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Lifelong Learning in the New Economy: A Great Leap Backwards

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at a 1994 Jobs Study report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that presents a disturbing economic development strategy for use by its member countries. The report calls for the creation of two distinct streams of jobs: high-skill jobs that would have high-knowledge requirements; and low-skill, low-wage jobs that would absorb significant numbers of unemployed workers and for which the report advocates regressive ways to ensure workers are desperate enough to take the low-wage jobs. The concept of "lifelong learning" is central to the process of increasing the skills of those in the high-wage jobs, although it is seen solely as an investment in business and in the economies of OECD member countries. This article raises questions

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine un rapport d'études sur les emplois de 1994 de l'Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Économiques (l'OCDE), qui présente une stratégie développement économique perturbatrice à utiliser par ses pays membres. Ce rapport demande la création de deux volets distincts d'emplois: les emplois hautement spécialisés, qui exigeraient des connaissances intellectuelles et les emplois peu spécialisés et peu rémunérés, qui épongeraient un nombre important de chômeurs. Le concept "d'acquisition continue du savoir" joue un rôle important dans ce rapport de l'OCDE, puisque l'apprentissage est essentiel dans le processus d'accroissement des compétences des personnes ayant des emplois bien rémunérés. Cet article soulève des questions sur la direction des stratéabout the direction advocated in the report and explores some of the OECD strategies that have been adopted in Canada under the guise of "structural adjustment." The implications of this direction for university continuing education practice are examined and a social policy role for university continuing educators to play to address the issues of work and learning is discussed. gies de l'OCDE et, en observant les implications de cela sur les cours d'éducation continue dans les universités, débat du rôle de la politique sociale que les professeurs en éducation universitaire continue et pour adultes auront à jouer pour résoudre les problèmes d'emploi et d'apprentissage.

THE NEW ECONOMY

The world of work is changing rapidly. Under the banner of "economic globalization" and the need to be competitive in the international economy, corporations have restructured to give their shareholders immediate profits. By automating their operations, they have not only eliminated hundreds of thousands of full-time jobs but also depersonalized the victims of this new economy.

Companies have been "re-engineered" as though they were pieces of machinery. Workforces have been "downsized" or "right-sized" as though they were computer generated models. Workers, like the inanimate objects they manufacture, may be "reorganized," "redirected," or "reoriented" at will. Corporate hierarchies have been "restructured," "flattened," "delayered." Workers have been "de-hired," "de-selected," "severed." Entire industries have been "de-jobbed" (Finlayson, 1996, pp. 46, 47).

Because of the popularization of this language—aided and abetted by the mass media—workplaces are now viewed from the perspective of management, that is, as places that *must* be restructured if they are to compete globally (Finlayson, 1996).

Economic globalization—a widely misunderstood buzzword of the 1990s—refers to the transformation of the world's economies into a *world* economy that places the interests of transnational corporations ahead of those of individual nations. The globalization impulse is nothing new, however. The arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 marked its beginning in North America; the subsequent formation of the Hudson's Bay and the

Northwest Trading companies in the 17th century initiated the fur trade, in which aboriginal people were exploited in order to generate wealth for England and France. What is new, according to Broad (2000), is the "'deepening' of capitalist production relations" (p. 54). This intensified focus on economic globalization has changed the lives of workers everywhere.

Jobs are being dramatically restructured, creating a highly polarized workforce.

At one end are highly skilled, well-paid professionals, semi-professionals, and tradespeople with relatively stable jobs; at the other end are blue- and white-collar workers stalled in unskilled, low-paying, casual or part-time jobs, eking out an existence that is far from secure. A study conducted by Burke and Shields (1999) found that 52% of Canadian workers earn less than \$15 an hour, and more than 37% of working single mothers earn less than \$10 an hour. In addition, 45% of adult employees between the ages of 25 and 59 do some form of flexible work, while 3.2 million Canadians (about 20% of the labour force) are either unemployed or significantly underemployed and can be considered to be structurally excluded from the labour market.

