Organising, mass mobilisation and worker education: Experiences with political worker education in South Africa and Namibia

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Introduction

This chapter is written by two worker education activists with over 30 years of practical experiences in developing and running various working-class education programmes in South Africa, Namibia and elsewhere on the continent through their joint work for the African Labour Educators' Network (ALEN) as well as the African Labour Research Network (ALRN). Their experiences are presented in this chapter as case studies of the Workers' College in South Africa and the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) in Namibia.[1]

Both organisations were active in research and education work on the continent from the late 1990s, with LaRRI coordinating the ALRN, and the Workers' College coordinating the ALEN. Both these Networks worked closely together and the directors of LaRRI and the Workers' College were prominent members of these Networks. Both Networks attempted to develop an independent research and education capacity within African trade unions, and to enhance trade unions' capacity to design and execute their own initiatives and programmes by collaborating around the development of a diploma programme.

The collaboration was enabled by various similarities between the two organisations in terms of:

- their vision and mission viz. the development of socialist values and principles;
- their commitment to the development of an independent trade union movement that determined its own agenda and explored the possibilities of a socialist reality;
- their research and education programmes which provided an alternative to the neo-liberal education discourse that dominated existing higher education institutions;
- shared historical political realities both having endured racial, economic and political oppression by the South African apartheid state;

- the nature of the exploitation carried out by global and South African capital,
- trade unionism which developed along similar lines with close links to the political liberation struggle;
- Robben Island which had been home to political prisoners from both countries;
- their respective liberation movements with a shared political vision and agenda which included alliances with the trade union movement, and
- democracy and political independence which was achieved by both countries in the early 1990s.

The chapter draws together the authors' perspectives on what workers' education is and what it should be – as both a product and weapon of working class struggles. It begins by describing the forms that trade unionism and worker education took in the 1970s and 1980s in South Africa and Namibia - a period that serves as a reference point for the analysis of worker education developments in subsequent years. The shift in focus of education post-independence occupies the next part of the chapter, and in particular the role of the Workers' College in South Africa, and the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) in Namibia. In assessing their contribution, the chapter critically examines the links that should exist between education, organisation and mobilisation against the post-independence emergence of workers' education as a 'specialisation' within the context of bureaucratisation and corporatisation of trade unions, and their incorporation into the labour relations and social contract paradigms. The chapter argues that the continued drive for a skills-focused institutional framework, together with the established conventions of academia, are contradicting the political workers' education that had emerged strongly in the 1980s and that political worker education is merely one site of the broader struggle to bring about radical change to social, political and economic relations.

Learning through struggle

In the past, two main forms of trade union and working-class education that were provided, namely, education by the trade unions themselves, and then the education provided by independent labour service organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

A distinction must be made between education that is acquired through formal, structured programmes, ranging from workshops to certificate courses, to that of education acquired through lived experiences, engaged in the struggle for worker and human rights and interests.

Most of the trade union, labour, and working-class activists and educators who emerged during the late 1970s and 1980s were shaped by the prevalent political and social struggles. This was the 'school for activists', the school of struggle which, during periods of heightened tension and strife, created the sharpest levels of consciousness and creative action. Experienced trade union activists acquired their knowledge, skills and insights into broad trade union and working-class understandings through their involvement in trade union and working-class activities. These included the recruitment and organising of workers, discovering and determining the rights and interests of workers, the tabling of demands on behalf of workers, negotiating with employers, representing workers in different fora, embarking on strikes and consumer boycotts with communities, developing policies and strategies within trade unions and community organisations. This constituted education through experience and provided activists with a wealth of education that even the formal programmes could not replicate. Such education has hardly been given the necessary recognition and value for its role in developing working class movements and consciousness in South Africa particularly, and on the continent in general.

