

## Research report

# Innovations, Opportunities, and Challenges: The Story of the Prairie School for Union Women



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with assistance from the Coordinating Committee of PSUW

(Adriane Paavo, Debbie Lussier, Donna Smith) and the Saskatchewan  
Federation of Labour

**March 8, 2012**

Funding support from Saskatchewan Instructional Development Research Unit (SIDRU),  
Community based educational fund.

## Acknowledgements

The researcher would like to acknowledge the commitment and examples of collaboration provided by the Steering Committee during the research process. Study participants – women who had attended the School in various capacities – were all very willing to share their experiences. Those experiences were largely enlightening and heartfelt. I thank you all for giving me the opportunity to work with you. Thanks also to the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) for its ongoing and continued support to the Prairie School.

Additional information about the Prairie School is available on the web-site of the SFL. See <http://www.sfl.sk.ca/events/schools>

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## Executive Summary

The Prairie School for Union Women (PSUW) is a non-formal education program for union women organized through the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour which annually brings together union women to explore issues relevant to unions. The study *Innovations, Opportunities and Challenges: The Story of the Prairie School for Union Women* was a research project between a University of Regina researcher and the School. It was done to explore the opportunities for and challenges of educating union women as experienced through the Prairie School. This study was designed as a participatory action research project and carried out using participatory processes and methods that involved direct participation and involvement of the School's Steering Committee and the university researcher at all stages – from designing the funding proposal, to collecting the data and distributing the results. The process and attention to collaboration between the School and the researcher ensured the knowledge was created by and for the community it serves (Israel, Eng & Shultz 2005).

Data was gathered through key informant interviews, a focus group, participant observation at the school, and an analysis of participant anonymous evaluations from the School. The study demonstrates that the PSUW appears to be meeting its goals of building women's leadership skills and capacity for union activism. It also demonstrates that the School is providing union women with a site for the development of personal skills and confidence, for consciousness-raising and transformation, and a location from which they can understand how issues of gender also intersect with race, class, sexual preference, ability and other representations of difference. Finally the study demonstrates that while the School provides many benefits to its participants on personal and political levels, challenges remain. Communication about the School and structures to support participants and keep alliances when the School ends still require additional attention. Addressing how the School can transform the energy and commitment of its participants into supported and respected union activists also requires additional support and analysis. Within the union movement, increased awareness of the School and its benefits additionally needs to be recognized and promoted. The democratic structure of the School and its inclusiveness of social justice courses along with wellness programming and on-site childcare received rave reviews; most significantly from the women's whose lives are informed and transformed by it.

Finally in terms of next steps, the steering committee of the School worked with the researcher to come up with a consensus on priorities for the School. These include ensuring that the School strengthens and maintains its feminist analysis; that it builds further supports among and between facilitators, especially in using popular education methods; and that it improves communication networks among participants. The next steps may require additional resources.

## Introduction

The study *Innovations, Opportunities and Challenges: The Story of the Prairie School for Union Women* was done to explore the opportunities for and challenges of educating union women as experienced through the Prairie School for Union Women (PSUW; also referred to as the School or Prairie School in this study). PSUW is a Saskatchewan based labour, non-formal education program for union women which brings together union women from Saskatchewan and other provinces for a week each spring to explore issues relevant to unions from a social justice perspective.

Although the Prairie School for Union Women has operated for 15 years and although its proponents comment on its success, this is the first study done to document the achievements and challenges of the School. In particular the study questions ask:

- i) To what extent is the PSUW meeting its goals? How can it more effectively meet its goals? What aspects of the PSUW need to be strengthened or changed in order for it to meet its goals and what should stay the same?
- ii) What stories from participants, past and present, illustrate both opportunities and challenges of the PSUW?

An indirect focus or benefit of the study was the development of community research skills through direct work between the Steering Committee of the PSUW and the university-based researcher. At all stages of the research – from the formulation of questions to the dissemination of the data, the steering committee was involved in the decision-making process. The research was described accordingly as community-based participatory action research. The study was funded by SIDRU (Saskatchewan Instructional Development Research Unit) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina and behavioural ethics approval also was through the University.

## Background and purpose:

The Prairie School for Union Women started in spring of 1997 (Banks, 2000). Since its inception and with the exception of one year when the School was cancelled it annually brings together 120-160 participants.<sup>1</sup> The School takes place annually in June and “provides four days of learning and sharing in a supportive environment” (PSUW). Similar summer schools have operated in North America since the 1920s with schools for women workers and in the 1930s with worker education programs.<sup>2</sup> In Canada, the PSUW started after several women union activists visited and were inspired by a similar school in BC. The goals of the School are “to develop women’s personal and leadership skills, to build solidarity among women workers, and to increase knowledge about the labour movement” (PSUW pamphlet). Unique to the PSUW, is the focus on adult learning principles in facilitation, mentoring and support for activist practices, and popular education methodologies. Although women’s issues form content for other labour

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<sup>1</sup> Most participants are union members, but through the School’s scholarship program a few non-unionized women from equity-seeking groups have been able to participate.

<sup>2</sup> Such schools were affiliated with the AFL-CIO. See <http://uale.org/union-womens-summer-schools#His>

<sup>3</sup> ~~Such schools were affiliated with the AFL-CIO. See <http://uale.org/union-womens-summer-schools#His>~~

schools in Canada, the PSUW (offered by the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour) is the only remaining school just for women.<sup>3</sup> There are several in the United States.

The courses offered provide over 20 hours of instruction in various union- and social justice-related topics. They have included feminism and trade unionism, Aboriginal issues, collective bargaining, homophobia, dis/abilities, popular education skills, advocacy and protest, and gender dimensions of the workplace. The courses are popularized by names such as *Well-behaved Women Seldom Make History*, *Inside and Out*, *Women Speaking Out*, *What Colour is a Union?* and so on. Courses are designed to have a feminist analysis of issues presented. The School integrates wellness, recreation and solidarity actions into its programming.



*Photo: Wellness activities at PSUW  
(source: SFL pamphlet, 2010)*

The Prairie School encourages participation from non-union women and equity-seeking groups through its unique scholarship program. The scholarship supports non-union women attending the School so that union women can build connections with non-union, community-based women. The scholarship is a deliberate strategy to increase diversity at the School and address the bias toward able-bodied, heterosexual women's privilege.

## Framing the Study

This study is framed within feminist critical theory and participatory action research. The researchers recognize the participants have multiple constructed realities that are framed by their identities as women foremost, as rural or urban or northern residents, as members of diverse unions, and by race, class, age and other forms of diversity. These diverse constructions of experience alter perceptions of knowledge, and accordingly the research is acknowledged as subjective. The School itself advocates feminism as a way of seeing the world through a gendered lens – that is, the experience of women and men (along with class, race and so on) frame experience in different ways (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). The courses taught at the School are facilitated using a feminist lens and this aspect was viewed as central to the research.