We live in a society of growing extremes—extremes that have widened dangerously since the 1989 signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Canada and the United States. While corporations and the wealthy have been given huge tax breaks to help them become globally "competitive," the rate of child poverty has increased by 49% (even as Parliament pays lip service to wiping it out) and an alarming 19.8% of Canadian children now live in poverty (Campaign 2000, 1999). Further, in 1980, there were no food banks in Canada. There are now an estimated 2,000 and the number of people needing them for basic survival continues to grow (Jackson & Robinson, 2000). Presently, more than 800,000 Canadians rely on donated food for part of every month (Food Bank, 1999/2000).

The effects of the FTA and the subsequent 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which included Mexico, have been devastating for many Canadians. Indeed, some people who have been on the conservative side of the ideological spectrum in the past are raising serious questions about the pacts. For example, Dalton Camp, a former president of the Progressive Conservative Party and a key Tory strategist, is now championing social justice issues and strongly critiquing the neo-liberal policies of our current governments in his *Toronto Star* column and on current affairs television programs. In 1996, Angus Reid, the head of one of Canada's largest polling firms and no friend to the radical left, wrote a strong critique of the new economy and its impact on Canadians. He predicted the loss of many good jobs and said:

What the new economy is producing is job insecurity, longer working hours, a surplus of labour, more part-time workers, a social safety net full of holes and the potential for growing income disparities between the rich and the poor. (p. 190)

Reid continued:

The movement to part-time, flexible work is swamping the job market. We're talking about the creation of a new "servant class," whose main role will be to attend to the personal needs of the wealthiest 20% of the population. This is the 20% that advises ordinary people to make themselves "flexible" in the workplace. (p. 191)

Workplace change has happened so quickly that few of us realize its extent. Canada now has a system in which workers at the top are rewarded with large salary increases while workers lower down the scale are expected to be grateful just to have a job. The polarization of work into "good jobs" and "bad jobs" is transforming our society. However, many Canadians accept this polarization and the widening gap between the working rich and the working poor as inevitable, viewing it as an unfortunate reality of the new economy that is beyond their control.

Why has the workplace changed to such an extent? How did we get to this state?

What role should continuing educators play in the new global economy? Building on a review of the literature, this article explores these questions. It looks at *The OECD Jobs Study* (1994), a report advocating a regressive approach to job creation and training; it describes how Canada has followed the path endorsed by this report; and it discusses the impact on unemployed and underemployed Canadians. The transformation of universities from centres of learning and independent research to centres serving the interests of business and the subsequent changes to the mandate of continuing education and extension units are also explored. Finally, a social policy role is suggested for university continuing educators to play in an attempt to address the issues of work and learning in the new economy.

Although some people tend to combine organizations such as the OECD and the WTO (World Trade Organization), referring to them as the "alphabet soup" of trade organizations, this article focuses on the report of one organization—the OECD. *The OECD Jobs Study* report of 1994 is of particular importance to university continuing educators because of the emphasis it placed on lifelong learning, the follow-up attention it has received by the OECD member countries, and the ongoing monitoring of its implementation (OECD, 1995, 1996).

OECD JOBS STUDY REPORT

A 1994 Jobs Study report from the OECD proposed a disturbing economic development strategy, one that clearly has been followed in Canada and OECD member countries (OECD, 1995, 1996). The report's authors believed that OECD member countries had not responded "appropriately" to the demands of economic globalization and thus challenged them to "strengthen the capacity to adjust to rapid change" (OECD, 1994, p. 29). The report stated that while governments, unions, and businesses in member countries often tried to protect people from the worst effects of economic change, many of the resulting policies and practices decreased their countries' ability and will to adapt to change. It disparaged the growth of publicsector jobs in the 1970s, claiming that this led to the diminishment of "the incentive to accept work—particularly low-paying or precarious work" (p. 30). In addition, it was highly critical of state-imposed or union-negotiated wage/income floors and employment protection programs, saying these were a type of protectionism that impacted negatively on the ability of member countries to "adapt" to the new global economy.

