

## Chapter One

# Our Approach to Popular Education

**GATT-Fly, AH-HAH!**  
*A New Approach to Popular Education,*  
(Toronto: Between the Lines, 1983)

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**T**he Ah-hah Seminar's approach to education is through dialogue. It is a forum where the participants talk together about their own experience and make decisions about their own learning. It is rooted in the principles developed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

Freire distinguishes his approach to education from the traditional "banking" approach where participants are treated as empty vessels that must be filled with information. The underlying implication of the traditional approach is that students are "uneducated" and in need of knowledge that can come only from teachers or experts. This need creates a dependency and reinforces a sense of powerlessness. People learn to distrust themselves, their own knowledge and intuitions and this can lead to confusion. They often feel there is something wrong but they are not sure what. Freire's method encourages participants to see themselves as a fount of information and knowledge about the real world. When they are encouraged to work with the knowledge they have from their own experience they can develop strategies together to change their immediate situations.

Our approach is not to come in from the outside and

provide "a" social analysis or to provide "the answers" but to help groups do their own analysis by providing a structure and some tools to accomplish this task. In short we provide an educational process and some questions which help a group develop its own analysis and strategies. The analysis and conclusions resulting from this process are taken much more seriously by a group than if they were merely the recommendations or views of one person, even if he or she were an "expert." As one woman at the end of a seminar with the National Farmers' Union in Saskatchewan put it, "This is our drawing. We produced it. You didn't come and tell us all this information; it came from us. You didn't tell us what to do. It's our world and now we have to change it."

### **Starting with the Participants**

In order for the seminars to be effective, we have found that they must start by focusing on the work and life experience of the participants. When we "started with the fishermen" on the second day of a seminar with the Newfoundland Fishermen's Union both the level of participation and the quality of the discussion

improved significantly over the earlier discussion when we had started with a description of the Third World. The participants began putting themselves into the picture, sharing stories from their personal experiences, talking about specific issues that affected them, and developing analysis and strategies that would address their situation.

Starting with the participants' life and work experience is essential for several reasons:

1. It encourages a high level of participation. We have found that people have no difficulty talking about themselves and their own experiences — after all, that is a subject matter of which they definitely have intimate knowledge. On the other hand, if they were asked to start off discussing the whole economic system they may be intimidated or feel inadequate. Talking about themselves anchors the discussion in specifics and ensures that we deal with the issues and themes most critical for the participants.

2. It helps to ensure that the animator/recorder avoids the traditional role of teacher or expert. There is no question that the participants are more knowledgeable about their own work and lives than the animator/

recorder. The balance of authority is tipped in favour of the participants because they are the "experts."

3. It places the participants at the centre of the larger picture that emerges, demonstrating that the world is in part their own creation. A description of the world that builds from the participants' experiences means they are defining the world as actors rather than spectators. This mitigates against a fatalistic view of the world as something that ordinary people have little power to shape.

4. It gives the group a basis for testing general perceptions based on secondhand sources against their own experiences. A key to critical consciousness is to help people recognize the contradictions between views derived from their own experience and views that are based on the dominant culture. The dominant culture constantly denies the understanding oppressed people have of their own experience. Starting with people's experience is one way of affirming their suspicions and experiences in a way that stands in contradiction to the dominant cultural view or ideology.

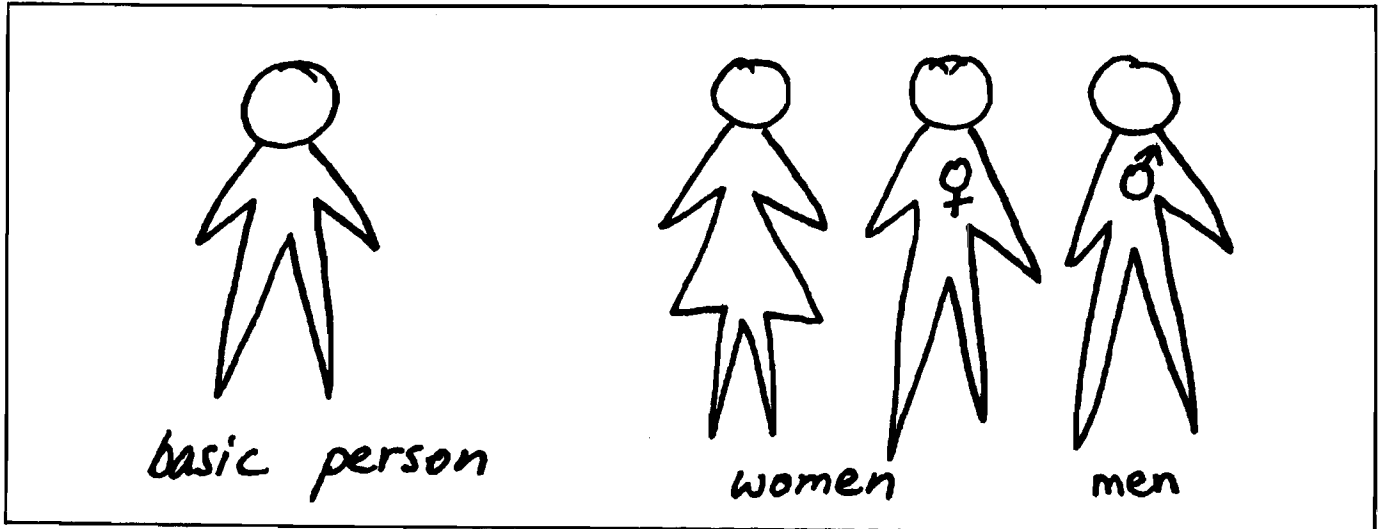
For example, in a workshop with unionized workers in Toronto, one participant had militant views about

his work situation. He told us about a recent strike that he had been involved in and how the media had distorted the facts concerning the strike in a way that maligned the union's position. But when we began to discuss social issues not directly related to his experience — such as the problems of immigrants, native people or people on welfare, his views became reactionary and racist. The group challenged him in a positive way by affirming the conclusions he had come to from his own experience. They suggested that the media influenced his response to social issues he had no personal knowledge of, and showed the contradictions that existed between his two responses.

5. It helps to make explicit the particular perspective from which society is viewed by members of the group. It demonstrates that there is no such thing as a "neutral" or "un-biased" analysis. The work people do is one of the most important determinants of their world view and starting there helps to make them aware of why they have the perspective they do. To make this point even clearer we sometimes ask a group after they have completed a drawing what that picture would look like if it had been created by a group of business executives or political leaders.

Getting participants to talk about themselves almost always brings out strong emotions and creates a high level of interest and participation. The method can also lead to conflict, because the discussion hits on people's own lives and self-images. Participants have a lot at stake and it is understandably difficult to be objective

or dispassionate. A great deal of sensitivity and skill is required on the part of the animator/recorder and by the group as a whole to deal with these emotions in a supportive way. While there are risks involved, we do feel that emotion or passion is essential both to motivate and mobilize people.



## **Education for Action**

To be fully effective, the Ah-hah Seminar must, from the outset, have the objective of developing action strategies. The seminar is education for a particular purpose, for collective political action, not for greater understanding as an end in itself. The seminar aims to empower groups by reinforcing their confidence in their abilities to analyze their situations and develop strategies to change them. This objective helps to focus the discussion. It forces the group to be practical and helps to ensure that the discussion doesn't become too theoretical or abstract. It also prevents the participants from becoming overwhelmed with the power of the system and feeling frustrated and hopeless about the possibilities of change.

The second half of an Ah-hah Seminar is usually devoted to discussions of action strategies. The picture they've constructed of the economic and political system helps the participants identify potential allies and makes it easier to determine the possibility of common action.