Feminist research questions what counts as knowledge, how issues are political, and how power is understood in the process. Feminist research demands attention to the perspectives in the research as well as the interpretation of the data (Reinharz and Chase, 2002). Feminist critical theory also fits well with participatory action research (PAR) and the purpose of the research because PAR emphasizes the political nature of knowledge production, and it allows for flexibility and reflexivity in creating and understanding the research questions (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000) Therefore, if the purpose is to understand how the goals of the PSUW are being met, there is an implicit understanding that the interpretation of these goals may not be

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<sup>3</sup> While labour unions frequently have conferences for women, the Prairie School is different because it offers non-formal continuing education courses to expand capacity and knowledge in an area linked to the goals of the School.

equal for all participants. The stories of experience the research hopes to illicit through the focus groups and interviews will create a rich data set through which understandings of the possibilities and challenges of PSUW will be understood. Interestingly, Maori researcher Bishop (2008) speaks about the importance of a participatory approach because the concerns, the interests and the preferences are guided by the participants.

## **Significance of Research/Project**

The research is significant for the PSUW because it documents its successes and challenges and the impact of the PSUW on the lives of union women (and, by implication, the organizational lives of the unions they belong to). There is recognition by the Steering Committee that in order to be sustainable, the PSUW has to learn more about how to meet its challenges and reach its goals – the research assists in documenting this. Additionally, the stories from study participants document some of the experiences women have during and following attendance at the PSUW. Broadly, this also serves to document the role non-formal, gender-based education plays in changing inequities within the union and in empowering women and equity-seeking groups toward a more social justice agenda in a larger social context. Finally the methods and methodologies may increase academic capacity to engage communities (PSUW) with university research through a participatory research process. The methods used in the study demonstrate how the School was involved in all stages of the research process. On the part of the researcher this involved attention not just to the research product and findings, but to ways of constantly and diligently engaging the Prairie School community.

## **Study Design and Methods**

The research is designed using participatory action research (PAR) and therefore it assumes a participatory approach between the researcher and the community group (PSUW) in all stages of the research -- from the question-making, to the process of data collection and the dissemination of results. It also requires the researcher to be part of the process of forming new knowledge. This research is important because it has partners from the university and community working collaboratively in all stages. The Steering Committee of the PSUW met before the research proposal was written to discuss what kind of research they were interested in participating in with a university partner. The inclusion of their opinions and the continuous sharing and adapting of process throughout the research ensured that the results would more likely be accessible and owned by the community if they were engaged in understanding and to some extent, controlling it. The design adhered to a PAR principle which is that a process is iterative and fluid because there is an assumption that knowledge creation is not linear and additional ideas that surface during the process might enhance the results. For example at the end of the research process, the Steering Committee met with the researcher and prioritized the recommendations that came out of the data collection process. The process of doing this gave ownership of the results to the PSUW itself. It also set the stage for additional research or collaborations to ensure that the research goals and recommendations are carried through.

Data collections methods included document analysis, key informant interviews, a focus group at the School in 2011, and multiple meetings and dialogues with the Steering Committee. The document analysis included an analysis of former program brochures and four years chosen

randomly of participant evaluations collected between 2003 and 2011.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six study participants. These participants represented at least one of the following: union leadership, the PSUW steering committee, former and present participants of the PSUW; forms of diversity (youth, rural, not heterosexual, racial minority), former/current facilitators; and at least one participant who received a scholarship to attend. The interviews averaged around one hour each. They were recorded and later transcribed.

As the researcher I was invited to attend the School as an observer and I was invited to introduce the research project to the School's participants. So, on the first day of the School in June 2011, I described the study to the School's participants and invited anyone interested to sign up for a focus group – the collective part of the study data collection methods. Interested participants were invited to pick up a letter describing the study. Twelve participants signed up within several hours. Others were turned away because the focus group was capped at 12. The FG lasted about 2.5 hours and to ensure that it did not interfere with other activities of the School it was held at a time that did not conflict with other activities. Participants in the focus group included new and former PSUW participants and at least two women who had taken on roles as facilitators of workshops at the School. Two participants were from outside of Saskatchewan. They represented a diverse number of unions and geographic locations.

After the data was collected and analyzed, it was sorted into themes. The findings section in this report discusses those themes and provides quotes indicating the multiple ways participants described their experiences. The findings were later sorted into draft recommendations and ideas for further work and study. These were taken to a meeting of the School's Steering Committee and through a participatory process with the Steering Committee they clustered and ranked these ideas in order of importance. A consensus was reached on areas of priority or next steps. While the next steps are beyond the scope of this stage of the research funding, they provide a guideline for future work. The research to date has been disseminated at a SIDRU seminar in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina; at a University-Community Network Seminar; and at the SFL Provincial Convention.

## **Study Participants**

The study participants consisted of twenty women aged mid-20s to mid-60s. They represented a range of labour unions – from manual, service, clerical, and management to professional. Two study participants self-identified as being Aboriginal, two as differently-abled, and two as lesbian. Some had worked as facilitators for the School and others were participants. Some had attended once and others had attended multiple times. At least one participant had attended the School through the scholarship program. Although a random sample (6 persons) of union leaders associated with the SFL were contacted for interview purposes, none replied and therefore, no union leaders were interviewed. One did however refer me to another person.

## Review of the Literature

### Prairie School and Women's Union Education

The Prairie School for Union Women was started in 1997 by the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, at that point led by a female president, Barbara Byers. She and other women union activists, some of whom had attended a similar school in BC, acknowledged that women in the union movement needed more resources and to learn a feminist approach (Banks, 2000). So while the PSUW was created in order to break the gendered access to labour schools (labour schools frequently had more male participation until recently), it is the content of the courses, the democracy and reach for diversity (i.e. scholarships) in the organizing and the feminist popular approach which were noteworthy to the research. Labour schools have now been organized by the SFL for several decades and courses similar to those of the Prairie School are offered at other labour schools and occasionally women's conferences discuss issues of concern to equality in the workplace, but the Prairie School held annually by the SFL is the only annual non-formal education labour school still being held in Canada exclusively by and for women. Meanwhile several regionally based Union Women's Summer Schools in the United States have existed since the 1920s (United Association of Labour Education, n/d).

The PSUW supports lifelong learning and offers courses in a retreat setting for women over five days annually. The study intended to provide a clearer understanding of transformative learning in the context of non-formal, feminist labour education and add to the dearth of scholarship on how equity issues can be mobilized within labour movements (Kainer, 2006; Kirton & Healy, 2004). This is important because as Kainer writes, the absence of scholarship on gender in unions impairs visions for union renewal. Her view is supported by Yates (2006) who writes that "unions often fail women" and that "organizing practices are deeply gender-biased" (p. 103). Strategies to enhance chances for union renewal and eliminate biases in organizing would therefore be more successful with the application of a feminist- or gendered-analysis. Such an analysis would present a broader vision of transformation, enhance goals of union justice, and improve women's social and economic status within the union and beyond (Kainer, 2006; Yates, 2006). Because of the emphasis on feminist analysis at PSUW therefore, it possibly fills an important gap between women and labour union revival.