The report spoke in more positive terms about the ability of the United States to respond to new technology and globalization. It applauded the way in which the less-protective labour market and social policies of the U.S. resulted in labour markets that were "highly flexible, and entrepreneurship [that] was dynamic" (p. 30). New jobs were created quickly, and while many were high paying, many others were low-skill, low-paying jobs, "often filled by women" (p. 30). The report expressed tacit support for sweatshop-type labour practices:

Workers in these jobs often had no option but to accept low wages, precarious conditions and few health or other benefits, because they lacked the skills needed for higher-paid jobs, and did not have the alternative of European-style social support. On the other hand, the social problems faced by many of these workers might well have been worse if inflexible labour markets had deprived them of even these jobs. (p. 30)

The basic policy message was that member countries should address the issue of high unemployment "not by seeking to slow the pace of change, but rather by restoring economies' and societies' capacity to adapt to it" (p. 30). The report presented a two-pronged challenge: to examine social policies of member countries for the extent to which "each may have contributed to ossifying the capacity of economies and the will of societies to adapt; and then to consider how to remove those disincentives" (p. 30). Although the authors of the report spoke of not wanting to harm social supports, their

unabashed admiration for the U.S. system, with its relative lack of such supports, tended to contradict this claim. This contradiction was apparent in the report's proposed job creation strategy.

The OECD report favoured creation of jobs only in the private sector, and in two distinct streams: skilled jobs that would have high-knowledge requirements; and low-wage jobs that would "absorb significant numbers of low-skilled unemployed workers" (p. 33). It supported the growth of low-wage jobs and argued that member countries should not inhibit their creation.

The document described ways to ensure workers are desperate enough to take "low-paying and precarious" jobs. For example, in a section titled "Disincentives to Hiring," it called for changes in attitudes and practices, especially in the areas of taxation, social policy, and collective bargaining. Cuts to social spending were advocated, and ways to increase the hiring of low-wage workers, such as lowering minimum wages, reworking employment-protection legislation, and lowering trade barriers, were explored. All of this was built upon the unquestioned ideological assumption that member countries "must adjust to changing circumstances" (p. 36); in other words, OECD countries and their citizens must adapt to the demands of the corporate elite.

This assumption remains unchallenged by governments, the business community, and the news media. It is accepted as a given, as an inevitable part of progress—a testament to the effectiveness of an ongoing and well-orchestrated corporate public relations strategy as described by Marchak (1991) and Nelson (1993). This acceptance has filtered down to the general population of these countries so that now most people tend to believe that "this is the way of the world" and people who want to challenge it are ridiculed as "living in the past." Laxer (1998) looked at this public acceptance in terms of a class conflict and observed that the ruling classes tend to legit-imize their rule by "presenting it in a universalist guise, justifying their dominance as the only way to achieve some lofty and worthy purpose" (p. 148). The new global economy, he argues scathingly, has returned capitalism to the survival of the fittest:

The world, it seems, is divided between those who have the drive, the guts, the entrepreneurial verve to make it and those who do not. And the second group is much the larger of the two. The drones are the vast majority of the human population, and they must not be allowed to get in the way of the much smaller but indispensable group who makes things happen. (1998, p.151)

STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT IN CANADA

In the prosperous post-war period of the late 1940s and 1950s, Canada developed a number of income and social security programs to prevent a return to the abject poverty experienced by so many Canadians during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Canada Assistance Plan, the Canada Pension Plan, and the Unemployment Insurance program were designed to be a social safety net to help all Canadians attain a minimum standard of living. Although many considered the standard to be far too low, the fact remains that Canada had a nationally legislated social safety net that spanned the country.

The erosion of this social safety net began with the election of a Progressive Conservative government in 1984 and accelerated drastically with the recession of the early 1990s. On the basis of "we have no choice, we must reduce the deficit in order to become competitive," the federal Liberal government, pushed by the lobbying efforts of big business, declared war on the poor by slashing public spending.

The introduction of the FTA and NAFTA resulted in a dramatic social restructuring in Canada. In order to "compete in the global economy" and achieve a "level playing field" with the United States, Canada's social standards were cut in an attempt to harmonize with those of the U.S. These massive spending cuts to basic social and economic development programs, including health, education, and housing, have injured many Canadians significantly. Ottawa's spending hit list has also included: regional development programs, the national railway, unemployment insurance (through increased eligibility restrictions and reduction in benefits), public service jobs, job training, and Crown corporations. Many of the spending cuts were repeated on a smaller scale at the provincial level.