## **Who is the Ah-hah Seminar For?**

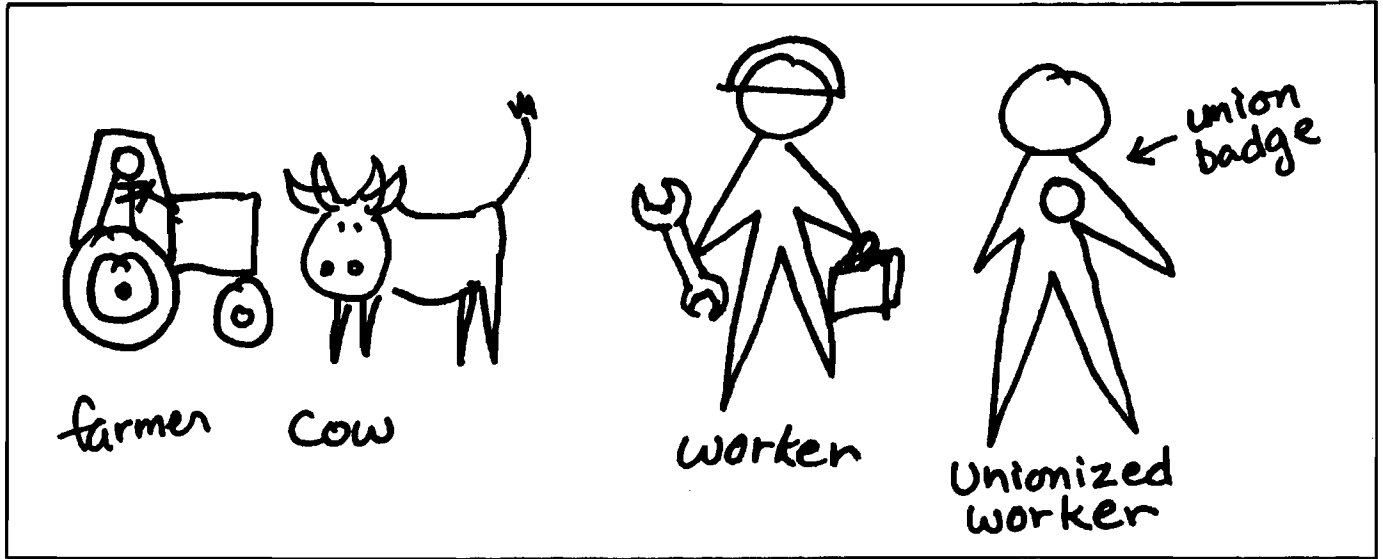
We have found the Ah-hah Seminar is most productive when the participants have a material interest in changing the present economic system and when they are members of a group or organization through which they can act.

Participants need not have a well-developed political analysis or be aware of the need for basic changes in our economic system. But their experience and material interest must provide the basis for raising critical questions. For example, the experience of a group of unemployed or native people provides ample material on the injustices inherent in our economic system. Using the experience of participants to raise critical questions is more difficult with groups such as teachers or high-wage workers as they may believe that the system works to their benefit. But it is possible to challenge this belief by asking what real power or control over their lives they have, and whether their relative affluence is any compensation for loss of control.

In our experience the Ah-hah Seminar method does not work with people in positions of power and privilege in the economic system. Though we have

never worked exclusively with a group of businessmen or bank managers, we have conducted seminars where a few were present. In every case they became very defensive, either walking out or disrupting the group in its attempts to agree on strategies for action.

In addition, the Ah-hah Seminar won't work with people who don't want to describe their own experiences. This has happened when the group was made up mostly of students or professional educators who insisted on drawing a picture of the economic system



"out there" and resisted putting themselves into the picture. They constructed a picture of the world as they perceived it secondhand from the newspapers and media, not as they directly experienced it. The discussion became very abstract and frequently deteriorated into academic debates over minor questions.

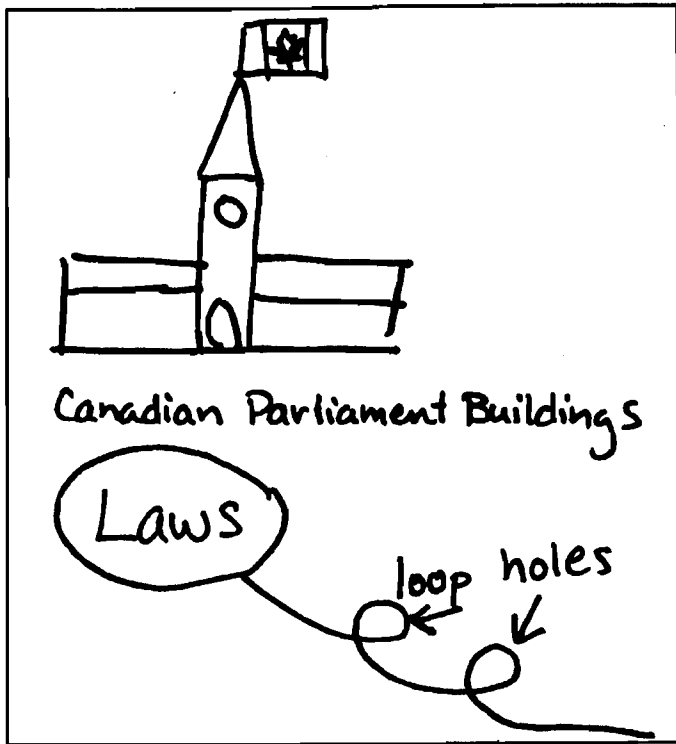
Because of all this, we give preference to working with groups that plan to continue meeting or already do meet regularly, such as union locals or social action groups as opposed to groups formed just for the Ah-hah Seminar. Often the seminars identify questions that need further exploration. This work can be completed later only if the group meets regularly. Similarly, if strategies for action are to have any chance of being implemented, a commitment to ongoing work together is necessary.

One exception to this is when several groups come together with the objective of identifying common interests and deciding on joint action strategies. Another is when the Ah-hah Seminar is used as an organizing tool: when there is an expectation of forming an ongoing group as a result of the seminar.

## **Educational Process That Empowers**

In our experience of doing popular education we have found that the method used often communicates a more powerful message than the content discussed. If the objective of popular education is for people to have more control over their own lives then the educational method should not contradict this by treating participants as passive learners who require input of knowledge or information from a teacher or expert. An approach to education that focuses on content may increase an individual's knowledge but this does not thereby enable him or her to take action. In our experience it is not a lack of knowledge or information that keeps people from taking action but rather a lack of confidence or ability in analyzing the information they already know. The Ah-hah Seminar may not bring any new information to the group, but the way the information is pieced together by the participants themselves can spark insight and understanding.

What are the ingredients for a successful seminar? While there is no simple formula, our experience has taught us that our seminars work best when certain requirements are fulfilled. The best of our seminars —



those that have contributed most to enabling the group to develop an analysis and subsequently take action — have the following characteristics:

1. The group size should be limited to thirty participants and sufficient time must be allowed (a minimum of six hours in one block of time or spread over several sessions, days or weeks apart). A weekend or even a week-long workshop can use the Ah-hah Seminar picture-drawing process as part of a larger agenda.
2. A degree of trust and familiarity must exist among the participants before honest sharing and discussion can take place. If the seminar is with a group that has not been together before, time should be allowed for people to get to know each other and develop a basis of trust. One method we sometimes use to begin a seminar is to pair off participants to interview each other and then introduce the other to the rest of the group.
3. To ensure that everybody works together, clearly stated, practical and action-oriented goals for the seminar must be agreed to by the whole group. We try to get the group to work out its goals ahead of time so that, if required, additional preparation can take place. Even so



we always check the goals out again at the beginning and reformulate them or modify them if necessary. It helps to have the goals pinned up where everyone in the group can see them, so they can be referred to easily during evaluation of the seminar.

4. The agenda or an outline of the programme, developed and agreed to by the group, should be posted at the beginning of the seminar. This enables the time available to be used efficiently and the goals identified by the group to be accomplished by the end of the session. The agenda need not be inflexible, as unforeseen topics or questions may arise and need attention before the group can return to the original plan. But any deviation from the agreed agenda or outline should be agreed upon democratically by the group. In addition it is useful to stop periodically and check if the original agenda is still useful or if it needs rearranging.

