413-14). He calls for a focus on ‘democratic citizenship’ which takes up ‘discrimination, de-industrialization, interculturalism, inequality and new forms of solidarity’ (418).

In the US, the AFL-CIO disbanded its educational department in 2002, and the budgets of most US unions reveal that ‘membership education is not a priority’ (Fletcher & Gapsin 2008:206-7). Ruth Needleman who served as education director of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) points to the focus on ‘grievance, bargaining, and organizing skills’ and notes that education programs ‘function largely as a service resource to meet the needs of other priority departments’ (102-3). She calls instead for ‘education to expose and subvert the capitalist system’ (2004:102) and ‘to move workers from individual to collective identities.’ As in the UK, union education is seen as a vehicle, less to challenge democratic deficits and right-wing hegemonic ideologies, and more to develop skills, promote union organising and address declining union memberships.

In recent years, many Canadian unions have revised their education programs in order to integrate equity and address barriers, evidenced in 2009 document -- *Integrating equity, addressing barriers: Innovative learning practices by unions*-- which surveys fifty educational initiatives in Canadian unions suggests (Labour Education Centre). These programs pro-actively take account of diversity and equity issues and include a heightened sensitivity to barriers faced by various equity-seeking groups. They have the overarching goal ‘to build a labour movement where more union members engage in the struggle for social justice, equality and workers’ rights’ (8).

‘In a capitalist society that promotes individualism, competition, a narrow version of political democracy, and a sense of the inevitability of inequity, unions encourage workers to value and build community; to recognize inequality and act against it; to feel in solidarity with all people who are oppressed; and to build inclusive organizations. In short, unions promote learning that uncovers and results in action against systemic barriers, and that builds towards a more equitable future (10) ... This contrasts with the individualistic goals and structure of learning that infuse much of the corporate training and formal schooling in Canada. As in other areas of union activity, education builds solidarity, promotes critical thought and democratic participation, and aims to effect change in the workplace and beyond’ (12-13).

Such programs have moved well beyond the earlier deficit model approach (Briskin 1993) which

focused on changing women by improving their self-esteem, developing their assertiveness, and training them in union procedures (Eaton 1993; Greene and Kirton 2002). The new emphasis on structural barriers is a great step forward. Barb Thomas, a well-known Canadian labour educator, and currently Education Officer for the Ontario Public Service Employees Union [OPSEU] suggests that union education should focus on

‘community, democracy, equity, class consciousness, the greater good, organization-building. These values (and goals) are the antithesis of the commonsense ideas of merit, excellence, and individualism ... I've found that giving people a taste of what it would be like to experience these [alternative] values can be really subversive and shifts people's energy to what they can do differently’.¹¹

However, identifying barriers, recognizing privilege, developing individual and collective skills, and visionary calls for inclusive unionism may not touch the deep-seated views which were so openly and actively expressed in the CUPE debates on designated leadership seats for women, and may not speak to the large number of union members whose worldviews are infused with hegemonic ideas of merit and individualism. In the Canadian context, courses which address directly this cluster of values do not seem to exist.¹²

It is worth noting the tradition of anti-racist training inside unions and elsewhere, some of which fuelled considerable anger given the apparent focus on white guilt and political correctness (Swan 2009). Quite in contrast, this call for more politicized union education does not focus on individuals or their failings; it neither blames the victim nor the privileged; and it goes beyond the discourse of identifying and overcoming barriers which can reinforce individualism. It recognizes that calls to and claims about purging individuals of racism and sexism, sometimes called non-sexism and non-racism (Briskin 1994) not only focus on individuals, but seek the impossible in societies imbued with racism and sexism. In contrast, politicized union education focuses on structural realities rather than individual failings, and on deconstructing hegemonic and commonsense views which work against the interests of the majority and which limit collective capacities to organize and resist.

In fact, the challenge to individualistic analysis provides a strong foundation for dealing with the difficult and sensitive issues of power and privilege, often the elephant in the room. In contrast to endorsements of merit which ‘may cause members of the dominant group to avoid acknowledging racial privilege in an effort to increase their own sense of deservingness’ (Lowery *et al* 2006:972), understanding structural patterns of discrimination reduces resistance to affirmative-action policies (Eberhardt and Fiske 1994; Son *et al* 2002). In the interests of union equity initiatives and union renewal, union education programs need to reclaim their political role, move beyond the documentation of barriers and under-representation, and expose and unpack commonsense, naturalized, widely-held and contradictory views which buttress dominant hegemonic ideologies.