The formal education that did take place within the trade unions was limited to two to three-day workshops mainly for shopstewards, or residential 'schools', run over three to five days, usually once a year, bringing together large numbers of trade unionists together and usually organised by the trade union federations. The greater part of such formal education was conducted by independent labour education service organisations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These organisations existed outside the trade unions and provided the trade union movement with a consistent programme of formal education activities which complemented the unions' own education activities.

But overall, in the 1970s and 1980s, formal worker education was a marginal activity and not central to the workers' struggle. Within the trade union movement, there were different approaches to trade unionism ranging from unions which focused on 'bread and butter' issues or a cross-cutting trade union movement where the struggle was seen as a collective fight for

rights and interests across trade unions, to working-class movements, where the identification of struggle was in terms of class.

They all tended to regard formal education as an additional or marginal activity rather than a core function. Instead, wage negotiations, either at bargaining councils or at plant level, representing workers in disciplinary and grievance hearings, mobilising workers for strikes, and running trade union organisation, have always consumed most of the time and resources of trade unionists. Formal education was seen as too lengthy a commitment in the face of everyday realities and struggles that needed to produce quick results. Education secretaries or coordinators were appointed but had small budgets that prevented them from conducting education programmes on a sustained and consistent basis. So, whilst some form of worker education was considered important, it was not considered a priority, and when it was conducted, it focused predominantly on shop stewards, officials and office bearers, neglecting the education of the workers who constituted the power of the unions. This may well have contributed to the emerging social distance between workers and their representatives that became quite stark in the later years.

Worker education during this period was divided into activities that could be described as 'consciousness-building' while at the same time developing skills, strategies and tactics on the one hand, and, on the other, education which was purely 'technical', that equipped trade unionists to represent their members and to carry out their functions effectively. How did this manifest itself in South Africa and Namibia during this period?

Worker education in South Africa in the 1980s

In the mid-1980s there were different types of trade unions, and different approaches to trade unionism, in South Africa. There were four main groupings:

1. The Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) grouping that essentially had a 'workerist' tendency, which spoke to a broader working-class culture and advance towards socialism;
2. The trade unions in the 'congress tradition' that had a more 'populist' orientation, which saw the political struggle, and therefore political alliances, as core of the workers' struggle;

3. The Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) grouping which had a black consciousness, pan-Africanist leaning, and advanced the principle of black working class leadership;
4. The old, established Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) unions which had a conservative orientation, were ethnically divided and adopted a 'work-within-the-system' approach.

The first three groups constituted what could be considered South Africa's progressive labour movement, in which education was intertwined with mobilising and organising workers. This education manifested itself predominantly through meetings at the workplace but more importantly through meetings of local structures of shop stewards and office-bearers, usually in the evenings and over week-ends at the union offices. Such meetings constituted a form of popular education as issues relating to the workplace, the union and broader social and political struggles in the community and beyond were subjects of engagement. Singing, sloganeering, and at times workers' theatre, became mediums of education.

This form of informal 'struggle education' occurred during a time of scarce resources, and the bare minimum was considered good enough. Thus, worker education took place without proper venues, without meals being provided, without any form of subsistence allowances and without strict hierarchies! Debates were robust and open, and a general spirit of collectivism and sharing prevailed. Members, shop stewards and organisers participated equally, giving their views, critical of each other but working toward the same goals of fighting exploitation, building the organisation and linking with the community to fight the 'system'. The backdrop of this activism was the apartheid state, propped up by white capital and those black individuals and formations that attempted to give it credibility, commonly known as 'puppets' or 'sell-outs'.[2] There was a thirst for information, knowledge, debate, and a common drive towards a more equitable society, often envisaged as a socialist one, even though there was no uniform vision of its shape and form!

The recognition of the informal education acquired by trade unionists through struggle happened predominantly within the labour movement itself. Shopstewards, office bearers and officials were elected or appointed mainly because of their involvement in struggle or in trade union activities. There were little 'education criteria' attached to such election or appointment. When shopstewards or office bearers stood for election, it was never a practice

to determine whether such activists had completed any formal education. They were elected primarily based on their ability to mobilise workers and their resolve to conform management. Even general secretaries were not subjected to any determination of the qualifications but rather on their experience in the organisation, the manner in which they represented workers and their ability to articulate the agenda of the working class.