With the elimination of the Canada Assistance Plan in 1996 and the massive cuts to health, education, and social services, the federal government launched an outright attack on social spending. Broad (2000) has noted the rapid shift to the lean state in the 1990s, including renewed attacks on labour and, in particular, on public-sector workers, the restructuring of social programs, and the reduction of the welfare state. Clearly, by restricting access to social programs and cutting social assistance and unemployment insurance benefits, Canada is in tune with the approach advocated by the OECD. In fact, social programs and benefits have been attacked to the extent that, by international standards, Canada now is seen to be a "low spender on income maintenance, health and education as a proportion of GDP" (Ross, Scott, & Smith, 2000, p. 155). As a direct result of our shredded social safety net, many unemployed people are trapped in a vicious cycle of lowwage contingent jobs, from which they cannot escape.

THE ROLE OF LIFELONG LEARNING

The Jobs Study report by the OECD advocated creating and entrenching a two-tiered jobs system that would widen the gap between the working rich and the working poor; "lifelong learning" is central to the process of increasing the skills of those in the high-wage tier. The OECD concept of lifelong learning is limited, however, to learning specifically for jobs. Indeed, the study argues that "vocational and academic studies should both prepare and stimulate students for entrepreneurial activities" (OECD, 1994, p. 38).

In this view, the educational needs or interests of workers are irrelevant, as learning is seen only as an investment in business and in the economies of member countries. Business interests have hijacked the concept of lifelong learning, and this is clearly expressed in the report.

A more radical solution would be reforms to accounting standards which could help improve information on the value of training investments, as would agreed upon, and implementation of, training standards and credentials. This would enable financial markets to account for the stock of workforce skills in a firm as part of recorded assets, in turn encouraging investors to invest in firms with proven track records in training their workforces. (OECD, 1994, p. 38)

In Canada, continuing education practice seems to be following this narrow path, even though it has a rich history and, in the past, covered a broad spectrum of activities (Selman, Cooke, Selman, & Dampier, 1998; Welton, 1987). The onset of economic (corporate) globalization has resulted in considerable prominence for human resource development (HRD)—training people to "fit" into the organization—within continuing education.

There are serious problems with university continuing educators aligning themselves so closely to an HRD strategy in the new economy. The current focus eschews traditional adult education values by looking at the world through the narrow lens of business and the powerful, rather than through that of the broader society. Organizational HRD approaches tend to further polarize the workforce by helping people who already have skills move into higher positions and ignoring those who most need training. This widens the gap between the working rich and the working poor and reinforces an unjust system that wreaks havoc on the lives of people worldwide. As well, continuing education becomes a service industry, serving the needs and interests of business and, thus, part of the corporate world.

The ideology of retraining is predicated on the idea that there is plenty of work and retrained workers will find jobs easily. However, this is a false understanding of the state of the new economy and the types of jobs being created, and makes it easy to see the unemployed and underemployed as

being responsible for their own misfortune. If people really want to work, they can simply take training, or so the rhetoric goes. Thus, the jobless and those in low-wage jobs have no one to blame but themselves for their lack of initiative and drive. This blame-the-victim argument serves only to reinforce and legitimize the inequities within the system.

Reid (1996) argued that, although some jobs are vacant because of a lack of skilled workers, this is not the norm. In essence, it "doesn't matter how willing, or how trained, workers are if improved technology and a global marketplace are creating a society in which there will not—cannot—be enough decent jobs to go around" (pp. 192-193). The need for "decent" jobs is the key to this statement, and it is echoed by Jackson and Robinson (2000), who believe the problem is not one of skill shortages, but a "highly educated workforce chasing fewer and fewer jobs that actually demand high levels of qualifications" (p. 48). They noted that while there are now more jobs requiring a higher level of education, this growth has been "outstripped by the surge in education and credentials among the workforce" (p. 48). Thus, they argued, many people are unemployed and underemployed not because they lack skills, but because there are too few jobs. While recent statistics show that the unemployment rate is dropping in Canada, many of the new jobs being created are in the contingent work category and are being filled by women in the 15-to-24 and 45-and-over categories (Statistics Canada, 2000).