### Union activism and feminism

There is a dearth of literature exploring union democracy or activism as it intersects with gender, race, ability, or sexual orientation. This kind of analysis moves beyond just looking at how women/gender is a variable of oppression and includes oppressions such as race, class, age, ability and so on which position people into hierarchies of power and inclusion or exclusion (Fleras, 2010). The PSUW also tries to integrate this kind of analysis into its practices – for example the theory behind the courses and scholarships that are available to young women and women from equity-seeking social groups. Acker's (1995) gendered logic of organizations fits into this analysis as it examines sex-related politics with power in the union: the invisible centrality of (white) men in the union movement and the definition of union power, leadership, and activism as men's domains (Cunnison & Stageman, 1993; Franzway, 1997). In such domains, resistance to women in leadership is deliberate and, in part, a result of the role's white,

heterosexually masculine construction.<sup>4</sup> The goals of the PSUW, which include developing women's leadership and union solidarity, speak to efforts at dismantling some of those invisible politics. They also speak about possibilities for organizing and leadership to be orchestrated in different ways. Yates (2006) acknowledges that when organizing is done by women the process is more likely to be done through face-to face interactions and in group meetings.

Just as the politics of gendered identities are made invisible by the social structures that keep them in place, so too are forms of resistance to gendered hierarchies. The literature, for example, widely documents how it is the women's movement that has brought attention to the double and triple roles played by women and work. For example, the CUPE National Women's Task Force (2007) which consulted 2300 of its members across Canada, noted that attention to women's multiple roles in the workplace, the household and the family were inequitable and presented a barrier to women's participation in union activities and leadership opportunities. This is supported by literature that suggests unions need to recognize women's positions in the market are different and therefore different organizing strategies need to be developed (Yates, 2006).

While many realize that access to power includes strategies such as leadership training for women and organizing separate women's structures and committees (c. f. Eaton 1993 or Kaminski & Yakura, 2008), some authors would argue that the health and viability of the trade union movement itself rests on its ability to re-envision its decision-making processes and the organization of power in general based on feminist values (Briskin 2006; Ferree and Tripp, 2006). The Canadian Labour Congress (1997) acknowledges that the racist and patriarchal nature of union culture and organization is an issue and has made widespread recommendations for change. The possibilities of changing these domains through adult learning in non-formal education are suggested by the goals of the PSUW. Attention to the ways that privileges are articulated by facilitators working with rank and file members in non-formal education processes needs to surface to make this a consciousness-raising process (McKenzie, 2010). The Scholarships offered by PSUW are a step in this direction.

The literature that reflects the increase in union membership by women and the role played by women's committees and conferences in politicizing union women is quite widespread (c.f. Briskin, 2006), although it is seldom explicitly feminist. The practice of holding women's conferences and having women's committees has, however, had an impact on changing traditional union foci. In fact as Briskin argues, "the women's committees have utilized more inclusive, flexible and responsive structures and developed vocal constitutions which have challenged leaderships to be accountable, and unions to be more democratic and participatory" (2002, p. 35). She adds that this has opened up discussions on racism and homophobia within the union. Heery and Adler (2004) concur adding that it was feminist interactions with the women's movement that placed emphasis on collective actions and activism beyond the union itself. Studies also demonstrate that women-only courses increase union activism and participation because women learn confidence and skills to articulate opinions, they develop identities as gendered along with trade union identity; and friendship and solidarity (supports) within the labour movement grows (Kirton & Healy, 2004). Kainer (2006) notes, however, that the

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<sup>4</sup> While constructions of masculinity are frequently interpreted as male-only, it is important to remember within patriarchy this can also include women who operate in hierarchical fashions. This also suggests the importance of taking a feminist analysis that looks at other forms of oppression as well.

contributions of women-only courses or feminist analyses frequently go unnoticed. This is further complicated when unions amalgamate issues into a social justice focus, because it can detract from issues particular to women and in some cases actually de-politicizes the issues (Briskin, 2002; Hobday, 2003). It is perhaps fair to say, therefore, that the PSUW experiences of including a feminist politics and a gender analysis provides an important role in the union movement both in ensuring that a feminist lens is put on the issues and in strengthening broad movements for social change within the union. These are perspectives frequently ignored and absent from much of the discourse on union activism (Kainer, 2006).

### **Feminist Popular Education and Labour Schools**

Depending upon the source, union education can be divided into various streams or tendencies (c.f. Slott, 2002; Cooper 1998). For the purpose of this study two types are noteworthy: instrumental and transformative. Instrumental labour education teaches technical and content aspects of learning necessary for union business, for example increasing the effectiveness of shop stewards in order to enforce contracts. Larger political and social issues are however avoided in this kind of labour education (Slott, 2002). The second type, transformative approaches to education, is influenced by the work of the Brazilian educator and critical theorist, Paulo Freire (1970). Freire suggests in transformative or liberatory education an instructor and learners together engage into a dialogue and problem-posing approach to solving social issues. Within union education Burke et al. (2002) suggest this means helping workers find a process to move past previous prejudices and build critical consciousness about how their workplace struggles are linked to global movements for social justice (p. 31). Popular education has been critiqued by feminist educators who realize how it is often used in social justice education without a gender analysis thus making the lives and experiences of women invisible (Doerge, 1992; Walters & Manicom, 1996 & 2012). Feminists add that multiple forms of oppression – such as gendered, racial and other so called identity politics of difference increasingly require attention (Weiler 1993; Lather, 1998). Thus, at least in theory, while the PSUW uses popular education rooted in Freirian theory and methods, it adds a feminist ideology and practice to the learning. In this way it is definitely transformative and political in its intentions.

Transformative approaches to education advocate that learning is not neutral; it is a political act. Therefore, activating social and political identities through an education process is important for union education (Kirton & Healy, 2004). Kirton and Healy (2004) explain:

Our assertion is that women's trade union courses, as form of women's separate organizing, are one such location of gendered consciousness raising (although not the only one). Issues are framed both by tutors and participants to raise awareness of inequality and, guiding on a sense of injustice, to encourage the belief that collectivism is the means to conflict resolution ... The education setting is especially important for women because 'women's issues' might not be articulated at the workplace (particularly if the local union leaders are men) (p. 306).

Transformative approaches to education also acknowledge that power relations are always present in educational settings and the workplace. According to Paavo (2001), one of the Steering Committee members and a School organizer from the onset, the School worked to provide a learning experience that removed the inequitable power structure between the

facilitator and the learner and that put the experiences of the learner at the heart of each course. It did this by having two, instead of one, facilitators for each course and by ensuring that the facilitators were trained and committed to using a feminist analysis and popular education approach and methodologies; for those not familiar with these methods, two courses in popular education are offered at the School. According to Paavo (2002),

The PSUW promotes women's involvement in the labour movement by creating a climate different from the co-ed school, acknowledging that women-only events provide a safer environment where we can learn, strategize, and create a community of women within the community of the labour movement. Organizers intuitively recognized the important role of labour education in developing activists and leaders; the School removes barriers to women's access to education and, through it, to leadership roles. Particularly interesting in the development of the School has been the emergence of Aboriginal women and young women as union educators. Some have their first experience in leading courses within the PSUW, and continue as educators within their own affiliates or elsewhere (p. 394).