During this period, the formal trade union education was provided by independent organisations and institutions such as the Urban Training Project (UTP), the South African Council for Higher Education (SACHED), and university-linked special programmes. These events were more structured and occurred alongside the spontaneous education that happened in meetings, at workplaces and in union gatherings. This formal education was tied to a broader approach to conscientising and equipping members, shop stewards and officials with a sense of what the workers' struggle was about, that capital and the state were the 'enemy', and that the power of numbers was the main weapon in confronting capital. Education included discussions and sometimes heated debates on strategies on how to make the union stronger, how to engage the bosses, how to recruit and mobilise members.

With the beginning of the transition to democracy in the early 1990s, the trade union movements then resolved to create their own education organisations, and this led to the establishment of the Workers' College in Cape Town and Durban, and later in Port Elizabeth. In the late 1990s, Ditsela was formed as a national education institution representing most of the trade union federations and their affiliates. The formation of these trade union driven education organisations was the recognition of the fact that the trade unions themselves did not have the resources and capacity to provide the necessary formal education so needed to holistically capacitate its representatives and members.

Emerging trade unions and worker education in Namibia

Unlike in South Africa, where unions had emerged much earlier and were already firmly established by the 1980s, the major trade unions in Namibia emerged only from the mid-1980s onwards (Bauer 1994, Jauch 2007; LaRRI 1999). Before that time, progressive unions were repressed and closed down by the colonial regime and many early union activists had to flee into exile. Industrial workers were concentrated in the mining and fishing industries which were dominated by a handful of transnational corporations. A large number of Namibians were working and living in rural areas either as subsistence farmers in the

northern communal areas or as farmworkers. The manufacturing industry hardly existed, accounting for only about 5% of GDP and employment as most consumer goods and even food items were imported from South Africa. Before independence, Namibia was essentially treated as the fifth province of the apartheid regime (Sparks and Green 1992).

Politically, the 1980s was a period of 'reform and repression' where the apartheid regime and its allies fought a brutal war against the guerrilla fighters and SWAPO supporters in general. This was most pronounced in the northern regions of the country. At the same time, there were some political reforms (in an attempt to win legitimacy for the 'puppet government'[3] in place), for example amending labour legislation and 'petty apartheid laws'; as well as the release of political prisoners from Robben Island. Some of the activists came back to Namibia and became leaders of the emerging progressive unions under the banner of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW). At the time, community organising and student activism reached new heights, partly inspired by the mass democratic movement in South Africa (Bauer 1994, LaRRI 1999, Jauch 2002).

During the 1980s, the new unions operated in just a few urban towns at larger, established companies and at the major mines as well as the public sector. They had to operate with very limited resources but gained significant popularity beyond their membership by linking workers' complaints at work with the broader political questions of liberation. Thus fighting employers, transnational corporations and the colonial regime were seen as two sides of the same coin. Systematic workers' education hardly played a role at the time as the focus was on mobilisation. Some basic educational materials were developed, including a union calendar in 1988 but there were no courses or shop stewards' manuals. Instead, similar to South Africa, education mostly took the form of workers' meetings at the union offices after work to discuss the challenges and proposed actions. The key focus was on mobilisation, coupled with some radical slogans and emerging attempts to explain the oppression of workers as part of the capitalist system. Such attempts were, however, very tentative and not anchored amongst workers in general. A banner reading 'socialism means freedom' prominently appeared on Mayday 1988 but never ever again thereafter, as radical transformation was quickly subsumed by compromises and negotiations which paved the way for national independence in 1990.

