

**To: Friends, Colleagues, Advisors**  
**From: Jojo Geronimo, LEC (Labour Education Centre, Toronto and York Regions Labour Council) and Lisa VeneKlasen (JASS)**  
**Re: Update on the Cross-border Dialogue on popular (political) education strategies and global economic power**  
**Date: October 26, 2006**

Over the last several months, we've had dozens of conversations with grassroots and labor activists, organizers, popular educators, and academics involved in a diverse range of economic justice efforts that, in one way or another, link struggles for economic rights at local and national levels to global economic power dynamics (see the attached list). We've deliberately sought out people who are especially concerned about a) low-wage workers, working class, communities of color, immigrants and women; and b) ways of building critical awareness about neoliberalism, and its impact on people's sense of why the economic situation in their communities has deteriorated, why they and their families are struggling with economic uncertainty and survival, and what kinds of change are possible and acceptable.

We were fortunate to meet some of these folks at gatherings such as the South East Social Forum (which Darshana Patel/JASS attended), the Grassroots Global Justice's 2<sup>nd</sup> Popular Education Encuentro (Lisa VeneKlasen/JASS) and Common Frontiers/Hemispheric Social Alliance, and Aboriginal and Workers of Colour Conference (Toronto: Jojo Geronimo/ Labour Education Center) . In other cases, conversations were made possible through informal networking, such as Jojo's involvement with the emerging Center for Labor Renewal (USA) and the Toronto networks of labour, literacy, and popular education practitioners, and JASS' linkages with a variety of Mexican women's organizations (as well as many Latin American economic justice and social movement activists).

This conversations were motivated by the fact that neither JASS nor the Labour Education Center were previously known to a number of the groups we were reaching out to. We were also conscious of the real tensions between grassroots and labor, between researchers and activists, and between policy advocates and folks working with rank and file or at the community level. With that in mind, we wanted to deepen our understanding of the *shared* political challenges that people involved in diverse economic justice work perceive in building the power of local communities (loosely defined) to confront and change the politics and policies of the dominant economic agenda (corporate-driven neoliberalism). We hoped to refine the aims and agenda for the workshop and project loosely outlined in the concept note called "America's Dialogue for Citizen Engagement and Global Economic Power" (February, 2006) to ensure that this modest effort built upon and contributed to similar efforts happening in the US, Canada and Mexico. We set out to define a process which was more concrete and manageable, ideally with a multiplier impact on economic justice work.

Some of the changes we've made as a result of these conversations include:

- The title of the workshop from America's (which is the whole continent) to *Cross-border* (focused on the US, Canada and Mexico) because of the concrete regional economic policy and political connections, particularly now as all three are led by conservative political leadership in addition to the economic bonds and struggles shaped by NAFTA, etc.

- from citizen engagement — to the more concrete task of *popular/political education as a political strategy* and an integral part of building the collective people power necessary to challenge and propose alternatives to the current global economic agenda. While we use the word ‘citizen’ in a much more activists way, beyond what governments bestow or not upon residents of a country, we realize that citizenship is a very contested term and issue.

In this brief update, we’d like to report back some of the key themes and issues we heard and propose next steps. Most of what we heard is not “new” but we feel it’s worth sharing as a way of explaining the focus we propose and to provide the necessary background for each of you to determine how you’d like to be involved:

**About global economic power:**

- “anti-globalization” is a poor adjective for activists fighting for economic justice at any level; in fact, activists and leaders appreciate the political potential of the growing interconnections between people through immigration and telecommunications; they agree that the core of the problem is the unchecked dominance of corporate power on all decisionmaking and perspectives – not just economic policy – and including cultural hegemony by monolithic media, etc.
- There are many common local problems facing communities across the 3 countries which are created or worsened by global/regional economic agendas, including migration & immigrants’ rights, economic insecurity and dislocation, low wages, job loss, privatization of essential services (especially healthcare and education) and the general “takeover” of government by the private sector. These economic and social problems are deepened by racism, sexism and classism exacerbated by globalization and xenophobic state responses to conflict. To clarify differences, these problems are just ramping up in Canada, whereas Mexico has been devastated by them for a few years while low-income communities of color have been hit very hard in the USA;
- Questionable legitimacy surrounding elections and their results further weaken formal political institutions while political parties and electoral agendas remain thoroughly disconnected from and unrepresentative of the majority of working class communities, immigrants, low-wage workers and women;
- Growing violence experienced within communities; sense of social fabric disintegrating because of economic pressures; drugs, gangs, etc. This has a huge impact on people’s time and willingness to “fight back”;
- People increasingly view corporate globalization as an integrated agenda encompassing economic, political, environmental and military strategies serving a core set of interests; recognizing how militarization and war are fueled by economic exploitation; reinforcing racism and sexism (dominance of right-wing religious political agendas affecting women’s basic rights significantly).

**About economic justice efforts:**

- A widely felt need to address a *lack of coherent analytical frameworks(ideas!)* to make sense of the political context and give direction to long-term strategies;
- A strong need for a transformative (radical) strategy that integrates organizing, education and advocacy, building people power from the ground up;
- Few and tenuous connections between grassroots and labor organizers/educators in the three countries despite a clear sense of common issues; few opportunities for conversation/joint analysis. A sense among US activists that better connections with the Global South is needed to energize and reframe movement-building in US while cross-border movements seen as necessary for future effectiveness in advancing rights and just alternatives. Limited knowledge or connection between US-Canadian grassroots and labor. Strong interest in exchange and building connections.
- The words “fragmentation” and “disconnect” appear a lot as people assess political work in their own countries: between policy advocacy groups working at national and global levels and grassroots organizations working at community/local levels; growing anger and frustration with the dominance and political compromises made by key global advocates and institutionalized labor; lack of connection between groups working on different issues, etc. that prevents a sustained effort to build collective power. These disconnects/tensions exacerbated by donor priorities/resources, competition for visibility, limited accountability to constituencies; disagreement about tactics and strategies; reactive, short-term thinking; racism and racial differences.
- Differences over short and long-term strategies seen as a conflict between perceptions of winning and building; winning is perceived solely as policy or electoral gains at a time when policy space is severely limited and most policy gain is practically a loss in that it does not translate into any serious change; emphasis on short-term policy goals eclipses longer term base-building/movement building. General frustration with the tendency for tactical organizing but in such a difficult moment politically, there are many challenges to shift to longer-term work.
- Activists (grassroots and labor) rarely mention institutionalized trade unions except in negative terms; a big emphasis on community unionism and workers centers (US and Canada – see point below); in Mexico, new forms of worker organizing particularly among women (maquilas; contingent labor) although important worker’s centers have emerged. Commonly seen that these newer forms of worker organizing due partly to the “failure of the house of labor” to address the reality that the majority of good jobs have been lost (more in Mexico and USA, but also true in Canada if only in a lesser degree), their work force is contingent labor, informal service, people of color, immigrants and women (Canada and USA); also failure of institutionalized labor to accommodate new forms of organizing around a range of issues tied to community problems, not just workplace issues.
- Diverse “new” kinds of economic justice organizing linking labor (wages, conditions, benefits) to community issues, such as labor unions organizing

around public services, like the bus drivers union (Los Angeles) and healthcare and education (Canada); consumer/shareholder organizing (Coalition of Immokalee Workers) as a strategy for improving wages and conditions; many of these incorporate political analysis and economic literacy as part of organizing; interesting new alliances forming around food sovereignty 'movement', linking interests/rights of small-scale farmers, farm workers, anti-hunger and anti-poverty activists, environmental advocates, and middle-class consumers concerned about food safety.