Safety in practice and a politicized identity (for example, the above-mentioned references to Aboriginal women and young leaders) are recognized as valuable strategic components of union education that can serve as stepping stones for capacity and character-building which are integral to the participation of women in union politics and leadership (Kirton & Healy, 2004). This was reiterated aptly in the words of former facilitator and program committee member, Loretta Gerlach (as quoted in Banks, 2000) when she explained, "women feel like there's more room for them to participate in an entirely different context – because it's much more caring and sharing – but sometimes you see some healing that needs to take place by women who come from unions that are male-dominated. You can tell, because the words just rush out: they have so much to say, but they've been silenced for so long" (p. 39). The report now turns to some of the words of the study participants as they explain their experiences with the PSUW.

## Research findings

The data were sorted thematically initially and then sorted into categories. The categories were loosely classified as the following:

- i) Achieving the goals of the School;
- ii) Personal growth and empowerment;
- iii) Education as a political act: Education as a Political Act: Participant and Facilitator Actors
- iv) Carrying the torch forward: The nuts and bolts of the Prairie School
- v) Making a good thing even better

In this section, I briefly describe how each of these themes was experienced by the study participants. I use quotes to illustrate the ways in which study participants described these aspects of their experience at the School. To maintain confidentiality of the speaker, the quotes are reported using pseudonyms. Additionally anonymous quotes from yearly evaluations are recorded as such. When FG follows a participant's name, it signifies that this was said during a focus group.

### 1. Achieving the goals of the school

#### *Developing confidence and leadership*

The Prairie School's goals – *to develop personal leadership skills, to build solidarity among women workers, and to increase knowledge about the labour movement* – appeared to be achieved successfully, according to participants, facilitators, and organizers of the School. All interviewees and focus group participants painted the School in glowing colours. They frequently linked their personal learning with union activism and leadership. Here is an example from a participant who attended as a youth.

I found the confidence learned from women at the Prairie School women actually opened up [me and others] like a knowledge vault. They learned confidence in themselves. [As a result], they were surprised with themselves; like I was surprised with myself too. I was surprised that once you are there and working with these women all together suddenly, all these ideas start flowing and you're surprised. You're honest to goodness surprised. ... And then you feel really good about yourself, like wow, I'm actually really quite smart. I know what I'm doing, and it gives you that confidence and then you turn around and go back to your workplace... It's a confidence you can't find anywhere else (Sandy).

It was the door that opened, that gave me the confidence to explore more what my union does, what it meant to be a union member, what it meant to be part of the labour movement, and I would never be doing what I'm doing today had I not got my very first experience and taste of it through the Prairie School. ... It was the first environment ever that as a lesbian, I felt safe (Arnica).

After attending Prairie School, Arnica became a member of the provincial executive for Solidarity and Pride, a president of her local, and she worked with the International Labour

Organization on their HIV and AIDS committee to develop a labour standard globally. Arnica claims it was all a “result of going to Prairie School in 2000.”

Although women at the School acknowledged that it was important for the School to be women-only, they realized that it was not always easy to explain this outside of the School. Many equated this with leadership that was traditionally male dominated.

[There are] very inflexible structures within a union movement sometimes and I think you’re talking about the old boys and I think I’ve mentioned these old boys one or two times before, or maybe twelve (Brenda, FG).

### *Safety and solidarity*

Developing confidence went hand in hand with a feeling of security and support. Many participants spoke of how they felt safe in the all-woman environment, and the feeling of safety appeared to be a basis for solidarity among women in the labour movement: at the School and in unions as well as in all aspects of their lives.

I’ve never been to anything like this in my life and it’s just opened my eyes hugely to not only women’s issues, but the history of the union I’m embarrassed to say I’ve been a union member for 30 years, but taking night school, got married, had two babies all the while working full time ... Just the environment has been (contented sigh) I just feel so safe and loved and validated, and what I’m learning is transforming conflict, is just something I can use in my whole life.” (Janet, FG).

“Being able to talk with other sisters about their concerns strengthened my own belief – we are strong.” (evaluation, 2006).

Participants said the School enabled networking and camaraderie through the learning process, and one concluded “We are a team. United we stand – divided we fall.” (evaluation, 2007).

Many women appeared to be learning about union history, practices, and structures for the first time, and those that already had a strong union background learned skills to share their knowledge of labour issues. As one participant said “All union women should attend” (evaluation, 2006). Examples of solidarity and leadership were therefore exhibited on both political and personal levels. Discussing how aspects of the personal became political are often linked to a gender or feminist analysis. This quote illustrates that point:

It is an incredibly nurturing environment, partially because of the classes that are offered but partially because it’s women only right, so women feel like they can disclose and I think intimate parts of their lives ... it helps us understand and define our own experiences” (Sandra).

## **2. Personal growth and empowerment**

Perhaps the most enlightening and encouraging aspect of the inquiry was the passionate manner in which participants spoke about the School. For most study participants the School was an

experience in their lives that could be described as bringing about “increased confidence and personal empowerment.” Women spoke about feeling hopeful, inspired and rejuvenated as a result of their participation in the School. The discussions explored many aspects of personal growth - “It really opened up an inner part of me that I didn’t realize was locked up.” This quote illustrates that point:

It is an incredibly nurturing environment, partially because of the classes that are offered but partially because it’s women only right, so women feel like they can disclose and I think intimate parts of their lives ... it helps us understand and define our own experiences” (Sandra).

Participants also acknowledged that the personal impacts were intergenerational. For example, Arnica's eighteen-year-old niece went to the School this year for the very first time. According to Arnica, the young woman was very excited about the event, and said: “I didn’t have to think twice about what I wore, and I didn’t have to think about who I was there to impress, I didn’t have to think about who I was going to offend ... I could be myself whether I was 18 or 28” (Arnica).

For many participants the School was also a safe environment – one in which they could find their voice. In this quote, a focus group participant, Shelley, explains how this worked for her.

“I can identify with some of the people I was in the public speaking class that I was in tonight. They were sharing with me, they were petrified, they were going to have to get up and speak tomorrow, and give speeches. And I said, you know you won't believe this because I'm non-stop talking now, but when I was a child I was so afraid, I was so shy I never spoke, and I used to hide actually from speaking. And since, you know, from being in Prairie School and other union activities, I never stop talking.

The supportive environment, including high quality child care, and having good nutritious food provided throughout the conference, freed women from worry about their children and gave them time to focus on their work. Time away from unpaid work in the home gave participants time to renew their energies and work toward being capable and effective leaders as described in the first research theme.

Just think if all these women were recharged every year, you think how much the difference on the community level, and they go back to their communities. There's this bright light out there in every community (Melody).