The mass mobilisation of workers in support of the struggle for Namibia's national independence was thus not systematically linked to a radical workers' education programme. Education was a kind of add-on to the broader task of mobilisation and was driven by a small group of people (including some South African political activists who were living in Namibia at the time), who saw the need to develop workers' consciousness beyond the national liberation discourse towards working class struggles. It should be noted that a Marxist framework shaped some of those early education activities in an attempt to link education, organising and mass mobilisation. Union meetings were held in public halls, often without chairs and everybody sitting on the floor in a circle. This created a sense of comradeship and equality. Education likewise happened in offices or public halls with the flipchart being the only tool, sometimes accompanied by a few pamphlets. Using pictures, cartoons and different languages characterised this kind of basic workers' education in the 1980s. It was a tentative beginning with the aim of building worker power and worker control. The National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) calendar of 1988 stated on the front cover that 'workers control grows out of many, many meetings'.

Workers' education on the eve of new political dispensations: Two case studies

The need for long term education programmes, apart from the two to three-day popular workshops, arose on the eve of a new political dispensation both in Namibia and South Africa. In-depth knowledge, skills and critical analysis were required for trade unionists to be able to engage with the State and capital particularly around creating a new, egalitarian society. Two such programmes were developed by the Workers' College and the LaRRI as outlined in the case studies below, illustrating these developments.

The Workers' College in South Africa

A modular worker education programme was introduced in the early 1990s when the Workers' College was established in Durban. The modular programme was referred to as the diploma programme and was given recognition by the University of Natal (later to become the merged University of KwaZulu Natal – UKZN) as an access programme into the Bachelor of Social Science degree known as the Industrial Working Life Programme (IWLP). As the College was initially based at the University, this facilitated the establishment of the diploma programme.

The Workers' College was established as an independent education organisation for the labour movement, opening its doors to all trade unions and trade union federations. Later on, as its understanding of class struggle grew, it opened its doors to community organisations, both in terms of students being admitted as well as representation on the governance structures. This allowed the College to design its courses in broader terms so that it did not have to serve any particular interest or political persuasion. However, being a working class and community resource organisation, it developed education programmes that spoke to the challenges faced by the working class, not only at the workplace, but also in their organisations and the broader society, nationally, continentally and globally (see Workers College 1996-2015).

The modular course aimed to achieve several objectives that would build on the short course programmes that various unions ran at the time. The six-module programme was designed to provide a long-term, developmental education experience for trade union and community activists. At the same time, the College was mindful of the fact that most working class and community activists had been excluded and denied access to formal education. Thus, the programme was structured to allow any activist to come onto the programme, without regard for any formal qualification, as long as they displayed an experience and knowledge of activism. The recognition by UKZN played the role of ensuring, through moderation of the examinations, that the programme was on par with a post matriculation qualification although the entire programme was designed, developed and facilitated by the Workers' College.

There were four diploma streams that activists could choose from: labour studies, labour economics, gender and labour studies, and political and social development. Each of these diplomas was developed incorporating fundamental elements such as the practical application of theory to realities confronted by participants, the sharing of their experiences in struggle by participants, the development of critical thinking, and the exposure to varied schools of left-wing perspectives. Raising consciousness was the cornerstone of the design, with the intention of ensuring that participants were aware of many debates, realities and issues that pertained to the specific diploma that they were doing. For example, if they chose the labour studies diploma, they would be exposed to an understanding of activism, a common module for all diplomas, an engagement with who and what was the working class, how trade unions were operating within the confines of a capitalist society, the challenges of worker participation and workplace democracy, how the law could be used as a tool for and against

the working class, and how structures of organisations could be more effective in engaging in struggles of the working class.

Another element was the facilitation of the modular programmes, with the explicit aim of drawing on the experiences of the participants as well as everyday realities that confronted them in their workplaces and communities. In a sense this was giving effect to the recognition of prior learning (RPL) but with the distinct intention of using this experience to advance the collective interests of the working class. This was done by exposing participants to activities such as readings, cartoons, videos, debates, songs, which were used in plenary sessions, group work, individual exercises, assignments, and field work. These activities were an attempt to get participants to try collectively to make sense of their experiences and realities, locating them in a broader political, socio-economic context, and examining alternatives and responses to them. Participation was on a horizontal basis, with everyone, including the facilitator, given equal recognition, respect and support. This was one of the many values that was adopted and encouraged through this education experience (Moodley et al 2016).

