

Workplace Training in Ireland and the United Kingdom Notes on a Study Tour Organized by the Ontario Federation of Labour

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The Ontario Federation of Labour organized a study tour to Germany, Ireland, and the United Kingdom in mid-November 2008 to examine apprenticeship governance systems in those countries in light of the anticipated changes to the administration of trades training in Ontario following the report and recommendations of Tim Armstrong on compulsory certification of trades.

The OFL will report on the specific implications of the tour regarding the implementation of the Armstrong recommendations.

This report comments on aspects of the tour of a more general interest to trade unionists who are engaged in labour education and workplace education and training. The author participated only in the Ireland and United Kingdom legs of the tour and so there will be no commentary on Germany.

In Dublin, meetings were held with representatives of the Irish Trade Union Congress, labour representatives on national training structures, the head of a major labour education college, bureaucrats from the national training authority, and staff from a major employer organization in the construction sector.

In London, the Trade Union Congress arranged a full schedule of meetings with trade unionists engaged in a variety of aspects of workplace education and training.

In each of the countries, we heard a number of common themes.

Ireland and the United Kingdom have both seen union density decrease at alarming rates. 62% of the Irish workforce was unionized in 1982. Today that percentage has been reduced to 29%. Of those, 80% are in the public sector. Figures were similar in the U.K. where private sector union density is in the range of 20%.

In both countries, apprenticeship training has gone through a significant revival over the past decades. Under the Thatcher government, apprenticeship systems were largely discarded in the United Kingdom.

By 1990 there were 53,000 apprentices registered in the U.K. More recently, apprenticeship has regained its former prominence. Currently in the UK there are 250,000 registered apprentices and plans are in place to increase that number to 400,000 by 2020.

In Ireland a white Paper on Manpower Policy in the mid 1980s described traditional apprenticeship as costly, inflexible and inefficient. Since that time considerable effort has been made to improve the system and, according to senior trade union representatives, improvements in the workplace training and education system since the 1980s have played an important role in the economic revival of the country along with favourable tax arrangements for multinational corporations, the injection of development funding from the European community, and social partnerships between government, employers and unions.

In both countries, study tour participants heard regularly about the affects that the current economic crisis is having on workers. In fact, barely a week after the end of the tour Irish and British unions agreed to a joint action plan on the recession, which included as a key point, “embarking on a major campaign of up skilling, so that workers made redundant have the maximum chance of finding further work, and all workers are equipped to participate in the high value economy that must emerge after the present crisis is over”.

Among the most interesting aspects of the tour were the brief overview of social bargaining, details concerning the structures for governing apprenticeship, and innovative programs in workplace training in both countries.

Social Partnerships

Both the United Kingdom and Ireland have had some years of experience with social bargaining between government, unions and employers.

In Ireland, since the late 1980s unions have negotiated national agreements covering social welfare, pensions, health and safety, along with wages and conditions of work.

While these agreements have often been reached after difficult negotiation, our informants believe that they have played an important role in increasing the social wage of Irish workers and have contributed to the tremendous growth of the countries economy in the 1990s and early 2000s. Up until the 1980s the key issues facing Ireland and the Irish labour movement were high unemployment and out migration.

The success of the economy in the intervening years largely overcame these traditional Irish conundrums and union priorities shifted to training, education and up skilling.

Unfortunately, in these same years union density in all sectors of the economy declined and when the recession began to bite the effectiveness of the social partnership agreements became more questionable.

The most recent agreement recommended a 6% wage increase in all sectors. Ominously, in late November of this year, employer groups reneged on the agreement.

Foras Aiseanna Saothair (FAS) – Multi-Sector Labour Market Partnering

FAS is the Irish national training and employment authority. With a current annual budget of 1 billion Euros (\$1.5 billion CAD) and over 2200 employees it is responsible for training and skills development throughout the country.

The work of FAS is directed by a multi-sector Board of Directors which features equal representation from unions and employers, along with government appointees, and a seat representing youth interests. In the Canadian context, the make up of the FAS Board would be equivalent to the skills development and training functions of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada being overseen by a Board with significant representation by labour and employers.

