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.
- More than 150 women attended our Minnesota Union Women’s Retreat, gaining skills and networking for leadership.
- The Minnesota Union Leadership Program marked a milestone when we graduated our fifth cohort of participants.
- We launched a curriculum based on our award-winning project, Who Built Our Capitol?
Media Services

In 2015, we continued our collaboration with labor and community groups to produce award-winning video in both long and short formats. Videographers Randy Croce and Howard Kling shot and edited dozens of short videos on events and issues for the Workday Minnesota website. In addition, they, along with staff member John See, produced customized programs.

Their efforts included “Construct Tomorrow,” a video promoting efforts by Building Trades unions and contractors to recruit people into construction industry jobs, with a special focus on outreach to women and people of color. The video is used widely on the web and is being shown in high schools.

In September, we participated in the biennial convention of the International Labor Communications Association in Raleigh, North Carolina. Howard Kling organized the convention program, featuring organizers, representatives of the AFL-CIO, BlackLivesMatter, Moral Mondays movement and others. Plenaries tackled the economic, social and racial issues confronting people today.

At the convention, LES won seven awards for video production and the Workday Minnesota website, and Howard was elected president of the ILCA.

Throughout the year, we convened the Minnesota Labor Communicators Group, an informal network of people doing communications for unions and allied organizations.

Who Built Our Capitol?

LES staff member Randy Croce launched the Who Built Our Capitol? project to offer insights into the people who constructed our statehouse more than 100 years ago. Little did he know his work would also inspire young people to take part in our democracy.

Research for the project, begun in 2009, first led to the creation of a video documentary, then a website, whobuiltourcapitol.org. In 2014, we received a grant from the Education Minnesota Foundation for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to develop a school curriculum based on the research.

In the spring of 2015, after studying the curriculum with their teacher, Jen Hansen, sixth graders at Willow Creek Intermediate School in Owatonna wanted to know why there was no recognition of the workers who constructed the Capitol anywhere in the building. So they started a petition to get a plaque placed in the statehouse honoring the workers, especially the six who died during the construction. They gathered more than 700 signatures and wrote to their legislators.

Two lawmakers introduced the Minnesota State Capitol Workers Recognition bill and it is likely to go before the 2016 session of the Legislature.

We chronicled widespread organizing by workers, including this group of fast food workers demonstrating for a $15 minimum wage. Photo by Barb Kucera

“After decades of being unknown, it’s exciting to see the story of the builders being told in classrooms across the state,” Randy notes. “It’s equally exciting to see young people take this project a step further by engaging in a real-life civics lesson.”

The curriculum, designed by Jen Hansen and Cannon Falls teacher Missy Klapperich, is featured on the website. Randy, together with Hansen and Klapperich, presented the materials to educators, historical societies and community organizations in numerous venues, including the annual Minnesota Educator Academy conference.
Women’s Programs

A record crowd of nearly 160 women participated in our three-day Minnesota Union Women's Retreat in April. Highlights included a panel of female union leaders, who urged women to step up in their organizations, and a keynote address by Saru Jayaraman, the executive director of Restaurant Opportunities United. She spoke on the challenges facing workers – particularly women – in the restaurant industry.

Other panels and presentations focused on “Understanding the Attack on Worker Rights,” “Worker Organizing and the Impact on Women” and “Women’s Issues Across Generations.”

Each participant attended two workshops from a list of four that included Building Power for Bargaining, Addressing Workplace Bullying, Bridging the Generation Gap and Learning from Labor History. LES staff members Monica Bielski Boris, Barb Kucera and Sharice McCain organized the retreat in cooperation with a volunteer committee of working women.

Also in 2015, Monica, Barb and Amy Livingston assisted the AFL-CIO with a project to help women succeed in construction industry careers. Funded by the Women’s Economic Security Act, the program links experienced tradeswomen as mentors with women participating in the Women Building Minnesota pre-apprenticeship program.

In cooperation with Building Trades unions, Monica and Barb recruited mentors and Monica and Amy conducted a training session for mentors on mentoring best practices.

Minnesota Union Leadership Program

The Minnesota Union Leadership Program reached a milestone in 2015, graduating our fifth cohort of students in May.

“We learn from each other’s successes and each other’s mistakes,” said Mary Kunesh-Podein, a member of the Robbinsdale Federation of Teachers. “The program really strengthened my knowledge of unions and my role in the labor movement.”

Dialogue and networking among members of diverse unions are hallmarks of MULP. In addition to participants sharing knowledge and best practices, they also engaged with panelists drawn from community organizations, worker centers, unions and others.

The goal of MULP is to prepare the next generation of workplace leaders by providing a strong foundation in economics, history, worker rights, organizing, coalition-building and other important areas. Participants, who are sponsored by their organizations, take part in six days of intensive learning, starting each fall and wrapping up in the spring.

Our sixth group of students began their training in September.

Customized Training

With the changeover in our staff in 2015 (see “Staff Updates” on page 4), we began a comprehensive review and evaluation of our educational programs, with an eye to what is most needed in today’s workplaces.

Our core teaching staff—Monica Bielski Boris, Amy Livingston and Russell Raczkowski—provided training in traditional labor education topics such as steward training and collective bargaining. At the same time, they explored new approaches and subject matter.

Monica spearheaded well-received “Union 101” trainings with apprentices for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and Roofers. We are working to expand these offerings to other building trades.

We also continued our commitment to the AFL-CIO’s “Common Sense Economics” curriculum, providing an immigration-focused training for residents of the Worthington area. More programs are planned for 2016.

Organizations that were served with customized trainings in 2015 included several building trades unions, AFSCME, MAPE, National Association of Letter Carriers, United Steelworkers and United Food & Commercial Workers, among others.
Community Programming

Many Minnesotans have been following the conflict over collective bargaining rights in neighboring Wisconsin, so on April 17 we co-sponsored a special screening of “Wisconsin Rising,” an independently produced documentary that provides an inside look at the historic events that included the takeover of the state Capitol. Howard Kling moderated a post-film discussion that included activists from the Badger State. A large crowd attended the event, held at the Bell Museum of Natural History.

In May, we continued our longstanding collaboration with The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library and the Untold Stories series. Barb Kucera and Sharice McCain coordinated “The People’s Music: Jazz in St. Paul,” a program featuring professional and student musicians. The Untold Stories series is held each May in celebration of labor history month.

In June, Barb spoke on the “Fight for $15” and other low-wage worker movements before the Men’s Club at the St. Paul Jewish Community Center.

The next month, she helped lead a labor history tour of downtown Minneapolis for the annual convention of the Association of Labor Relations Agencies. The ALRA is an organization of impartial government agencies in the United States and Canada responsible for administering labor-management relations laws and services.

2015 Advisory Committee

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Bureau of Mediation Services

Megan Gavin
Minnesota Nurses Association

Larry Gilbertson
Iron Workers Local 312

Apprenticeship Coordinators Association of Minnesota

Nancy Goldman
UNITE HERE Local 17

Linnnea Hackett
Minneapolis Federation of Teachers Local 39

Lane Harstad
Federal Mediation & Conciliation Service

Brenda Hilbrich
SEIU Healthcare Minnesota

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Minnesota Association of Professional Employees

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Sheet Metal Workers Local 10

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National Association of Letter Carriers

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