The safe and supportive environment further created a space for women to explore their identity as gendered and also representative of diverse equity-seeking groups. Many began to resolve issues of equity by finding their voice as women with different abilities, as LGBT, as Aboriginal women, or as a union sister, for example. One woman said, “[It's] beneficial to me to learn more about my Aboriginal culture and heritage,” while another said, “It is so informative and empowering. I feel proud to be a union woman” (evaluations, 2007).

In a few beautiful words, one woman summed up the transformation many women experienced at PSUW. “[Prairie School] helped me to find out who I am becoming” (evaluations, 2007).

### **3. Education as a Political Act: Participant and Facilitator Actors**

#### ***Unions and Feminist Popular Education***

Popular education as a theory and method of instruction is common in many labour schools that have a social justice slant. The analysis however is not always feminist. Participants, however frequently mentioned the School’s framing of the issues from a feminist perspective was critical to its success. Here a participant shares how she feels empowered by the feminist content at the Prairie School.

I really like the fact that there's the whole feminist analysis coming in to all of it because I think when we look at things from a feminist perspective we validate women's experiences ...I think it's an excellent thing because something like freedom from violence really provides that analysis in that course. We talk a lot about the intersections of oppression like that you can be a woman and then you can have like additional levels of oppression based on orientation, ability, race. I think it's really important that we provide women with that kind of information because it's empowering and it helps them understand and define their own experiences. What I've observed is once women actually understand their own experience, then they are able to do something about it” (Judy, FG)

Feminist popular education was expressed as a key factor in the School's success. Feminist popular education is transformative education. Simply put, participants were encouraged to participate in class discussions, and to share their own experiences: they worked together to find solutions to real world problems. Participants learned not only about union issues and practices, they learned how to teach others what they had been taught, and were able to take that knowledge back to their locals, and to their union conventions.

[I think] that the popular education way of teaching gives everyone the opportunity to participate (Yvonne, FG).

They also learned how to deal with conflicts they would experience within their own unions and at the bargaining table. For example one evaluation summary said, “The facilitators dealt with class conflict in a way that allowed the rest of the class to reflect and learn from the situation.”

Solving the problem of women being too exhausted from family and work commitments to participate in union work is an example of using feminist analysis to improve women's, and by extension, all working people's lives. At the School women learned that the issues they were interested in were feminist issues.

There was this wonderful bright activist women, J., who was not going to be a damn feminist, because really in her mind a radical, hairy arm pit, unattractive, and she’s a beautiful woman, and she probably struggles with “I can’t be a feminist because ...” but you know she really worked hard, she wanted to understand, and she kept coming back to

the stereotypes about feminism, and although the course didn't explicitly make provisions for that conversation we spend a lot of time looking at the stereotypes both in terms of the media and wherever else you might encounter them, and by the end of it she said, "Well, I've tried hard, but I'm just a feminist!" (Arnica).

Every year, many participants say in evaluations "I learned I was a feminist". At the same time, one participant, Emma, said in an interview, "[it's] inaccurate to say that every facilitator is a feminist."

When asked how feminist principles get incorporated into the courses, Debbie, a facilitator at the Prairie School, said

Well, we look at how it specifically impacts, women, how does globalization impact women? Who wins and who loses under globalization, who wins and who loses when there is environmental destruction, and so basically the answer is it impacts women more. So it's to show the participants that globalization is a negative force that impacts women worse than men.

### *Creating new educational methods: The facilitation experience*

Prairie School not only successfully uses popular education, it also creates its own courses. Teaching popular education facilitation is important to the organizers and they try to ensure supports for facilitators are built into the process. For example, before facilitating the Prairie School, facilitators are required to be graduates of the School's course in Popular Education. The School offers a course in basic and advance popular education training as part of its ongoing commitment. Potential facilitators are also encouraged to attend the facilitator training event held every spring and to work with mentors. The School has said it is committed to ensuring that people from all walks of life can become facilitators. One of the people interviewed who has been actively involved as a facilitator and organizer says of this unique approach:

The other way I think we were different is that from the outset we wanted the course, all of the courses, to be designed using popular education methodology, to make sure that the facilitators were familiar with, you know, with theory and practice. And I think we've been pretty good about carrying that out. To support the School fairly early on we did two kinds of novel things – one was that we deliberately started offering, as one of the actual courses at the School, popular education, and design a facilitation skills training because we thought hmmm, you know, that's great to say we want courses designed and facilitated in a certain way, but in order to increase the pool of women able to do that we needed to provide some place, some means for them to gain those skills. ...

Prairie School has fostered a new generation of union educators from within the working population itself.

I think it was important for us philosophically to be able to say facilitating union learning is not the preserve of a privileged few. And sometimes, you know, access to certain options within organizations is kind of, it's hidden, the access is really controlled, and so

we were trying ... to find a way to make the process transparent and accessible, and to say this is one of the ways you can become a facilitator. Take this course, and then we'll provide you this other support (Anna).

#### **4. Carrying the torch forward: The nuts and bolts of Prairie School**

The School thrives from the work of many people – people whose organizational and teaching skills and life experiences blend to create a rich and varied environment. And although Prairie School faces the same challenges the labour movement faces: “energy, human and financial resources” it's unique in a very good way.

I was going to say we [union people] are not great at building secondary leadership, but in this particular case I think that's not true. [Barb] Byers was the key driving force behind this thing but she's been gone now for six or however many years and the Prairie School is alive and well. So it's really, I believe, entrenched, in a good and I expect permanent way” (Emma, interview)

Yet nothing is permanent, Emma acknowledges. In addition to maintaining the school's vision, there needs “to be somebody to look after the kind of nuts and bolts of it” (Emma, interview) At present, the SFL staff who work on the Prairie School are highly valued, and they would be difficult to replace if they could no longer carry out the work. “We need to make sure we have new people in place to continue it.” (Emma, interview)”

#### ***Funding***

The high quality of organization which has sustained Prairie School so far was there from the beginning. The founders were very careful to make sure it had adequate funding and was not competing with other union schools for scarce resources.

“We had to make sure we were fiscally responsible and that the costs weren't too great,” says Adriane (interview). The organizers also didn't want to compete with the other week-long school that's held every year – the co-ed spring school – sponsored by the SFL and the Canadian Labour Congress.

So that we weren't offering the same classes that would be offered there, there had to be something clearly different about the School that would justify we wanted to have it as well as the spring school... We knew that the school was about augmenting women's leadership in the union movement, that's why we wanted it. We wanted to be sure that we weren't offering the exact same kinds of courses that other schools were offering. (Adriane, interview)

It appears that the differences have paid off. Emma says the school has become “so much part of what the labour movement does that I can't think of a leader, who at this junction, at least, would say anything critical about it ” (Emma, interview).

Today the Prairie School is sustained by institutionalized funding from unions who pay all the

costs associated with sending individual attendees each year and unions who provide stable funding directly to the School. When Emma goes to Prairie School, her union fully funds her as though she's at work, so there's no cost to the School whatsoever (Emma, interview). Of another participant, the interviewee said,

One of the women who takes part on the Steering Committee of Prairie School for 2011 comes from the CEP local in Esterhazy – mainly potash miners, a predominantly male local. They decided that it's so important that their sisters to be able to take part in this, not just to attend the School but actually participate in organizing the School, that the local pays for this woman to drive into Regina, gives her the union leave, the mileage, if it's bad weather she can stay overnight in a hotel right. This is to take part in the planning, not just attending... It's enabling, it's really promoting, it's using their privilege and their probably decent union dues from decent wage rate to support this (Anna, interview).