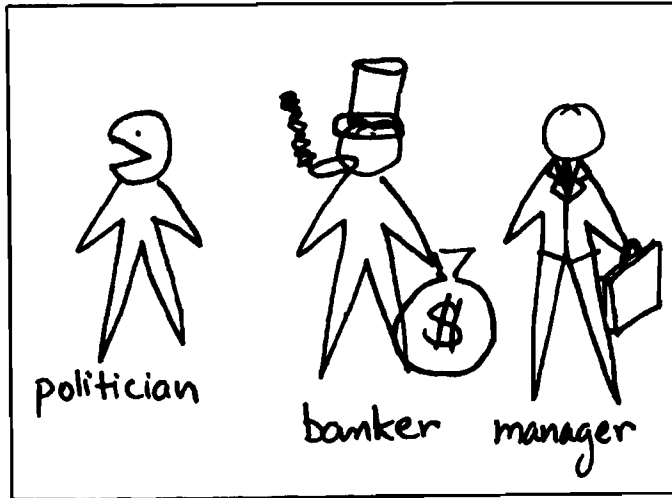
5. When issues arise over the agenda or the way the seminar is proceeding, the group should resolve them democratically. It could be a question of what symbol to use, where a particular institution should be placed in the drawing or whether a topic should be pursued or noted for later discussion. While the animator/recorder

may propose a particular course of action, we try to involve the whole group in making the decision by consensus.

6. It is critical that everyone in the group participates for the discussion to be most effective. If one or two people are dominating, or if some are not speaking at all this should be put to the group as a problem they need to resolve. Breaking into smaller groups for part of the seminar can help to broaden participation. In the seminar with the Kayahna Council described later, the women decided to form a small group of their own. In the larger group the more vocal men had made it difficult for them to speak out. At a seminar with a National Farmers' Union local, discussion of the problem of unequal participation led to a very heated and ultimately constructive evaluation of the local's operations over the past few years.

7. Leadership should be a shared responsibility if the group is to avoid becoming dependent on one or two people. We encourage shared leadership by asking the group to select from among themselves people who will lead certain parts of the programme such as the introduction or the discussion of strategies and follow-

up plans. Another way is to ask the group to divide into smaller workshops for part of the programme and for each workshop to select a discussion leader and recorder. Other leadership roles can also be rotated for each session. This will help develop the skills of leadership within a group and also help individual participants take a stronger interest in the seminar.



8. It is important for several reasons to keep a record of the key points of the discussion. It shows that everyone's contribution is valued, and is a way of keeping track of progress made. It is a way of noting questions that a group may wish to come back to later. It also provides an accurate account that can be referred to by individuals or by the whole group later on. The task of recording also forces a group to come to a consensus about the points they are making.

It is best if the group can see the record of their discussion as it is being taken as it allows the group to revise or correct on the spot. The Ah-hah Seminar method of recording discussion in pictures and symbols is effective because it can be done quickly without slowing down the discussion. We also use flip-charts or sheets of newsprint to write down points for later discussion or conclusions of strategy discussions. Detailed minutes or notes taken by a group member can supplement the visual record but are no substitute.

9. The group should evaluate periodically how the seminar is progressing. They should review the original goals and see whether those goals are being accomplished or if as a result of the discussion they need to be

reassessed. It is important also to check progress on the agenda and modify it if necessary, to evaluate the level of participation, and identify and discuss any other problems that arise. This ongoing evaluation is critical to the effectiveness of the seminar.

Too often evaluation comes only at the end, when it is too late to do anything about the problems that may have arisen. We urge the group to take time at the middle and end of a one-day programme, and more often if it is a longer programme, to evaluate the way the discussion is proceeding. Also time can be taken during coffee breaks or lunches to check out what the participants think about the process of the seminar, especially for those who have not so far taken part in the discussion. We have found evaluation is one of the most helpful things for developing group skills and building a group's cohesiveness and effectiveness.

### **The Role of the Animator/Recorder**

A basic premise of the Ah-hah Seminar is to allow the group to take responsibility for its own learning. But this does not mean that there is no need for leadership. The main leadership role is that of an animator/

recorder. As animator she or he plays a crucial role in guiding the seminar by helping the group clarify its own objectives and determine its own agenda. She or he has the responsibility to ask the questions that help draw out the individual and collective experiences of the group.

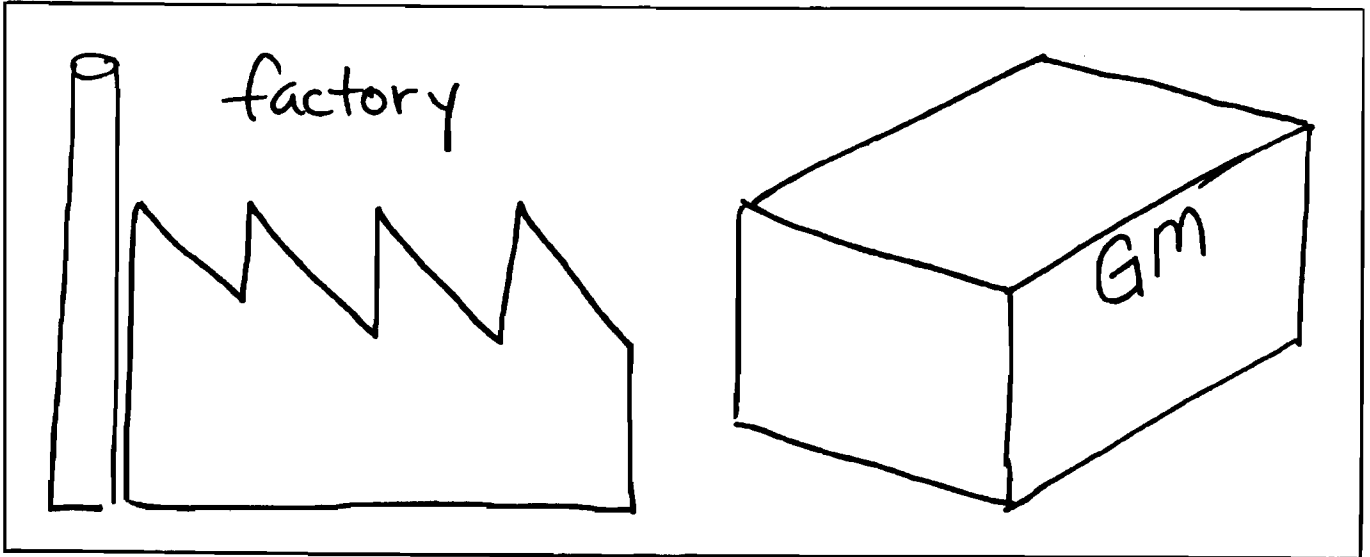
In most seminars the animator/recorder plays a major role at the beginning to get the discussion going. But in most successful seminars, the group soon takes the lead and the animator/recorder becomes one of the participants. We make a point of saying that we do not see our role as animator/recorder as neutral. We always try to be candid about our biases and the political perspective we hold as it determines the kind of questions we ask. We explain that our bias is to view society from the position of the majority who are excluded from wealth and power. We say that we intend to participate in the discussions and, when appropriate, draw on our own experience, including that of other seminars.

Certain skills are required of the animator/recorder: an ability to ensure that discussion and decision-making is democratic and involves everyone in the group; an ability to draw quickly no matter how crudely; and a coherent political, economic and social

analysis. Without such an analysis it would be difficult to know what kind of questions to pose to the group. The animator/recorder must also have some background information on the work and community of the participants in each seminar. This can be gained by

interviewing one or more prospective participants and by reading as much background material as possible beforehand.

The other major leadership function is in the recording of the discussion in symbols and in pictorial form



on a large sheet of paper placed in front of the group. Occasionally we have involved the whole group in the drawing process but usually we do the drawing as we are faster and are frequently working under time constraints. Often we will invite a member of the group to draw a local landmark or some particular thing they can more easily symbolize in the picture.

Another important role is that of observer. She or he keeps track of the progress of the seminar, drawing attention to problems such as the domination of the discussion by a few, divergence from the agreed agenda without a group decision to do so, or a contribution that has been passed over. She or he should interject anytime a problem comes up that needs immediate attention. The observer can also comment during evaluations on his or her perceptions of how the seminar is progressing. When two people are involved in leading an Ah-hah Seminar one should act as animator/recorder and the other as observer. If only one person is involved we ask someone in the group to be the observer.