On a short study tour it is difficult to analyze the effectiveness of these multi-sector arrangements but it is clear that labour representation on the Board of FAS has had positive benefits for Irish workers.

During a session with one of the labour representatives on the FAS board we were told that decisions are made by consensus and that labour priorities are regularly addressed. His words were echoed by the head of Ireland's largest union training centre. Both spoke to the range of FAS programs which address the needs of workers, including the development of a national framework for job qualification, up skilling programs for low skilled workers, traineeships in area such as environmental inspection and health and safety training.

The labour commentators on FAS programs emphasized that through the representation of the labour perspective at the Board and committee level, the traditional gap between training and labour education was

being overcome.

At the training college run by the Service, Industrial, Professional, Technical Union, Ireland's largest union, programs in labour education such as activist training, shop steward, health and safety, and union activist short courses are funded by FAS.

The head of the college was very clear that the focus of the training was less on individual skills and more on building a strong trade union movement. The courses have been approved as part of the national qualification framework which means the FAS funding has increased from 50% to 70% of costs.

FAS and Apprenticeship

FAS has set up a National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee to provide the Board with advice on issues related to apprenticeship. The structure of the committee is similar to the FAS board of directors with unions and employers having an equal number of seats.

There are 26 designated trades, classified into 5 families: construction, engineering, electrical, motor and printing.

Although the model used for the apprenticeship training system is called a "standards based program" it is in reality a mixture of standards based and time served. That is, although the system includes a series of standards that must be met to move through the program, it maintains minimum requirement for time served.

The Irish system of apprenticeship is also characterized as demand driven, meaning that to register as an apprentice the worker must first find employment in the occupation, with an employer who satisfies FAS that they are capable to provide access to the range of competencies required by the trade. The program includes 7 alternating phases of on-the-job and classroom training. The classroom phases of the program usually do not exceed 40 weeks, and the total program, from registration to completion, takes a minimum of 4 years.

The program and standards for each trade are based on an occupational analysis that includes skills requirements classed as core skills, specialist skills, common skills and personal skills.

The employer is responsible to pay the wages of apprentices during the on-the-job phases of the program, to provide a qualified craft person to oversee the on-the-job training and work of the apprentice, and another

qualified person, approved by FAS, to assess the competency of the apprentice.

FAS funds all apprentices during their off-the-job training and provides the training directly through one of its training centres or through an approved institute or college. All phases of the off-the-job training are required to be delivered in a single training environment to ensure continuity and the integration of practical and theoretical skill sets.

FAS believes that their apprenticeship system has produced first class trades people who have played a significant role in the growth of the Irish economy over the past 15 years.

Apprenticeship in the United Kingdom

The apprenticeship system in the United Kingdom was essentially dismantled by Margaret Thatcher's government in the 1980s. In recent years it has re-emerged to become, in the words of the Trade Union Congress, "a key route to work" for many British young people. The reconstituted system, as it stands, would hardly meet the basic criteria to be called "apprenticeship" in the Canadian context.

Apprenticeships in the U.K. are defined by 25 sector skills councils, representing 80% of the labour market, which have been created over the last 4 years and which are employer lead but include minority representation from unions.

The sector skills councils create task groups to define apprenticeship in their sector. Funding is provided by government to training providers, usually local colleges or training specialists, who work with employers and apprentices to design the program which contains three elements, the national vocational qualification, a technical certificate and the attainment of key skills.

Most of the time spent in apprenticeship is on-the-job, with classroom portions usually on a day release basis. The duration of the apprenticeship, from entry to completion varies widely, from 12 months to 5 years. Minimum wage rates have been established but appear to be guidelines rather than enforceable regulations.

The Trade Union Congress and many of the people who made presentations to the study group provided critiques of the current apprenticeship system in the U.K.

From the perspective of the TUC, the quality of apprenticeships vary

greatly. In many cases apprentices receive too little training and low wages. National standards are not enforced beyond adherence to the three key elements referred to above, and the role of independent training providers appears to be far too expansive.

The system also raises equality concerns with the TUC. Most sectors have very uneven gender participation, with women dominating the lowest paying apprenticeships and more men in higher level advanced apprenticeships. Only 6% of apprentices come from the black and minority ethnic community. BME apprentices are underrepresented in the traditional craft sectors and are less likely to get a related job at the end of their apprenticeship.