Then one year “we had to cancel the school, in 2009, we were really worried, um what did that mean right... We couldn't find any clear pattern of what had happened I think it was sort of perfect storm of a bunch of things that happened” (Adriane, interview). The response to the cancelled School was encouraging: both the SFL and the CLC Western Region stepped up to the plate and institutionalized funding to the School, hoping it would not slip through the cracks again.

### *Outreach*

For the most part unions support sending sisters to Prairie School, but in some cases women have not had the opportunity to attend because of structural barriers.

I think some of the heavily male-dominated unions where their internal practice for getting people to go to stuff is tied to their participation on the executive or whatever so that would de facto exclude women, and so the Prairie School then becomes a venue where that opportunity should be explicitly extended, so that's pretty important and I can't remember which course it's in , but I know there's one I've participated in where I think we call it “Rebuilding our house” where we talk about amending local union structures to facilitate the participation of women, amending bylaws and stuff like that, so for any women that are frustrated by their local I think we provide some tools to at least assist them a little bit. (Emma, interview)

Says Emma “for any women that are frustrated by their local I think we [should] provide some tools to at least assist them a little bit – that's a pretty important opportunity” (Emma, interview).

Prairie School strives to be accessible to union women. It offers scholarships to woman in low paid non-union jobs or other challenging life situations who might not otherwise be able to attend. Prairie School not only offers financial support to women seeking equity, it makes sure these women feel welcome through inclusive school programming.

Two courses that don't run every year but that have been offered consistently throughout the history are a course called *Inside and Out* which is for people who are gay and who are not gay, but to talk about homosexuality and transgender issues... that's resulted in huge moments of epiphany for lots of people...The other one which is now I believe

called “Unionism on Turtle Island”, First Nations stuff, has been transformative for a lot of people as well. And I think that's been of tremendous value for both those fronts.  
(Emma, interview)

It's great that there's a course for people geared toward people with a disability or to learn more about disabilities if that's what they want to do, so coming from a different angle I think it would be nice to have a course or something geared towards, and I don't want to pick just one area, [but] Aboriginal women especially. I work in an organization that's predominantly Aboriginal people and I find that it's very hard to get them involved in the union because Aboriginal people in general fear unions. They don't know what unions are about, they don't know how unions help them or how they can work with them.  
(Shawna, FG)

Another group that is challenging to involve is the academic community.

I've sort of hungered for a connection with the academic community and it's been like what do I have to do ... Even when we held the Prairie School at the U of R for those two years, I mean the first year I think we were co-sponsored by the Women's Studies program, but all that meant (speaking with indignation) was that a prof came and spoke for five minutes at our opening ceremony and that was it. Like you'd think they would have swarmed us with research assistants, you know, with notepads and pencils watching our every move, but nothing (Anna, interview).

### *Accessibility: Childcare and Location*

Participants like Amanda and Shawna (during the focus group) pointed out that providing childcare and offering food and lodging so women can focus on learning instead of cooking and cleaning and minding children is part of Prairie School's success. Many study participants acknowledged the importance of the way the School has structured the childcare and how it was accessible all day and into the evening as well. Arnica said it is important to make people aware that the School has childcare, childcare which is not only high quality but also includes the children in the workings of the School. “That's pretty standard in lots of labour schools, but at Prairie School they're in the forefront. They have a very important role.”

The location was also considered important. Several participants noted that it's important the School is held outside of urban centres, otherwise the women go home to their families or go shopping, and then they do not bond or discuss and build upon what they learn during the day. Many agreed that a setting like Fort San or Waskesui meant that women got a break from their other responsibilities.

### *Making a good thing even better*

The study participants stated that the Prairie School attendees gain many new skills and sometimes had profoundly personal experiences during the workshops. They found they wanted some kind of follow-up. “I think that you know that this is such a tremendous safe platform to crack that shell open then you know we get out in the real world and you get squashed so why

don't we have other programs? (Mani, FG)

Some sort of follow up after leaving here, something like to give us the tools to find what we need in our own communities where to look for like if you're doing something on violence , a course on violence then where can we segue on with that cause obviously in we study a course for a reason same thing with the popular ed. where can I go and observe you know sit and observe and co-facilitate with somebody you know that this would push me into it. (Mani, FG)

Maintaining energy and commitment and skills when participants left the School, and learning how to implement projects in the community needs follow-up communication. Annette would like to see “more women doing the social networking you know after this Prairie School and be able to help each other in that, in that sense” (Annette, FG).

### *Marketing and publicity*

Study participants felt more publicity about the School was required to raise its profile. They suggested presentations and information tables at conventions, slide shows, photos, internet presence. While the school is on the SFL website, it has no website of its own, and no page on facebook. So despite its excellent word-of-mouth reputation, information on the School is hard to find.

I don't think anybody had ever asked to go to the Prairie School. I didn't even know that it existed myself. And you know the way I knew about it I went to the ULD 20 [a school for shop stewards within one SFL affiliated union] and one of the girls said we're having this Prairie School for Union Women, you should, you should come. And that I actually phoned the union and nobody seemed to know anything about it so that was two years ago and finally I think I was just on the internet and saw something and then pursued you know how to apply and there was a scholarship, but I did ask my local union and nobody knew what it was about. I tried to explain that I was unfamiliar too. It's probably like 75% male domination in my union, but they seemed to be quite okay and I think that's an option I'd like to do is go back and say I think we should send at least one woman from our union and yeah a car full. (Candace, FG)

One year, 2009, the School was cancelled, in part because of a lack of participants. In response:

At the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour convention another sister, Janet, and myself were asked if we could get up and speak about Prairie School and what it meant. I think a video was put together with a lot of pictures and in doing the presentation we both shared those duties and spoke to I don't know how many hundreds of people (Annette FG).

Arnica agreed that a presence at conventions was important and that the childcare should also be featured in a photo display. “Presentations of, a visual presence, a table, a display table of Prairie School, I mean those are all options for sure,” she concluded (FG).

## Discussion

In this section of the study report for *Innovations, Opportunities, and Challenges: The Story of the PSUW* the findings of the study are discussed further, particularly in light of literature related to the topic. Although there are no really clear-cut lines between the ways the School is innovative, the opportunities it provides and the challenges it still faces, this section is loosely structured to address those specific points.

### *Innovative and Unique*

The PSUW is the only annual non-formal education labour school still being held in Canada that is organizing by, and specific to, women. The courses taught at the School are facilitated using a feminist lens and this aspect was viewed as central to the School by the study participants. This is also important toward the health and viability of the trade union movement according to several authors as it offers unique ways of re-envisioning decision-making processes, leadership, and the organization of power based on feminist values (Kainer, 2006; Briskin 2006). Leadership at the School is also considered different from traditional union leadership and as Yates (2004) contends, these are the invisible things to which we need to draw our attention.