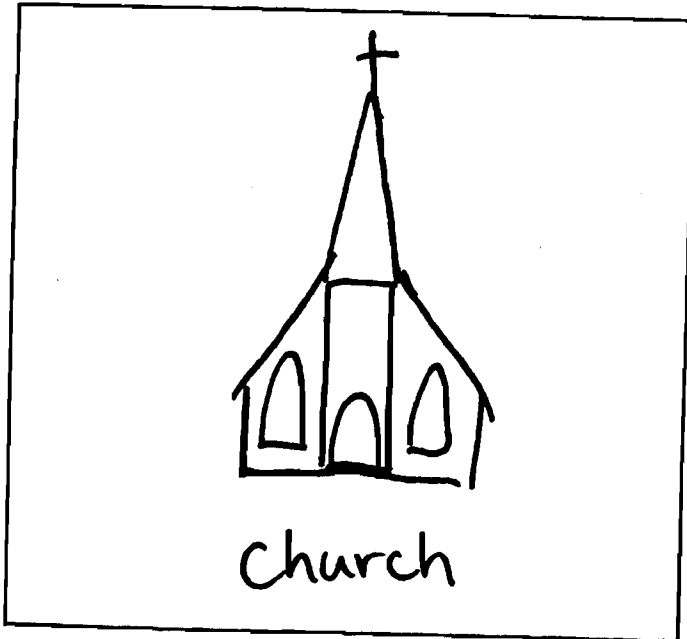
## **The Questions We Ask**

The questions asked by the animator/recorder are intended to focus and give direction to the group discussion, but the questioning is not a one-way effort as we also take direction from the group. The overall process is an interaction between the group and the animator/recorder, the issues raised by the participants and the specific objectives of the seminar.

The seminar is not a catechism where the animator/recorder mechanically asks predetermined questions which have "correct" answers. Rather it is a dialogue between the leader and the group. The questions asked should elicit responses which can be symbolized in the picture being drawn. Additions to the picture, or links between different parts, are drawn as they arise from the discussion of one participant's work situation. A discussion of the causes of a particular social problem, such as unemployment, may require adding certain parts of the system or actors that have not yet been drawn. Recording in picture form allows the discussion to move back and forth between description, analysis and strategy.

But it would be an error to make the drawing of the

most comprehensive picture possible the objective of the seminar. In any one seminar we would never ask all the questions we outline here. The discussion of possi-



ble future actions to be taken is most important and determines the questions to be asked and discussed. The drawing is a point of reference and a point of departure, not an end in itself.

The questions we ask fall into three areas. First we ask questions that draw out the participant's experience. The responses are symbolized in the picture. Then we ask the group to think critically about the picture they have constructed. Finally we ask questions that aid them to strategize options for the future.

### Constructing the Picture

#### 1. The Participants' Work and Life

We usually start by asking each participant to describe where she or he works and lives. Whether each individual is asked depends on the size of the group, the variety of workplaces or occupations represented and the time available. If several participants work at the same place or in a similar type of work we may ask them to describe their work collectively. The important thing is to get a representative picture for the purpose of developing analysis and strategy — the comprehensiveness of the picture is secondary. As people describe

their situation the animator/recorder draws representative symbols and pictures on a blank wall of paper.

The questions we ask include: Where do you work? What kind of work do you do? What are you paid? How many others work at the same place or for the same company? What are the working conditions like? Is there a union? Have there been any strikes or layoffs recently? Who owns the company you work for?

A very different set of questions would be used with a group of farmers or native people. In all cases, though, we begin by asking participants to describe their economic activity.

## **2. Drawing Out Themes for Discussion**

Issues such as health and safety in the workplace or unemployment may emerge from the description of one person's work. These may be pursued right away by asking further problem-posing questions and drawing in others' similar experiences, or they can be noted for discussion at a later point.

Parts of the larger picture are usually drawn in as they are suggested by the experiences of an individual participant. For example, if someone has been recently unemployed, the Canada Employment Centre and its

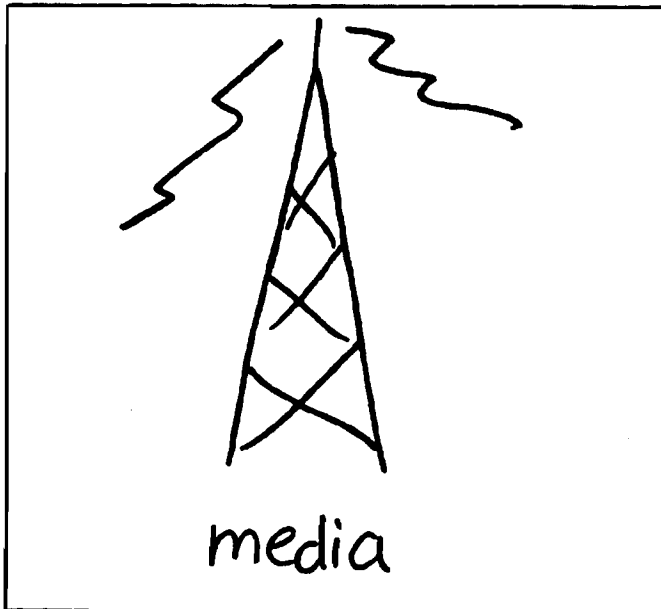
links to the federal government are drawn in. If another person's work experience leads to a discussion of health and safety issues, we would ask if there are any laws and government bodies that regulate safety standards, and then draw in the provincial government.

We don't limit the questions to work experiences. We ask them about where they live: Do you own your house or rent it? What rent or mortgage do you pay? What work does the rest of your family do? We also ask questions about their neighbourhood, community, total family income, shopping and prices of essentials. Usually themes for discussion emerge from these questions, for example, the availability of housing, real estate speculation, interest rates and inflation. The group decides which of these themes, if any, it would like to discuss in detail. In this way, we move from descriptions of experiences, to drawing in the larger picture and discussing issues, finally coming back to invite more participants to describe their situations.

## **3. The Larger Picture**

As participants discuss where they work and live, a description of the economic system begins to emerge. A discussion of the workplace can easily move to a dis-

cussion of the ownership of the industry and designation of corporate headquarters where decisions are made. Links can be made to those industries supplying



raw materials, or to the markets for the finished products. Consideration of the cost of home ownership or problems of farmers and other small producers put the banks and other financial institutions into the picture. Often these issues will spark critical discussion of the role of these important economic institutions.

In one way or another, the various levels of government affect the lives of the participants and so they are added to the picture as they come up. At a later stage, we invite the group to look at all the functions of the state, drawing in the ones that may not have been mentioned before, such as the military, the police and the legal system.

We try to ask questions which will help participants relate their own experiences to the larger picture. For example, if someone mentions the difficulty of finding day care services or someone else has had problems getting unemployment or disability insurance, then a logical line of questioning is: In what areas are governments cutting back and in what areas is spending increasing? Where do governments get their money? Who pays taxes and who enjoys tax loopholes?

Social and cultural institutions are also important to get into the picture because they affect the way people



view their experiences. If they are not part of the description of participants' work and life experiences then they are likely to be identified when the group starts to consider strategy. The role of the media, schools, churches, social clubs, community organizations and unions; and the way in which they either support or oppose the status quo is a critical part of the discussion of strategy.

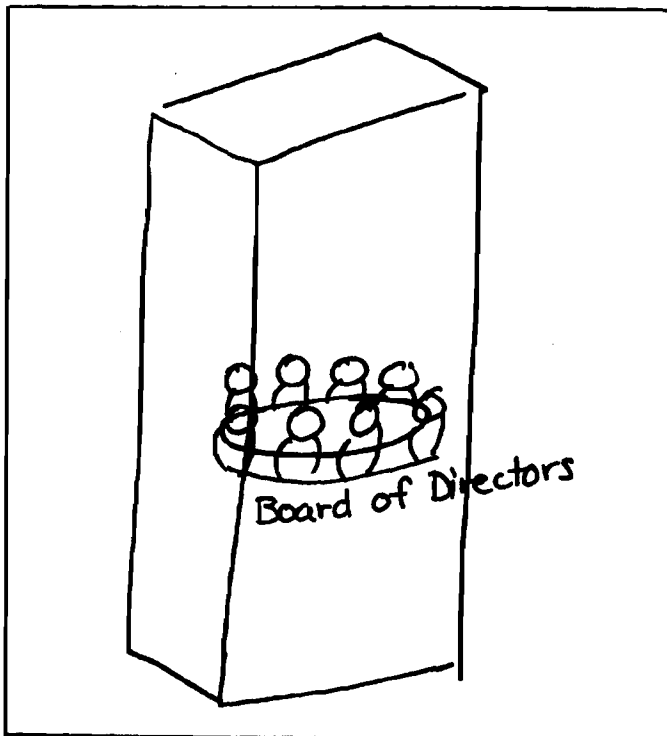
#### 4. Global Connections

In many of our seminars the discussion has led to an examination of the global as well as the local and national economic system. If someone in the group works for a company whose headquarters are located in the United States or Europe these connections to the global economy can be drawn into the picture. Sometimes the group will trace a particular commodity, such as coffee or sugar or bauxite, back to its origins in a Third World country. Cheaper imports from low-wage countries may be identified as a cause of layoffs in Canada. Other issues, such as interest rates or the value of the Canadian dollar cannot be understood without looking at our trade and other foreign economic relations.