As stated previously, the OECD report clearly recognized that there will be some good (read "decent"), high-paying jobs and many bad, low-paying contingent jobs. New technology will eliminate some jobs, but will raise the incomes of those in good ones. Because there will never be enough good jobs to go around, the main OECD strategy for reducing unemployment is to promote the growth of the low-wage jobs by further reducing wages and eliminating social supports, effectively forcing people to take them (Marquardt, 1998). As Reid (1996) argued:

We are in danger of extending the ideology of privatization—already a core precept of the Sink-or-Swim era—to its final and most bizarre conclusion: that adapting to the new economy is fundamentally a private affair with winners and losers each masters of their own fate. (p. 194)

THE CHANGING UNIVERSITY

Much has been written about the transformation of Canadian universities from centres of learning and independent research to centres that serve business interests (Tudiver, 1999; Turk, 2000). During the 1960s, universal access to university education became a national priority, as it was consid-

ered to be a "great equalizer" that would reduce inequities in society. Consequently, universal access through relatively low tuition, Canada Student Loans, and provincial grants became a cornerstone of Canadian education policy.

During the 1990s, however, universities experienced massive cuts in both federal and provincial government funding and they responded in a number of ways. As well as cutting programs, support services, and staff, universities looked to the private sector for much-needed funds and, thus, began to operate as businesses, serving the interests of business rather than the diverse needs of Canadian society. More important, they increased tuition fees to such an extent that university education is now beyond the means of many low-income Canadians. Tuition costs rose 126% during the 1990s, Canada Student Loans were privatized, and most provinces eliminated their grants to students (Conlon, 2000). Not surprisingly, the result is a two-tiered education system composed of an elite, whose members can afford a university education, and those who cannot afford the high costs of university. This system guarantees a pool of under-educated workers who will be desperate enough to take the low-paying, part-time service jobs that are now an integral part of the new economy.

Universities should openly challenge this shift in direction. However, Haughey (1998) believes that universities have become much more conservative in recent years and, now, rather than actively promoting progressive social reform, tend to reflect the conservative mood of the broader society. He believes that their prevailing focus is on accommodation and compliance rather than resistance and argues that "rather than being an active critic of the prevailing political and economic elites, the university appears to be a large part of the problem" (p. 205). As well, universities that are driven by market priorities and dependent on corporate funding for their very existence tend to stifle such debate. In their search for corporate dollars, support for academic freedom can evaporate, as illustrated by the Nancy Olivieri case (Olivieri, 2000).

Working under the umbrella of the broader university and mirroring its values, university continuing education departments have also shifted towards a market education model, a trend that has been discussed in considerable detail in the literature (Cruikshank, 1993, 1995, 1997; Haughey, 1998; Selman, 1994; Selman et al., 1998). As cost-recovery units, these departments now design revenue-generating programs and courses and narrowly focus on meeting the needs of people and organizations that can pay. The commitment to social action and social justice that historically was strong and vibrant within the extension movement has been lost, replaced by a "tacit acceptance of the status quo ... [and] ... an indifference to what is happening in our society" (Haughey, 1998, p. 205).

It is important that university continuing educators understand how the market model of education fits into the new economy. When they uncritically accept the status quo and the neo-liberal value system as "the way of the world," they indicate tacit support for a vicious and unethical system that places profits over people. In essence, they become allies in developing and reinforcing an unjust system. Selman (1994) predicted that universities would pay a price for abandoning the social justice activities of former years, and this has happened. Because of the conservatism found within university continuing education units, most of the socially conscious adult education work has shifted away from the university to broad-based organizations such as the Council of Canadians and various social movements.

A Role for University Continuing Educators

There is a role for university continuing educators in the fight for a more equitable society, but it requires a major change in direction. One important area, which may now be outside the realm of current practice but could be a role for senior continuing education faculty, is the educational role associated with social policy development. Quigley (2000), citing Silver (1980), defines this role as "the attempt to use education to solve social problems, influence social structures, to improve one or more aspects of the social condition, to anticipate crisis" (p. 216). In short, university continuing educators should become actively involved in developing progressive social policy—moving from a market education model to a social redistribution model as described by Quigley (2000)—a direction that is highly political given today's conservative climate.