The study participants recognized that key to the success of the School is its use of feminist popular education. This is important not only because the literature suggests that the vitality and viability of the trade union movement is supported by feminist values (Briskin, 2006; Kainer, 2006), but it also offers a broader vision of social justice and makes the lives and experiences of women visible – something critics have often said is missing from the discourse and practice of popular education (Walters & Manicom, 1996). Additionally issues around literacy are further dealt with by using a popular education approach that focuses on the learner’s experiences and instructional methodologies that are not literacy dependent (Paavo, 2001). Noteworthy in this regard, is the innovative way the School has trained and developed facilitators with diverse groups of women. The efforts of the PSUW are therefore synchronous with work in the wider union movement:

In response to this growing recognition, women activists across the industrialised world have actively campaigned to make unions more structurally and culturally inclusive. These initiatives have sought to increase participation, democratize organizational structures, and strengthen the capacity of unions to represent workers of all genders, races, and backgrounds” (Burke, Deschamps, Jackson, Martin & Paavo, 2002, p. 292).

While this is fundamental to its ongoing success, the PSUW also needs to heed attention to how issues around privilege and oppression are played out in the course delivery (Fleras, 2010; McKenzie, 2011). The scholarship offered represents a significant contribution to increasing access and equity; its impact could be further discussed and the subject of additional inquiry.

### *Opportunities: Personal, Political, Transformative*

Perhaps the most enlightening aspect of the research was the passion for which study participants engaged in conversations about the School. For most study participants the School was an experience in their lives that could be described as bringing about “increased confidence and

personal empowerment.” Women spoke about feeling hopeful, inspired and rejuvenated as a result of their participation in the School. The discussions of personal transformation as a result of the experience were noteworthy. For example, Mani (pseudonym) said, “It really opened up an inner part of me that I didn’t realize was locked up.” Discussing aspects of the personal and political development were frequently associated with the methodologies or feminist analysis used at the School.

By using a feminist ideology to guide the School’s practices, PSUW is not only building the confidence and personal identities of the School’s participants, but also politicizing them and developing their potential for union activism beyond the School – an idea supported by Kainer (2006), and Kirton and Healy (2004). The latter also discuss how opportunities for finding voice and understanding identity politics politicize not only the workspace but bring a new consciousness to the social and personal spaces that women occupy. The discussion of the recommendations with the Steering Committee of the PSUW further reveal that the emphasis on feminist ideas and practices at the School was considered of utmost importance to the organizers as well.

Study participants acknowledged the importance of linking union issues and union activism to broader forms of social activism and feminism; the organizers have demonstrated that the lives of union women are influenced by and hold influence upon issues in a broader, global context. Given the current context of globalization and economic restructuring that is impacting upon the union movement (as well as other progressive social movements) it is clear that leadership and activist training to resist and construct alternatives is necessary. The PSUW is successfully doing this and transforming lives in the process. This was apparent in the study interviews, focus group and in the analysis of the evaluations; two comments frequently made that illustrate this are examples of experiencing increased personal confidence and understanding that “I really am a feminist”. The discovery of a feminist identity was frequently described as liberating; for example, one evaluation read, “I discovered I am a feminist and gained the confidence to become involved and no longer be just one of the boys” (2007). The PSUW is perhaps doing what Yate (2006) suggests in demonstrating ways that women operate differently within the marketplace and I would argue, ultimately within the workplace. Perhaps the lack of literature referring to the PSUW is symptomatic of gaps in literature about labour non-formal education in general or the lack of networking between union and non-union sites of knowledge generation.

Shifts in identity perceptions, such as the recognition by several of the study participants that they were, indeed, feminists, demonstrates an important act in the work of the PSUW which therefore, has implications for further union participation. Studies demonstrate that women-only courses increase union activism and participation because women learn confidence and skills to articulate opinions and they develop identities as gendered along with trade union identity. Finding personal voice and acceptance of diverse identities was also important; for example, feeling that it was, as Arnica stated, “okay to be lesbian.” Kirton and Healy (2004) have demonstrated that such awareness and politicization of identity enriches women’s personal lives and increases efficacy in the workplace. Participants in the study emphasized the way the PSUW creates a safe environment where learning and sharing created conditions for transformation and developed confidence in abilities to make personal and political change. This is also validated by Paavo (2002). The importance of confidence-building and safety toward creating a climate for

leadership building is widely emphasized in the literature (c.f. Kirton & Healy) and the practice of the School in doing this was evident in the stories of the study participants.

The PSUW responds to the social structures of inequitable work not only by analyzing the double and triple work roles played by women, but also by offering classes to analyze it (Paavo in Burke et. al., 2002). There is a recognition at PSUW that the unionized workplace is not the only sphere of women's work. This is potentially different from other social justice union education because at the PSUW the influence of economic, social and unpaid work are overtly recognized and programming is developed to include wellness, recreation, as well as childcare. The School also offers on-site childcare both during courses and during recreational activities so that mothers can participate in both. Several study participants spoke about the success and innovative way this childcare had been structured as part of instead of apart from the School. Building in wellness and childcare into programming at the School acknowledges and validates the socio-economic roles played by women in the union, in the household and in communities; it is part of the practice of feminist analysis that is considered key to the School's success.

The findings of the study widely demonstrate that through both personal narratives and course content, the School was acknowledged for its efforts in achieving social justice practices for women and equity-seeking groups. The deliberate and thoughtful integration of other forms of oppression – race, class, age, ability and so on into the PSUW practices and goals are commendable. Nonetheless critical analysis that involves a constant monitoring of how aspects of diversity are both included and excluded could be further developed. Such an action is timely in light of demographic changes occurring in the prairies and globally. While remaining humble, it is worthy of note to add that it was feminist interactions with the women's movement that placed emphasis on collective actions and activism beyond the union itself (Heery and Adler, 2004), thus similar efforts by the PSUW may have resonating impacts beyond the School itself.

While the extent to which the PSUW has created transformation in union culture or practice remains a topic for further study, the stories expressed by study participants do indicate transformation is experienced in personal perspectives and in confidence-building, including the construction of a more inclusive union leadership. Kainer (2006) points out, gendered activism and women's labour organizing has encompassed important strategies that challenge traditional unionism while building stronger commitments to social justice. The literature on union activism and union renewal supports the way traditional views on leadership are challenged by the School. There are two ways in particular that PSUW presents different forms of leadership: 1) a commitment to intersectional perspectives, that is, perspectives of women from diverse groups; and 2) acknowledging that women may know or practice different forms of leadership. The fact that the School produces leaders who not only go out into the wider world but who also become leaders and organizers of Prairie School itself, appears to be a unique example of a self sustaining educational practice.