We have found that there is often someone present who has immigrated from another country or someone who has worked abroad. Using the experiences of these people or, if necessary, the knowledge of the animator/recorder, a picture of the social, economic and political system in one or more foreign countries can be drawn in.

The global picture can illustrate how multinational corporations operate and how they try to play workers in one country off against workers in another. Participants often find that there are similarities between the structural causes of injustice in Canada and the Third World, even though the absolute level of poverty may be worse in the Third World.

Although we may sometimes ask: "What else belongs in the picture?", we do not try to achieve a comprehensive picture before moving into an analysis of important themes. If an important institution has been left out, it can always be added later when it comes up in the discussion.



## Analysis of the Picture

### 1. Examining Causes of Particular Injustices

It is important that the economic, political and social system not be depicted as static and unchanging. We try to help participants see that, on the contrary, it is dynamic and transformable by examining how different parts of the system interact with each other. One way this can be done is to examine the causes of particular injustices. A discussion of unemployment can lead to discussion of interest rates. This connects unemployment with housing and with inflation. This connecting of issues points up the common interests between different groups. For example workers may realize that farmers are also affected by high interest rate policies.

### 2. Questions about Power

Examining the causes of a particular social injustice also helps to expose who exactly is making the decisions that shape our society. Simple questions are asked to probe power relationships in society. "Who decides?" "Who benefits?" "Who pays?" The myth that "natural economic laws" determine interest rates or

currency exchange rates obscures the real decision-makers. Identifying who is making the decisions that shape our economy and society is crucial to helping people see that our society is a human creation that can be transformed, and not a system operating on its own, outside our control.

### **3. Examining the Role of the State**

An important part of analyzing the picture is a discussion of the role of the state. One technique we sometimes use is to tear back the paper where the government has been drawn and ask, "Who is behind the government?" We challenge the group to explain its answers and give evidence to support its assertions. So if someone says, "Big business is behind the government," we ask for examples or ways in which business exerts its influence on government. We also push a group to distinguish between different business groups and to look at how the government responds and mediates between different business interests. We get the group to examine different functions of the state — the military, the legal system, the police, the parliament and the bureaucracy, to see how they interact and reinforce one another.

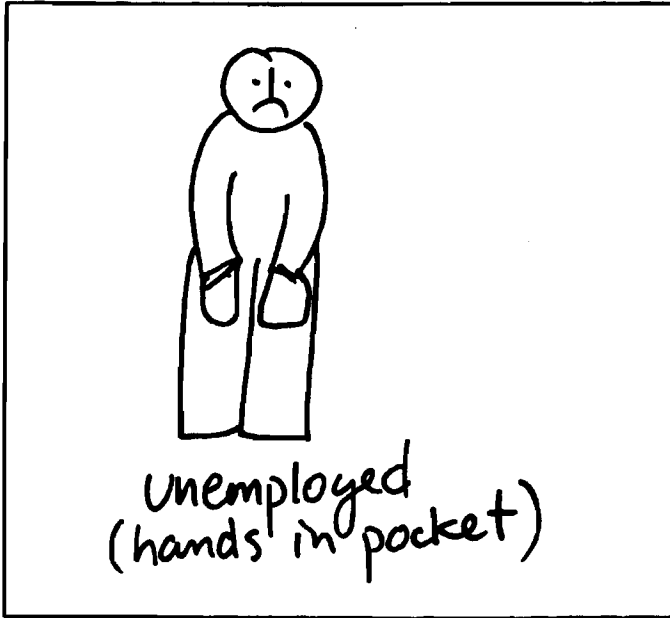
An obvious question that almost always comes up is why we have the governments we do when we have a supposedly democratic electoral system. This question often leads to a discussion of the role of the media, the problems with elections and why so many people vote for parties and politicians that in fact do not represent their real interests.

A related issue is whether involvement in electoral politics should be a priority for action or not. In Canada the New Democratic Party (a social democratic political party) and its shortcomings and potential usually comes in for heated discussion. Frequently the conclusion of such discussions is a recognition of the importance of pursuing a non-electoral political strategy as well as an electoral strategy.

### **4. Making Generalizations**

We believe that social analysis involves making generalizations. This happens almost inevitably in an Ah-hah Seminar when participants compare their own experience with others in the group and perceive that it is shared by others. Moving from an individual to a collective perception of society is a critical step in the process of enabling people to take action. The subject-

tive — the personal experiences and views of each participant — and the objective — the collective picture of the world that the group creates — are in a dialectical



relationship. If we deal only with the subjective we deal with persons without considering their relationship to the world. But if we deal only with the objective we may end up talking about the world without relation to the person.

#### 5. Testing Experience

We use published information, facts and figures to verify generalizations made by the group. These facts and figures can serve to affirm their perceptions and initial conclusions. When information is used to validate their experiences it becomes immediately relevant.

For example, introducing statistics on the national or regional levels of unemployment after someone has described how difficult it is to find a job, affirms the perception that she or he is not alone and that not finding a job is not a personal fault. Similarly, data on government spending cutbacks or increases may confirm the suspicions already expressed by the group. If it is anticipated that the discussion will deal with a particular theme it is a good idea for a member of the planning group or the animator/recorder to prepare some relevant statistical information beforehand.

Statistics and data used in this way can be very effective but should be introduced only to affirm or challenge the perceptions and generalizations of the group. We are careful to avoid bogging the discussion down in a lot of facts and figures. The important thing is to develop an analytical framework that will help the group act. If needed, specific figures can be found later as part of the follow-up to the seminar.

#### **6. Looking at History**

Another way to show that the economic and social system is not static and unchanging is to get the group to reflect on how situations change over time. This can be done by asking how things were done in previous years. Another way is to ask them to recall past struggles which produced changes in the system. The historical aspect of the picture can be recorded in a different colour as was done in the seminar with the Kayahna Tribal Council described later.

The historical questions are asked throughout the seminar. We might ask about their previous work experiences or how many people were employed at their workplace in past years as compared to now. Other

questions we often ask are how the unemployment insurance system came into existence, or how a particular organization has developed over the years. We ask the group to describe changes in the inflation rate or the number of people unemployed. These questions help the group discern emerging trends or directions in the economy. Understanding how popular movements have succeeded in making social changes in the past is a crucial part of developing effective strategies.

#### **7. Connecting Economics to Politics, Society and Culture**

We always start with a discussion of the economic activity of the participants because we believe that economic factors are the primary determinants of our society. But we never let the analysis that emerges become narrowly economic. We do this by asking, for example, what factors beyond economic considerations, influence the government's policy on a particular issue. We examine not only the economic but also political, social and cultural dimensions of such issues as the fight to preserve farmland. In this way we try to show that economic, political, social and cultural factors can-

not be understood in isolation from one another but that they are interdependent and affect each other.

### **8. Drawing Connections Between Issues and Groups**

An important step that leads to a discussion of strategy is to identify which groups are affected by particular issues or government policies. If a group of farmers is discussing the issue of high interest rates we would ask, "Who else is adversely affected by high interest rates?" If unemployment is being discussed we would press the group to examine the ways in which high unemployment affects those who are still employed. This type of questioning helps the group identify potential allies and develop action strategies.

### **Developing Action Strategies**

The whole objective of the Ah-hah Seminar is to help groups develop more effective strategies for action. Sufficient time needs to be reserved for this. It is important to move on to discussion of action strategies even if this means the stages of picture-building and analysis have to be cut short.

The discussion of action strategies varies in the level of sophistication and the amount of detailed planning that can take place depending on the group, whether it meets often or is one that came together just for the seminar.

#### **1. Identifying Long and Short-term Objectives**

The first step in figuring out possible strategies to adopt is to identify the group's long-term and short-term objectives. Sometimes we suggest that the participants discuss this in smaller groups and then report back their conclusions to the whole group.