Conclusion

Framed by a narrative about the defeat of designated seats for women in Canada’s largest public sector union, this paper has explored widespread and naturalized views about meritocracy, individualism and heroic leadership. These deeply-rooted and commonsense beliefs undermine the social justice commitments of unions, fuel resistance to equity initiatives around leadership, weaken attempts to mobilize union memberships, and make the project of union renewal more difficult. In particular, such values combine with generic commitments to union solidarity to create potent resistance to interventions to address democratic deficits. Addressing the complexity of solidarity in a global context will depend on new discourses which incorporate ‘unity in diversity’, that is, an intersectional solidarity based on difference.

Unions offer one of the few arenas to counter both the ideological onslaught supporting the market and the neoliberal promotion of radical individualism. This paper has argued that proactive union education to expose and unsettle the cluster of sometimes contradictory values may be critical not only to equity initiatives but also to union revitalisation, particularly given the corporate institutionalization of diversity training and hegemony of neoliberal ideas. In fact, politicized union education may be an important tool in the arsenal of renewal initiatives which have, to date, concentrated on organizing, rank and file participation, democratizing unions, cross border solidarity, coalition building, political campaigns and improving labour law.

Although this paper has addressed the ways that neo-liberal values promote resistance to equity initiatives, this cluster of values has a significant effect in other areas. Unions will need to reject neoliberal values of meritocracy, individualism and heroic leadership, embrace the leadership of the wide spectrum of union members, and invent new forms of solidarity in order to respond to the impacts of globalization, develop transnational labour organizing, organize the unorganized, and build coalitions with workers in informal labour markets.

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¹ Call for papers, ILERA 2012.

² In 2009, the AFL-CIO passed a historic motion on building a diverse and democratic labor movement including a requirement for documentation. See AFL-CIO (2009).

³ <http://www.vthc.org.au/your-rights-at-work/vthc-womens-officer/anna-stewart-memorial-project/index.cfm>

⁴ Email correspondence, 12 Oct 2005. Permission to quote.

⁵ I would like to thank Jane Stinson of CUPE for providing a transcription of the convention debate on these resolutions.

⁶ An earlier ILO report recognized the complexity of merit: ‘Selection on merit allows the best person for the job to be identified. In practice, however, merit is difficult to define and measure. Merit is not an absolute static concept, and the notion of what constitutes the “best qualified” applicant can be influenced by social values and prejudices. Moreover, the value of different types of experience and work histories may be difficult to measure and compare’ (2005:3).

⁷ See Holladay and Quinones (2005) on diversity training in countries spanning the individualistic-collectivistic dimension, Greene, Kirton and Wrench (2005) on trade union reactions to diversity management in the UK and Denmark, and Briskin (1999b) on women’s organizing and the discursive terrains of gender and class in Canada and Sweden.

⁸ ‘Survey data reveal substantial and enduring “target group effects” in attitudes toward antidiscrimination policies. That is, the level of support is determined, in part, by the target group in question’ (Strolovitch 1998: 31).

⁹ Rupture is a frequently-used imagery in feminist scholarship to discuss dramatic shifts in women’s consciousness when normalcy is disrupted (see for example Mies, 1983:125-6).

¹⁰ <http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/about/learn-2394-f0.cfm>

¹¹ Email correspondence, 19 May 2010. Permission to quote.

¹² One minor exception is an exercise titled ‘The Inner Circle’ included in the 250-page ‘Anti-Racism Integration Guide’ developed in response to the 1997 CLC report on *Challenging Racism*.

In trying to find Canadian union education material or courses which deal directly with these cluster of values, I consulted Anna Larsen from the Metro Labour Education Centre which produced the 2009 document on ‘Integrating Equity...’, Professor Nancy Jackson of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Maureen Hynes, Director of the School of Labour at George Brown College, Margaret McPhail from Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF), Joel Harden, the registrar of the Labour College of Canada, Barb Thomas, Education Officer for the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), Laurell Ritchie from the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), and Gisèle Pageau, the Human Rights Director from the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers of Canada (CEP). None could point to union educational initiatives which directly address these values, although some noted the parallels to discussions of workplace employment equity (sometimes called affirmative or positive action). Although this is not an exhaustive assessment of what may be available in Canada, it does suggest a certain vacuum.