Building women's leadership also means recognizing that there are many different ways of being a woman (Paavo, 2002). Younger study participants and study participants representing diverse sectors and aspects of diversity acknowledged that the School offers *core* courses specifically addressing issues faced by women in their diversity. In addition to gender, access to union resources is privileged on the basis of age, seniority and/or status within the movement, race,

sexual orientation, ability, and on the basis of holding union membership itself. While a couple of study participants acknowledged aspects of privilege and power in the relationships of diversity and resource access and control, this analysis was not common. Although facilitators of courses, other than the core courses responding to diversity, were asked to incorporate issues of equity in their classes, no examples of this in practice were shared. The Steering Committee is aware that organizing of the School is still largely done by white, able-bodied women and that this may be symptomatic of deeper problems in identifying and removing barriers to learning and leadership for women who are Aboriginal, workers of colour, or workers with disabilities (Paavo, 2002). The provision of scholarships to participants from designated equity-seeking groups was commended, although funding was mentioned as a barrier to this and at least one participant questioned giving access to non-union women. The aspects of diversity promoted by the PSUW may require further scrutiny and strategies; these should be documented because they are also an issue within larger union movements (Kainer, 2006). Recognition by study participants that could be leaders without using the same power and hierarchical practices used by the “old boy’s club” (statement frequently used) suggests new forms of organizing and leading emerge from the School. While this was beyond the scope of this study, additional studies looking at models of leadership developed at the School and continued after the School deserve additional inquiry.

The study demonstrates that PSUW appears to be meeting its goals of building women’s leadership skills and capacity for union activism. It also demonstrates that the School is providing union women with a site for the development of personal skills and confidence, for consciousness-raising and transformation, and a location from which they can understand how issues of gender also race, class, sexual preference, ability and other representations of difference. Finally the study demonstrates that while the School provides many benefits to its participants on personal and political levels, there are a few challenges that remain.

### *Challenges for the Prairie School*

The issues in the research findings which surfaced around power dynamics and the multiple examples of social and personal transformation demonstrate the importance of the School in the lives of union women. They also demonstrated the challenges required to sustain such educational opportunities and the need for increased study on how labour unions can benefit from university-community research.

Similar to the CUPE study (2007), some of the barriers for union participation and leadership that surfaced for the PSUW participants included workload pressures and lack of supports (at home and in the union), perception of an “old boys” network, and a lack of confidence in speaking up. They felt that the School gave them some of the tools to deal with these barriers, and notably, the CUPE task force names several of the courses taught by the PSUW as necessary enablers to women’s participation in leadership. A major concern that this study demonstrates however, is that when the participants leave the School they frequently find an environment that doesn’t understand or on occasion, is even hostile to their new ideas.

Addressing how the School can transform the energy and commitment of its participants into supported and respected union activists will still require attention. Perhaps a qualitative study

that tracks a group of participants after the School ends would yield important data about how and when women were able to engage in union activism after the School. “In the current era of labour struggle in which unions are losing ground as a force of political opposition to capital, women’s organizing continues to hold out possibilities for reinvigorating labour movements, and need to be considered in debates on the future of unions” (Kainer, 2006, p. 30).

The comments by study participants about how successfully the School integrated aspects of diverse identities, assisted participants in understanding and politicizing their own gendered identities, and advocated for the participation of equity-seeking groups is promising. There were, however, several issues in this regard that might deserve additional attention and these include:

- 1) reviewing inclusion of diversity into all of the facilitation course modules;
- 2) attending to the criteria and practice of offering scholarships; and
- 3) exploring further the idea of using privilege to advocate for participants who do not have the same privileges, such as the case of the brothers in the Esterhazy union. The School already uses a feminist analysis that looks at multiple forms of oppression; additionally examining multiple forms of privilege might provide yet another strategy for reaching diverse groups.

Additional issues that were raised as challenges included the ability of the School to sustain itself without assistance from SFL, including financial and human resources; continuity in leadership of the School, and the ability of the School to find sustained interest in its work from other constituencies such as academics. The suggestions for additional marketing, publicity and networking made by study participants are worthy of additional efforts.

## Next Steps

Although the discussion presented here has already suggested several possible areas for additional analysis or emphasis, it is important to acknowledge that the study participants were extremely positive about the School and what it continues to do for union women. This section looks at a few of the ideas the study participants shared in terms of recommendations or next steps.

The ideas for next steps were initially extracted from the data and then taken to a meeting for the Steering Committee for the PSUW. That group consists of two SFL staff members and about a dozen former participants and facilitators from the Prairie School. Together we used a participatory process to arrive at consensus about what area(s) of the study should be given priority. To implement this process I provided each of the Steering Committee members with a matrix (see annex A). They were then divided into four groups and each group was asked to review the ideas for attention, discuss them, then individually and finally collectively rank each of the points. Suggestions to cluster items that were similar were also given. After each of the four small groups completed the task, they came together as a large group to discuss their results. The results then got consensus from the whole group.

Next steps or aspects of the School deserving of increased or additional attention as determined by the researcher and the Steering Committee include the following:

- 1) Continue to place **emphasis on a feminist analysis** to ensure that that aspect is not lost.
  - ensure that this includes a power and privilege analysis.
  - review the courses to ensure a feminist analysis is in the modules and facilitation.
  - provide an introduction to feminism at the School
- 2) **Strengthen facilitation and co-facilitation training**
  - daily meetings at the School to address things beyond logistics (for example, pedagogical discussions, including the course content)
  - Maintain co-facilitation and practice of facilitators getting together in advance.
- 3) **Attention to diversity** in course content.
- 4) **Enhance the communication and marketing** associated with the School. This includes things such as,
  - Facebook or social marketing for participants of the Prairie School (new, current and past),
  - using buddy systems.
  - Expand the PSUW reach by putting up tables at conferences and links on electronic media including, the SFL web-site.

No time line was reached for implementing the next steps.

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### **PSUW Facilitation**

1. \_\_\_\_ Facilitators get together to plan and learn in advance of the school;
2. \_\_\_\_ Facilitation meetings daily;
3. \_\_\_\_ Increased attention to courses to ensure feminist emphasis is not lost;
4. \_\_\_\_ Discussion of power and power relationships

### **Communication and Awareness**

5. \_\_\_\_ Increased communications between School and participants and new/old participants both prior and following the school; includes supports for new and experienced participants (before and after).
6. \_\_\_\_ Electronic communications: Social networking, facebook and a website
7. \_\_\_\_ Information tables / literature at labour conventions.
8. \_\_\_\_ Better advertising – how?
9. \_\_\_\_ Continual education and awareness raising around the school and what it is about; dispelling misconceptions;

### **The School**

10. \_\_\_\_ Tracking changes
11. \_\_\_\_ Expanding organizing committee;
12. \_\_\_\_ Developing new organizational strength at SFL level;
13. \_\_\_\_ Keep courses about *marginalized* women – voice;
14. \_\_\_\_ Keep diversity of courses;
15. \_\_\_\_ Possibly more using art and music as methods of expression
16. \_\_\_\_ Developing a film or a book that highlights the PSUW

### **OTHER**

17. Something you've heard but don't think was made part of these recommendations?