From the Canadian perspective, it appears that any type of job readiness training, for any occupation, which includes components of on the job and classroom training is called an apprenticeship in the U.K. Compare this to the Irish example which features clearly defined trades, a national qualification framework, and a systematic program of alternating classroom and on the job phases.

Promising Innovations

The National Apprenticeship Service

While there is much to improve in the apprenticeship system in the United Kingdom, one particular recent program may hold promise for the attraction of young people to apprentice able trades and for improving the participation of employers in apprenticeship training.

In 2009 a National Apprenticeship Service will be established with responsibility for funding and expanding apprenticeship. Among the key goals of the NAS will be the maintenance of high quality programs and significantly increasing apprenticeship starts.

The NAS will be a separate and distinct service, which operates at a national and regional level, and will have responsibility for every aspect of apprenticeship.

One specific program of the NAS will be the development of a web based “matching service” which will connect potential apprentices with eligible employers, keep a record of all apprentices and employers, and track the progress of employers and apprentices through the system.

The new NAS holds the promise of addressing many of the negative

aspects of the current system in the U.K.

Union Learning

In the United Kingdom a union learning fund has been established and provides an annual grant from government of \$15.5 million (\$28.75 million CAD) to unions, through the Trade Union Congress.

The fund is used to expand and improve the training and development of union representatives and elected officials and to provide access to learning opportunities for workers. The fund supports both labour education and workplace education and training as they are defined in Canada.

The union learning fund supports learning in the workplace which balances the needs of the workplace with the needs and aspirations of the workers. Along with individual and task based skills development, the fund also supports the priority of embedding learning in all aspects of union work and in making learning a priority in collective bargaining.

The key actor in these initiatives is the union learning representative, who plays the workplace based role of facilitator of learning. The ULR provides confidential advice to individual workers concerning learning needs and aspirations, negotiates with employers and training providers to bring education programs into the workplace and actively advocates for increasing in training opportunities, particularly among low skilled workers and other disadvantaged groups.

In essence, the ULR works toward establishing learning as a core union activity.

In Ireland the study group visited the college established and run by the Science, Industrial, Professional, and Technical Union(SIPTU). As mentioned previously, SIPTU views its educational programs as building blocks for the union.

At the same time, these labour education courses are part of the National Qualification Framework, which means that the programs are eligible for maximum funding and also allows participants to gain credit for the course when seeking further post secondary attainment.

Final Comments

The governance model of FAS, Ireland's national training authority, and its apprenticeship advisory committee, provide excellent examples of the potential for building labour market development structures which are both effective and representative of labour market interests.

Including significant representation from both unions and employers in the creation and monitoring of labour market policies and programs has ensured that Ireland's resources are well spent and have the potential to meet the needs of workers, employers and the broader community. Further examination of the FAS example will strengthen efforts by unions in Canada to establish multi-sector forums, both nationally and provincially, aimed at labour market development.

The willingness of governments in both Ireland and the United Kingdom to fund union led education and training programs is a hopeful sign for Canadian workers. Of further significance is the recognition, in both countries, that labour education is a legitimate, and fundable form of workplace education. In Ireland this recognition extends to including labour education in the national qualification framework, allowing workers to use their union training as a component in their general educational attain.

Perhaps the most compelling program explored during the short tour was the union learning representative. Having a representative in the workplace whose role is to advocate for education and training, for the learning needs of workers, and to act as a confidential adviser for workers, represents a tremendous advance for workplace learning.

Support for union learning representatives acknowledges that there are broad areas of potential common ground for workers and employers in the area of education and training. By mediating between the interests of employers and the aspirations of workers, union learning representatives can help find ways to accommodate both. The development of the union learning representative role also recognizes that the power relationships inherent in the workplace require the worker to be sure his/her education and training needs and aspirations are explored in a safe, non-punitive environment.

Within the labour movement, establishing the role of union learning representative places education and training firmly at the center of union activity and facilitates an increased priority for training in the program of unions, including in collective bargaining.

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