We try to get the group itself to formulate the questions such as: "What kinds of changes do we want to see in this picture of the economic and social system we have just drawn?" "How can we bring about the changes we desire?" "Who are our potential allies?"

When the small groups report back, we record their responses in the picture. To show the objectives or desired changes agreed upon by the group, we like to use a different coloured marker. A red "X" mark cancelling an order for fighter aircraft and an arrow redistributing the money to housing or day care helps the

group visualize its objective. The act of drawing in the change shows that the world does not have to remain as it is now.

We try to help the group reach a collective consensus about objectives, rather than a list of individual goals. Agreement on common objectives is crucial if the group is to take collective action. If consensus cannot be reached on long-term goals, it is important for people to be aware of this. Instead they should try to reach some agreement about short-term or intermediate objectives which could form the basis for common action.

By itself, identification of long-term objectives does not move a group to take action. The intermediate steps needed to reach those goals must also be identified. Someone in a group might, for instance, raise a very general goal such as "a society where everyone is free" or "a socialist society." These kinds of goals, however, are meaningless by themselves and can discourage people simply because their achievement seems so far off. But the discipline of trying to draw such objectives into the picture usually challenges a group to be more concrete about them. We would ask how to go about drawing a socialist society, for example, and push the group

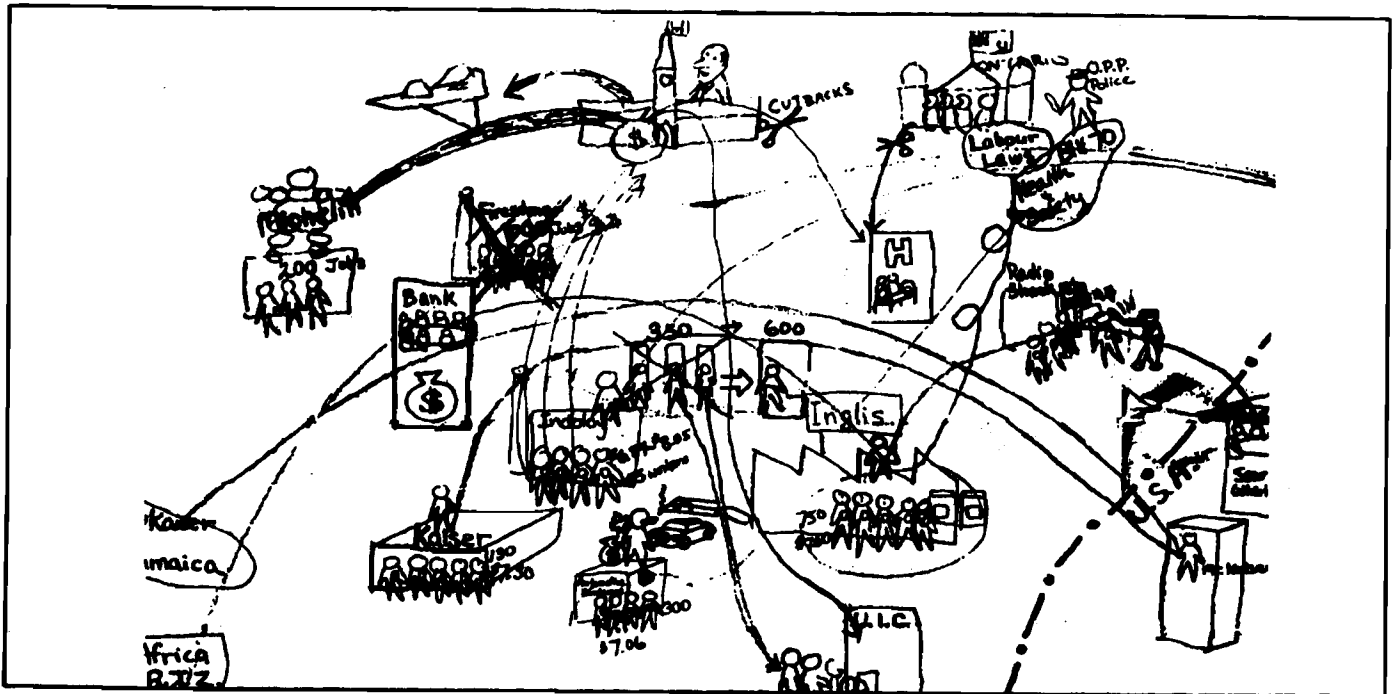
to specify the particular changes we should make in the picture.

Occasionally someone suggests that we put up a clean sheet of paper and draw a picture of the world as we would like it to be. We always reply, "Fine, let's discuss this suggestion." As part of the discussion we offer the opinion that our starting point should be the society we have now and that we have to envision the way in which it can be changed. Usually this opinion prevails. On a few occasions when we have attempted to draw utopia we actually drew very little and ended up listing abstract principles such as "equality" or "freedom."

If a group identifies only long-term objectives they should be quizzed about the intermediate steps needed in order to achieve those goals. Conversely, if only short-term objectives are identified the group should be challenged to articulate what these short-term objectives are leading to.

## **2. Reforms that Advance or Hinder Empowerment**

The group must, at some point, distinguish between those short-term measures or reforms which advance the struggle to achieve long-term objectives and those



"In the Steelworkers' seminar . . . they identified the Unemployment Insurance system as an example of the latter kind of reform."



that hinder achievement by patching up the present system and demobilizing people's struggles. In the Steelworkers' seminar described later, they identified the unemployment insurance system as an example of the latter kind of reform. They decided that while it provides important benefits for the unemployed, it is also a means of social control that can prevent people from taking action: that it acts as a lid on social discontent that might otherwise mobilize people into organizing a movement for change. They decided that while this does not mean that unemployment insurance is bad and should be eliminated, it does mean we need to be aware of the danger of those in power co-opting important reforms for their own ends.

A reform that limits the power of corporations and increases the power or potential power of workers was identified at the same seminar. This was the recent enactment of occupational health and safety legislation in Ontario which gives workers the right to refuse unsafe work and unions more power over health and safety issues in the workplace.

### **3. Evaluating Past Actions**

If the group has had some successful experience of working together to change their situation, we invite them to discuss this and evaluate it in the context of the picture they have constructed. We try to determine what effect those changes they made had on power relations, how they related to other issues or struggles and what opportunities for making alliances they found. Sometimes we recount the experiences of other groups at past Ah-hah Seminars.

### **4. Identifying Obstacles**

Another useful exercise is to get the group to identify potential obstacles to the changes they want to see and to discuss how to overcome them. The group could identify where opposition would come from, what form that opposition might take and what can be done to prepare for it. They may identify problems within their own group as an obstacle. The group should then analyze the nature of the problems and decide whether they can be resolved through education or if changes in the structure of the organization are needed. Groups frequently identify public apathy as a major obstacle.

Then we discuss the reason for this, usually getting into such topics as the media, our individualistic culture and the education system. Sometimes a group concludes that apathy results from people feeling they are powerless to control their own lives. We always try to get the group to identify actions that could be taken to dispel apathy or get the group to cite occasions when people were successfully mobilized, for instance, when an interesting programme succeeded in attracting a good attendance at a union meeting.

### 5. Identifying Allies

We always encourage a group to identify allies or potential allies in the struggle they are engaged in. It is important they examine the interests they share with others, as well as the possible minor differences that may exist between them and another group. We also consider how those in power have managed to keep popular groups divided.