- A widespread desire and need for clear alternative agendas in each country and regionally. While it appears that **policy** alternatives abound in think tanks and research centers, these tend to be technical (without an overarching set of new ideas) and have not been made useful or grounded in grassroots political organizing efforts in a way that activists can use them for organizing. Of all the countries, Mexico has a more popularized left alternative, although recent elections create new and difficult challenges for those;
- Many grassroots and labor activists (in the USA and Canada) are concerned about what they see as a limited skills and attention to political analysis among organizers and leaders/members; this is problematic given the power of ideologies (neoliberalism, right-wing conservative/fundamentalist religion) on people's perceptions and willingness to fight back. Activists mention lack of class analysis, even within labor itself; also grassroots groups have a strong desire to see *race and gender* articulated and incorporated into a class/economic analysis. Others would say: use an anti-oppression analysis that reflects the intersections.
- Need for "political education" among US community organizers and Canadian labor educators-organizers seems to stem from feeling of scarcity of space and skills, but more problematic is the undervaluing of analysis as part of political work. Tendency to import "expertise" and *thinking* in the form of reports or a resource person instead of engaging folks directly in their own reflection and collective political analysis. Tendency to reduce political analysis to policy updates. While distrust of top-down "expertise" is often well-founded, seems that more generally US political culture has little patience for "thinking" and ideas given an emphasis on action. Some organizations (GGJ and Toronto Labour Education Centre) responding to a felt need by their members and staff, have created in-depth processes of political and popular education. There is renewed interest in popular education methodologies and education as a critical piece of political strategies and leadership development. Frustration with the tendency to see education as separate from organizing and growing desire to link, "embed" political education within political organizing more strategically.
- Dilemmas -- despite widespread desire to break from tactical-reactive organizing and build visions and strategies for the future, the political situation in each country is so dire and the stakes so high that groups are stretched just trying to prevent and reduce political disasters. Lack of space, resources, skills.

Given this vast range of challenges, felt-needs and the innovative work already underway, it's important to target this effort in a way so that a single workshop draws on

numerous efforts and produces ripples affects. Importantly, it affirms for us the need for a structured space for analysis, reflection and retooling.

With this in mind and given the strengths of JASS and the Toronto Labor Education Centre, our proposal is:

- to narrow the focus to popular/political education methodologies on economic and social issues tied to organizing and movement-building strategies. This means that the workshop will:
  - 1) deepen understanding of popular education methodologies and the work of developing critical consciousness in relation to the global economy and power dynamics more broadly;
  - 2) share and develop innovative approaches for doing popular economic-political education/economic literacy with communities in the context of strategic organizing on relevant issues;
  - 3) maximize cross-border communication and (political) learning, and place the education work within a broader political context and strategy, the workshop will include an extensive joint political analysis exercise of the 3 countries, including some historical reflection about past successes, challenges and strategies; and
  - 4) develop some shared understandings about power and oppression and the key elements of movement-building to facilitate continued linkages and dialogue across different sectors of progressive movements;
- Due to our limited combined budget, we will be able to fully fund only 12-15 participants evenly divided between Mexico, the US and Canada; approximately 15 others will be invited with the hope that they will be able to self –finance through their organization or other means.

**Next steps:**

1. December-January: create a 4-5 person planning group to work with JASS/Toronto Labour Education Centre to plan, design and choose participants. We are in conversations with Grassroots Global Justice and others who have begun similar processes to explore co-sponsorship. If they agree to co-convene, then they will have someone on the planning group. Additional conversations with Mexican colleagues are necessary to figure out who can participate in the planning group (there won't be translation for that).
2. A location and date will be set: currently we are exploring the possibilities of Canada in conjunction with Canadian hosts. The timing could be either at the end of March or early May – around the time of other events organized by like-minded groups. (Note: the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) Conference will host the Aboriginal and Workers of Colour Conference on March 22-25, 2007 – shall we hold our dialogue just before or after this conference for maximum exchange? There is also a CLC Collaboration Project conference on May 9 to 11, 2007)
3. End of February/early March: Participants will be invited and the agenda will be developed; reading materials and cases will be prepared ahead of time.