OUR MISSION

The Labor Education Service is the only educational program in the state specifically focused on the needs of Minnesota workers and their organizations. Our mission is to equip workers, union officials and labor organizations with the knowledge-based tools to protect and advance their rights and responsibilities in a changing global socio-economic environment. Through these efforts, we foster economic vitality, ethical relations and social justice in the workplace, at home and in the community.

Highlights

- LES served thousands of Minnesotans through our customized training, skills classes, media services and community programming.
- We graduated the fourth group in the Minnesota Union Leadership Program and began sessions for our fifth cohort.
- The Who Built Our Capitol? project garnered numerous accolades and statewide attention, including screening of the video on public television and at events in several communities.
- The Workday Minnesota website featured new videos weekly and offered in-depth coverage of important issues such as the minimum wage and worker organizing efforts.
Customized Training

Minnesota’s changing workforce and the challenging nature of work opened up new avenues for labor education. At the same time, we continued to provide courses in important areas such as steward training and bargaining that have been a hallmark of our programming since the 1950s.

In each case, our staff tailored the training to the organization’s and students’ capacity and needs. For example, Tony DeAngelis helped develop several programs specific to the Building Trades. In several settings, Monica Bielski Boris and Russell Raczkowski utilized a new “Common Sense Economics” curriculum that Monica helped develop with the national AFL-CIO.

We taught classes at several union conferences, including the Minnesota AFL-CIO’s biennial convention and the federation’s women’s leadership conference. We also conducted “train-the-trainer” sessions and facilitated strategic planning.

Labor Studies Skills Courses

Rank-and-file workers and seasoned activists alike learned new skills and strengthened their expertise through our non-credit courses. Topics included Trade Union Administration, Contract Negotiations, Steward Training, Basic Arbitration and People Power: Building Union Strength Through Member Engagement.

For the second year in a row, we served students across the state through our online class, Introduction to the Labor Movement.

Minnesota Union Leadership Program

We were excited to graduate the fourth class in our Minnesota Union Leadership Program in May. Speaking at the ceremony, Rich Swanson, a member of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 110, said, “Without this class, I would never have had the opportunity to hear about so many issues outside of my union. . . . With these classes, you redefined what the labor movement means to me.”

Dialogue between members of various unions is a defining feature of the MULP series.

We kicked off the 2014-2015 program with two days of training in late September. Participants explored the origins of the labor movement, its history and its role in the modern economic system.

An alumni event in April brought together current and former MULP students and featured Saket Soni, nationally known for his organizing among day laborers and other workers in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina. Soni discussed the challenges facing workers and the labor movement in today’s precarious economy.
Media Services

Unions and other organizations turned to us for video production services ranging from short documentaries to YouTube videos. We also engaged in several special projects.

A four-person team produced videos for the American Postal Workers Union at its Chicago convention and related events in July. Randy Croce, Howard Kling, Barb Kucera and John See shot, edited and posted programs to the APWU YouTube channel each day of the gathering. In keeping with the convention’s theme, “Stand Up, Fight Back,” this year’s shows featured activist and issue-oriented subjects.

We provided audio-visual support to the 68th Annual Minnesota State Building & Construction Trades Council convention in Rochester from July 29 – Aug. 1.

In September, we operated cameras and equipment to screen and record the speakers and proceedings at the Minnesota AFL-CIO’s state convention in St. Paul. Workday Minnesota provided full coverage of convention events and issues.

Our media work won eight awards in the annual International Labor Communications Association contest. Several video productions and our website, Workday Minnesota, were honored.

Workday Minnesota

Every week, Workday Minnesota features new videos produced by the Labor Education Service, as well as in-depth coverage of news and issues important to working people.

Several videos explored “myths and realities” about the minimum wage and featured interviews with minimum wage workers, small businesspeople, economists and researchers. A companion curriculum developed by LES provided a tool for discussing the issue.

Another special section focused on recent organizing efforts, including the vote by home health care workers in the largest union election in Minnesota history. Stories and video delved into the widespread activity by low-wage workers, including Black Friday demonstrations and the “15Now” movement at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport.

Who Built Our Capitol?

The “Who Built Our Capitol?” project documenting the workers and contractors who built the Minnesota statehouse garnered widespread attention and accolades.

Coordinator Randy Croce continued to shepherd the project through new stages. After the full-length, 47-minute documentary premiered at the state Capitol in the fall of 2013, Randy and the team of volunteer researchers posted the video and hundreds of pages of supporting materials on a website, whobuiltourcapitol.org.

Resources include photos of the construction from 1896 to 1905 and special sections on African Americans, women, community life, wages, building techniques and workplace safety. An interactive map shows home, occupation and a brief biography of more than 620 workers and contractors.

Croce made additional presentations at the Capitol and spoke on the project at events in St. Cloud and Winona. Twin Cities public television aired the video on Labor Day and again in October.

In September, the “Who Built Our Capitol?” documentary and website were honored by the American Association for State and Local History at its national meeting held in St. Paul.

The next phase involves developing middle and high school curricula, using the video and website as tools. LES was awarded a grant from the Education Minnesota Foundation for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to work with teachers to create and implement the curricula. Lesson plans are available on the website. Pilot classes have been taught in several schools and the curriculum will be presented at education conferences in 2015.
Transitions

In May, Mary Bellman left our staff to become Labor Education Coordinator in the School of Labor and Employment Relations at Penn State University. In her six years with us, Mary was instrumental in building the Minnesota Union Leadership Program and our women’s programming. She did extensive teaching on a number of topics, including immigration and globalization. A large crowd attended a farewell event for Mary in May.

In July, we welcomed Monica Bielski Boris to the LES staff. Monica came to us from the University of Illinois, where she taught many topics important to workers, including leadership, negotiations and organizing. She has a Ph.D in industrial relations from Rutgers University and is an experienced researcher. Most recently, Monica worked with the national AFL-CIO to develop the curriculum, “Common Sense Economics.”

In October, Randy Croce received the “Outstanding Service to University Senate Governance” award given by the University of Minnesota Senate. Randy was recognized for his “significant impact and longstanding commitment to University governance,” particularly his leadership in gaining a greater role for Academic Professionals and Administrators in University decisionmaking.

In November, Sharice McCain represented Midwestern labor education programs at a strategic planning retreat for the United Association for Labor Education at the historic Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee. The retreat focused on labor education for women, particularly the four annual summer schools, including the Midwest School for Women Workers.

Community Programming

We were proud to again co-sponsor the Untold Stories series with The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library. This series of free, public programs focuses on the struggles facing workers in the past — and how they influence the issues of today. The 2014 theme was “Memory and Place.”

Sharice McCain and Barb Kucera organized the May 12 Untold Stories program that featured songs and readings from the civil rights movement, followed by a speech by University of Wisconsin Professor William P. Jones, author of The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights.

Also in May, Barb was part of a team of judges who awarded labor history prizes at the annual Minnesota History Day competition. Hundreds of junior and senior high school students performed skits, wrote papers and created exhibits, videos and websites on historical topics, including the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, Mother Jones and worker organizing on the Iron Range.

In the fall, Sharice and Barb took part in “The History of Labor Day” program at the East Side Freedom Library in St. Paul. Sharice led the crowd in song, while Barb performed a portion of a speech given by legendary labor leader Mary Harris “Mother” Jones. The East Side Freedom Library is dedicated to preserving and promoting knowledge about the East Side’s history, residents and institutions through educational collections and programs.

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