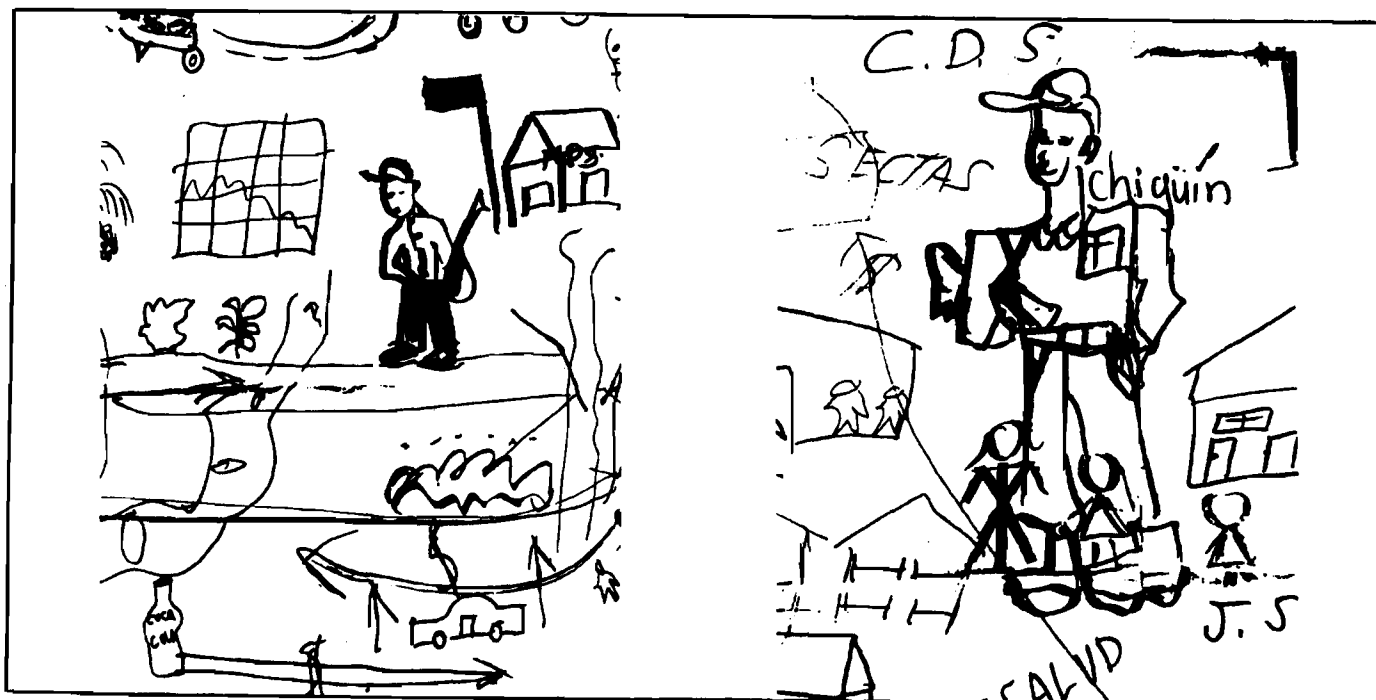
In an Ontario workshop on energy issues, participants from farm, labour, native, church and environmentalist groups examined the apparent contradictions between the need for pollution controls, native land claims and the need for jobs. The groups concluded that

pollution controls were more likely to create jobs than destroy them. They also decided that alternative energy developments and conservation measures would create far more jobs than the energy megaprojects that threaten native people's rights.

In many of our seminars with farmers we've discussed at some length the interests they share with workers. They were able to see that they had common enemies in the large corporations that control the food system and in the banks that are charging high interest rates. They could see how those in power attempt to divide farmers and workers by blaming workers for high costs of farm equipment and fertilizers and farmers for the high cost of food. Most importantly, they saw that they had little hope of making political changes without the support of workers.

Identifying allies is critical, because only when popular groups that share common interests support each other and work together can we hope to seriously challenge the power of those now in control. This process is, in effect, the beginning of a class analysis.

Sometimes the Ah-hah Seminar can be used to bring together representatives from different groups to discuss common interests and develop united strategies. If



Some details from the Nicaragua picture, referring to the CDSs (Sandinista Defence Committees) and trade relations.

the seminar involves only one group it may be useful, after identifying potential allies, to discuss the basis for common action. Plans can then be made for contacting other groups and developing working relationships with them.

#### **6. Deciding on Specific Action Plans**

Before the end of any seminar we encourage the group to agree on some action that can be taken immediately. There is a great feeling of accomplishment when a practical step has been identified and agreed to by everyone.

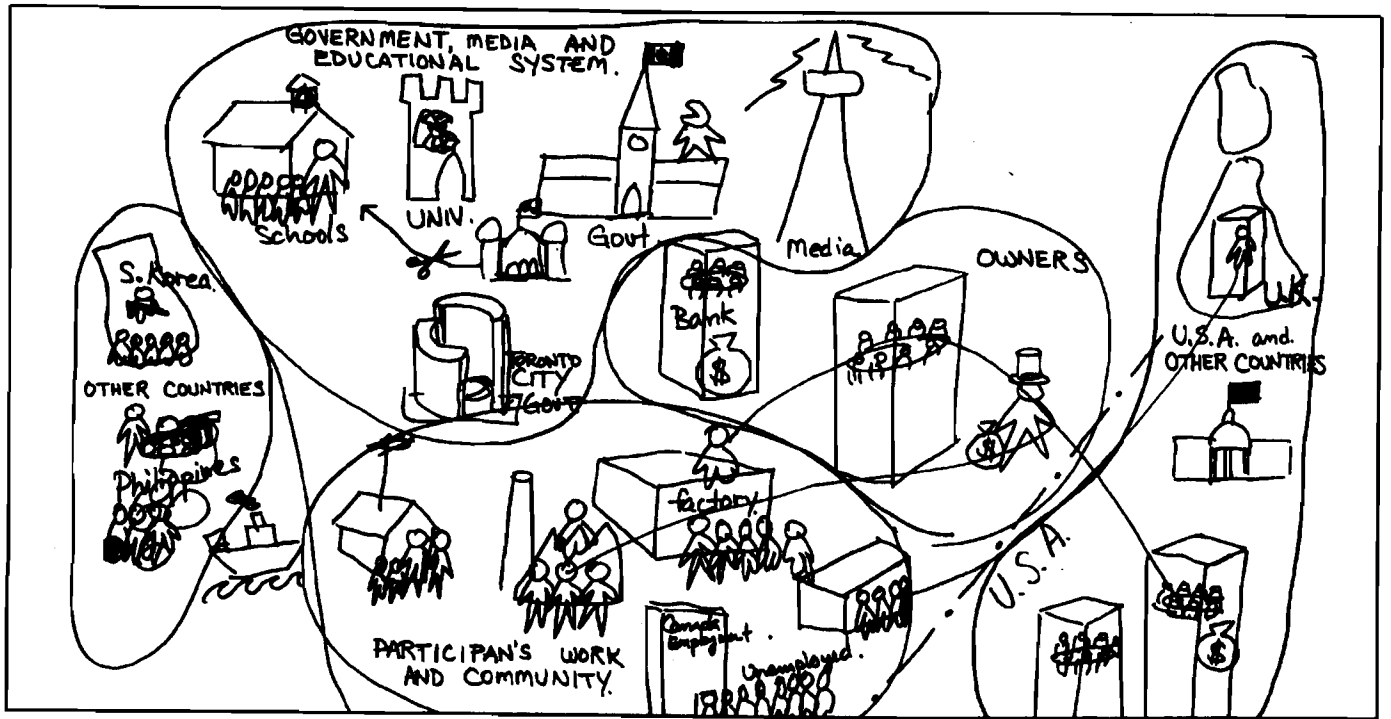
In the Newfoundland seminar with the Fishermen's Union and the Mummers Theatre Troupe the group planned a campaign to protest changes in Unemployment Insurance rules that would adversely affect seasonal workers. This involved assigning responsibility to the different groups represented to prepare an information sheet, contact other groups, send letters to government ministers and arrange meetings with Members of Parliament. A seminar with the unemployed in Saskatchewan drew up plans for presenting a submission to the Regina City Council, strategized about finding a

place for an office and drop-in centre and discussed their participation in public forums on unemployment being organized by the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour.

### **The Drawing Technique**

The drawing technique, unique to the Ah-hah Seminar, is simply a way to record and facilitate the discussion. The animator/recorder does not have to be a great artist. The most important skill is speed so that the act of drawing does not slow down discussion. A little practice and a "vocabulary" of symbols worked out beforehand gives almost anyone the necessary drawing skills. The more simple the symbol or sketch the better because they can be drawn more quickly — just as long as the participants can recognize what each of the squiggles or marks represents.

The only materials needed are a large blank wall, a large sheet of paper (a minimum of 1 metre by 3 metres and better if double that size) and coloured markers in at least four colours — black, blue, green and red. If large sheets of paper are not available use several smaller sheets of newsprint taped together. Even a blackboard



The usual positioning of different actors and economic sectors.

with coloured chalk can be used. Chairs are usually arranged in a semi-circle facing the sheet of paper on the wall.