Although the need for continuing educators to be "political" is often discussed, it is based on the assumption that the term is commonly understood. However, Cervero and Wilson (1999) identified two explicitly political perspectives that continuing educators tend to take: the pragmatic perspective (the political is practical: the ability to get things done); and the structural analysis perspective (the political is structural: redistributing power). I believe that the problems we face in the new economy are structural and, consequently, it is important to work from a structural perspective.

It is not by chance that we are becoming a polarized society. Society is being deliberately restructured into two distinct groups of people—the "winners" and the "losers." It is obvious that we are living in a class system and that the elites are structuring the new economy in a way that will benefit them the most. A form of Social Darwinism, that is, a survival-of-the-fittest, winner-take-all society, is now prevalent. As continuing educators, we must ask ourselves if we want to support this type of system. Whose interests are we furthering? What are the ethics of what we are being asked to

do? To answer these questions, we need a clear understanding of how society is changing. Without this, as Miles (1998) argued, we can "unknowingly become tools in the implementation of unjust policies and ... complicit with the destructive neo-liberal agenda" (p. 253).

Korten (1996) argued that change has happened so quickly, few of us realize the extent of it. He believes we must begin to explore alternative visions of society and identified the biggest barrier to change as the lack of public discussion and debate. The starting point, he maintained "must be to get the issues on the table and bring them into the mainstream policy debates" (p. 30).

The public has been bombarded with slogans such as "there is no alternative" and consequently has not engaged in any meaningful debate on the future of work.

Finlayson (1996) believes that people have not challenged the dominant agenda because they are frightened by the changes that are transforming the workplace; in short, "we are scared out of our wits that we will miss the global economic boat if we defy those who hold our tickets" (p. 69). She argued that the corporate agenda has

caused us to believe that we are losing all control over the forces that govern our lives. It has also caused us to believe that our politicians are paralyzed by circumstances, and have no real choices on economic policy. It has caused us to believe that our society has no real choices, that we are in the midst of an economic cataclysm that we have no hope of mitigating. (p. 70)

McQuaig (1998), too, noted the image of government impotence that has been carefully crafted by big business and its handmaidens in the corporate-controlled mass media. She argued that governments do have "autonomy to pursue policies aimed at full employment and well-funded social programs" (p. 255), but they must make choices. To date, they seem unwilling to make such choices and, instead, hide behind the "free market" ideology. Finlayson (1996) added:

In the last decade or so, Canadians have been denied the opportunity to engage in calm, thoughtful—and genuinely inclusive—discussions of how best to solve the workplace problems that confront us now and those that will confront us in the twenty-first century. In accepting the proposition that market forces alone should determine the way we live our lives and organize our society, we have also accepted the proposition that there is really nothing to discuss. (p. 202)

As university adult educators, we must educate and help organize the public around the issue of work and the new global economy that is adversely affecting so many Canadians. We need to encourage discussion and debate on the direction Canada is taking on these issues and become involved in social policy issues, a role that, in the past, was an integral part of adult education work. The federal government, encouraged by the rightwing opposition and the lobbying efforts of big business, has joined with other OECD member countries to follow the path advocated by the OECD, a neo-liberal path designed to benefit the wealthy at the expense of ordinary people. University continuing education faculty need to raise questions about this direction and explore its consequences for society as a whole, both in the classroom and by developing educational programs and public forums in the broader community. Rekindling alliances with community groups and organizations that are active in social justice work is crucial to this process.

I believe that a number of the specific and interwoven policy directions raised in the OECD Jobs Study report are abhorrent to many Canadians. Two specific issues emerging out of the OECD report are particularly disturbing: (a) the drive to slash public spending, and (b) the focus on improving productivity.

Questioning the Drive to Slash Public Spending

The OECD Jobs Study report viewed public-sector jobs as being a drain on the economy. "Cut public spending!" "We need smaller government!" "Get government off our backs!"—these phrases have become rallying cries for right-wing political parties and business leaders in Canada. University continuing educators can organize forums to help the public look behind the glib rhetoric and see what the push for smaller government really means. "Cut public spending" means cutting public service jobs and jobs in health care, education, environment, and highways, in short, jobs that provide a service and help us function as a society of citizens. The public needs to know that when jobs are cut, service is reduced.

What are the consequences of the cutbacks to public-sector jobs? Without adequate numbers of doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals, our health care system collapses—which is happening in communities across Canada. Without adequate funding of schools, colleges, and universities, our education system flounders—which is happening in communities across Canada. Without environmental-protection workers, tragedies such as the E. coli outbreak in Walkerton, Ontario, in which seven people died and 2,000 became seriously ill from drinking contaminated town water, occur. The Walkerton crisis was a direct result of a combination of staff cuts to the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, deregulation, privatization of labs, and lack of training of local public utilities personnel. Slashing public spending took priority over the public health of citizens.

Thus, publicly questioning the "smaller government" rhetoric of the right and examining the consequences of cutting public spending and public-sector jobs is vital. Canadians must discuss and debate this issue, and university continuing educators can provide a forum for this debate.

Rethinking the "Improving Productivity" Rhetoric

The OECD Jobs Study report of 1994 advocated lowering minimum wages and slashing income supports such as unemployment insurance in order to improve productivity. This neo-liberal path is guaranteed to trap people in permanent poverty.

University continuing educators should encourage public debate about the meaning of "productivity." When big business chants the mantra of "improving productivity," the public knows this means another round of cutting jobs and slashing wages to become "lean and mean" and make more profits for corporate shareholders. Why do we see the world of work from this perspective? Simply put, it is because this is what happened in the "lean '90s," because we hear about corporate downsizing daily in the media and assume this is the way the world works, and because we feel powerless to change the situation.

But the world of work need not operate this way. Improving productivity depicts a lopsided vision of the work world through the lens of big business and the powerful. There are other ways to look at productivity. For example, Camp (1999) suggested that we improve productivity not by lowering wages but by raising them. Wasn't it Henry Ford who looked out his window, saw his factory lot full of new cars, and decided to give his workers better wages? If his workers didn't have decent wages, he reasoned, who would buy his cars? The same logic is equally relevant today. If businesses want people to purchase their products, then workers must receive adequate wages.

Broad (2000), building on work by O'Hara (1993), suggested that we rethink the meaning of employment itself. Since there will never be enough "decent" jobs to go around, one option he proposed is to encourage more part-time work—but for better wages and benefits. Broad reasoned that what is needed is not more economic growth, but "more equitable distribution of work and world resources" (p. 95). Rather than campaigning for full employment, activists should lobby for sufficient pay for part-time work for all, he argued. Thus, a person could work as a carpenter or a computer programmer in the morning, go fishing in the afternoon, and philosophize after dinner. Broad believes that all of these activities contribute to individual fulfillment and to social good, and that this way of redistributing work could apply to all types of labour. He argued that a society should be based on the

"principles of equality, justice and conservation rather than seeking profit at any cost" (p. 96), and that there should be an extensive public debate over these alternate ways of looking at the issue of work. University continuing educators should be in the forefront of this debate.

CONCLUSION

Canada is becoming a highly polarized country: some people have benefited greatly in the new economy, while many others have become trapped in a vicious spiral of poverty. This type of polarization is wrong—it is harmful for society in general and for people trapped in low-wage work specifically.

Education has often been considered a "great equalizer" in our society, but, ironically, education now tends to increase the polarization between the working rich and the working poor. The "haves" get more while the "have nots" are tossed aside. University continuing educators who support this inequitable distribution of wealth by buying into the HRD model of lifelong learning must move beyond the market model of education and become a force for social change.

Korten (1996) said that "we are caught in a terrible dilemma. We have reached a point in history where we must rethink the very nature and meaning of human progress" (p. 29). University continuing educators have a clear role to play in this process, if they so choose. There are many issues around work and the changing workplace that must be opened up to public discussion and debate to help people understand the consequences of the changes that are taking place in the new economy.

As university adult educators, we need to look at the influence of corporations on Canada and explore how studies conducted by organizations such as the OECD and agreements made by the WTO impact on our everyday work lives. These organizations hold a tremendous amount of power—and use it to support wealthy people, not ordinary people. We also need to draw on our past successes, as described by Selman et al. (1998) and Welton (1987), and look for ways to engage people in a public discussion about the kind of world Canadians want to see. By exploring democratic options and by lobbying governments, we can help to ensure that citizens, not corporations, control the direction that Canada pursues.

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