Some thought needs to be given to the position of different actors and economic sectors in the drawing. We try to get the group to suggest their proper location but generally we draw the participants, their work and communities in the lower centre of the drawing, the government, media and educational system at the top and leave room for the United States or other countries on either side of the drawing. Sometimes it makes more sense to follow a rough geographic layout. We did this in the case of the Kayahna seminar where the participants and the northern communities they came from were drawn in the upper portion and Ottawa and all the non-native, southern institutions were drawn in the lower right hand part of the paper.

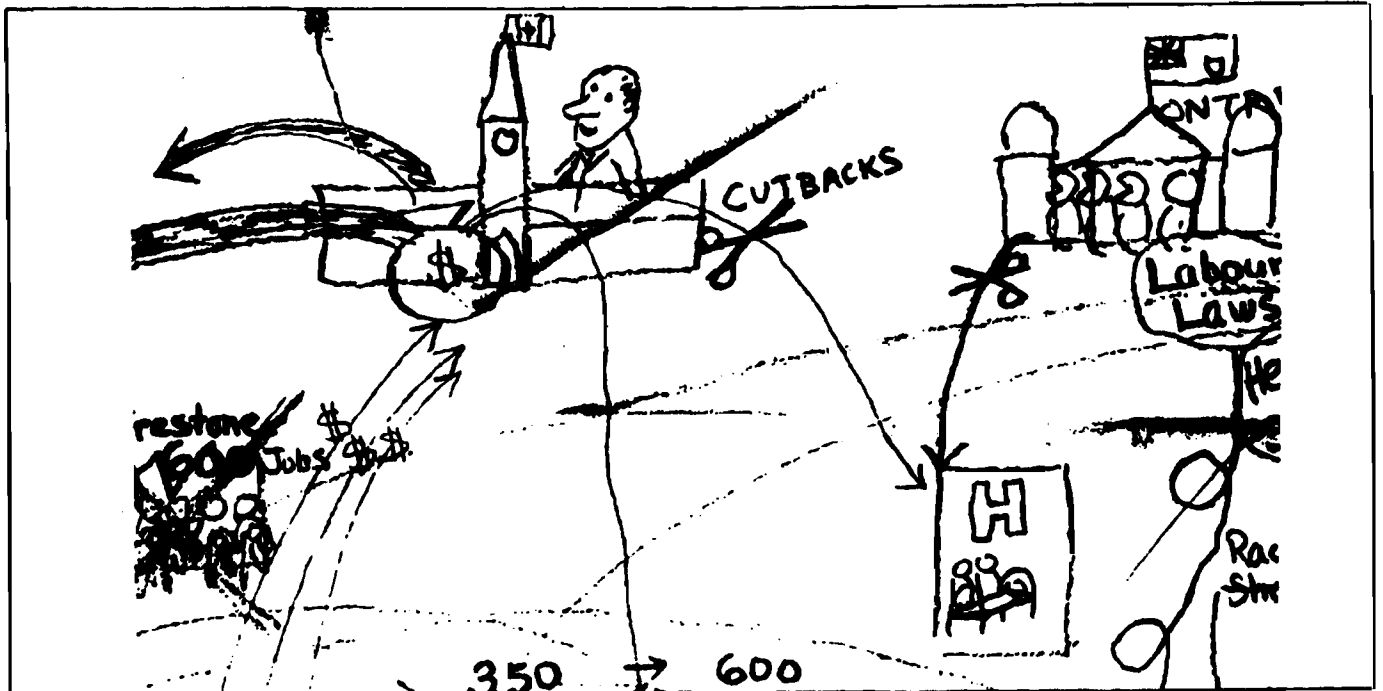
Using several colours of markers to differentiate between different aspects of the drawing helps to make it easier to read. We usually use black to draw the basic material aspects of the picture, blue lines and circles to signify ownership or control, green for flows of money and red to draw the changes that the group would like

to see take place or to indicate linkages between popular organizations.

The drawing technique serves a number of important functions:

1. It helps to organize the discussion by giving the group a common task — to create a picture of the economic and political system. The picture that the group creates through discussion is a tangible product of collective efforts. At the end of the day there is something to show for all the talk that went on. This is especially important for those participants whose work experience has led them to question the value of words. The group often develops a strong sense of pride about the completed picture. Frequently at the end of a seminar, the group asks to keep the drawing or to have copies made because they identify it as their own.

2. It helps to record the discussion. The pictures and symbols represent all the important points made during the discussion in such a way that they can be easily recalled. Each person's contribution is given value by inclusion in the drawing. The picture acts as a collective graphic memory for the group. As the drawing builds, new points are connected to earlier topics of



A group trying to decide how to draw a politician must first agree on the essential characteristics of the role.

discussion. The drawing can also help to tie together sessions that are several days or even months apart.

3. It can be understood by anyone. Drawings can be read by people who speak different languages or who are unable to read writing. An example of this was a seminar held with sugar workers from around the world as part of the 1977 International Sugar Workers Conference held in Trinidad. The working conditions in various countries were described in English, Spanish and French but the record was taken in a picture form that everyone could understand. The Ah-hah Seminar has also been used effectively with groups of immigrant workers in Canada from several different countries who spoke different languages.

4. It uses the language and symbols of the participants themselves instead of terminology foreign to their experience. While some of the symbols are introduced by the animator/recorder, we try to get the group to suggest their own symbols as much as possible. Creating symbols is an enjoyable, imaginative and sometimes hilarious exercise. A group trying to decide how to draw a boss or a politician must first agree on the essential characteristics of the role.

Important yet complex concepts such as surplus value, balance of trade or vertical integration can be demonstrated without using the language that would turn many people off. A graphic presentation makes key concepts visual and concrete rather than verbal and abstract.

One intriguing question that inevitably arises is whether to differentiate between women and men in the drawing. We have no standard way of drawing male and female characters beyond avoiding sexist symbols. We usually ask the group what to draw. Occasionally someone says it is not necessary to distinguish between the sexes because "we are all workers." Then later an issue may arise that makes it necessary to make this distinction — for example, the issue of equal pay for work of equal value.

5. It helps the participants to objectify their own experience. Through the drawing, the participants are "naming" their world, which is the first step towards controlling it. Being able to objectify personal experience and recognizing that it is shared by others is an important starting place for discussion of changing circumstances through collective action.



6. The drawing can be done in "layers" using different colours, to represent the past, present and future. In the case of the seminar with the Kayahna Tribal Council described later, the group first drew in purple a representation of what their lives were like before the coming of the Europeans. They then drew over in black the changes wrought by colonization. Finally, the group drew in the changes they wanted to make in a bold red colour. By adding changes the group began the process of collective action to make those changes. Visualizing the possibility of an alternative society became an incentive for change.

7. It is also valuable for helping a group to identify potential allies. Other social groups are depicted in the drawing so that the group can see clearly who else is in a similar position to them within the system.

8. It helps participants piece together the fragments they already know into an integrated picture of the economic and social system. It forces a group to think in structural terms as they are challenged to connect each piece to the whole. As Freire has observed, people lacking a critical understanding of the system do perceive



*Popular educators and development workers from the Caribbean at a workshop organized by CUSO in St. Lucia in 1982.*

the fragments although they don't yet understand them as interacting and constituent parts of the whole.

9. It helps participants think in visual rather than verbal forms. In this way the conceptual and creative

side of the brain is exercised as well as the linear and logical side. It is crucial to take this creative and imaginative approach to the problems of our society if we are to move beyond the inhibiting "logic" demanded by those in power.

Often a group realizes the full significance of the drawing process only at the end of the seminar or even days later. The process of drawing itself shapes the way people think about the world, for instance, by forcing the group to think in structural terms. Because the discussion may never have articulated this it is often only during the evaluation at the end of the seminar that

people realize exactly what has taken place that has changed their way of thinking.

Sometimes participants get frustrated during the early stages of the seminar, claiming the information being shared is stuff they already know and that there are no "Ah-hahs" for them. But by the end of the seminar they usually realize that though they may not have learned much new information they are thinking in a new and different way. The Ah-hah Seminar and the drawing method has arranged the information they already know in a way that it all starts to make sense. This is the real "Ah-hah" of the Ah-hah Seminar.