Other values, adopted by participants at the beginning of the education programme, included respect for each other, irrespective of political persuasion or organisational affiliation, gender equality, and collectivism. Information, knowledge and insights acquired through this process were examined critically. There was not *one* point of view but rather an exposure to different perspectives all of which were subjected to critical interrogation against the background of working class struggle, interests and values.

The education programme was seen as a process. The approach was adopted to allow the individual to gradually 'find' her/himself and to collectively locate themselves in ongoing struggles while determining what it was about, reflecting on their own strengths and weaknesses, and building their understanding and capacity, together with other participants. For this to work, there had to be an environment of openness, mutual respect, tolerance and a sense that this was a safe environment for all, without any hidden agendas, power struggles, biases, or the like. The hope was that this approach would be taken back to participants' own organisations to be shared, tested, and practiced.

All of these elements and values underpinning the education programme were captured in the Constitution of the Workers' College so that both the context and content of the education

was already decided upon and mandated. An extract of the preamble of the Constitution testifies to this:

> We, the participating trade union federations, trade unions and civic organisations, who constitute the Workers' College Council, hereby declare our commitment to the working class struggle to build egalitarian values and horizontal participatory and democratic traditions and processes in education and in the broader socio-political arena.
>
> The dominant education discourse and practices serve to entrench social stratification and maintain the capitalist class structure that is driven by greed, individualism, crass materialism and the commodification of life.
>
> Therefore, the Workers' College sees itself as part of the counter hegemony to the dominant capitalist systems and structures, in pursuit of a working class agenda. (Workers' College 1993)

The Labour Resource and Research Institute in Namibia

At the time of independence in 1990, Namibia's labour movement had no coherent ideology beyond the support for national liberation and anti-racism. The organisational culture at the time was fairly egalitarian, with union leaders (including general secretaries) basically living in similar conditions to their membership and personally experiencing repression and harassment

After independence, worker education became more institutionalised with some unions as well as the NUNW establishing their own education departments. Various donors entered the field and sponsored union workshops. This era was characterised by political demobilisation, with key union leaders joining government and the role of trade unions confined to a tripartite arrangement. Similar to South Africa, this general trend also affected the type of worker education offered: emphasis shifted from political intervention and mass mobilisation (after all, 'our own comrades' were now in power) towards preparing workers and their unions for their role as social partners in a tripartite setting. While some education programmes still focused on policy issues like the land question and a living wage, union education focused more and more on 'practical issues' like the Labour Act and collective bargaining. There were virtually no other organisations involved in workers' education.

Post-independence, Namibian worker education thus did not focus primarily on worker power and worker control but rather on equipping workers and their unions with the knowledge needed to play their tripartite role more effectively. This also meant that the workshops were increasingly facilitated by 'experts' who were often flown in from South Africa to facilitate union workshops. Some were drawn from Namibian organisations that had nothing to do with the labour movement.

The trend in workers' education only began to change with the establishment of the union-based Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) in 1998. Although its key focus was research, LaRRI soon realised that the research work had to be complemented by an education programme to build the internal capacity of trade unions to engage with organisational and broader policy challenges. Following discussions with the Workers' College and with various Namibian unions, LaRRI decided in 2002 to follow in the footsteps of the College and to introduce a similar modular worker education programme, which became known as the labour diploma course (Jauch 2013).

The Workers' College provided support in terms of materials and advice on the structure of the course as well as accreditation. The University of KwaZulu-Natal conducted the external moderation. The programme's main aim was to broaden the limited worker education that consisted of short-term on-the-job training at various workplaces and of short workshops offered by Namibian trade unions to their members. These initiatives had focused rather narrowly on specific skills and topics and LaRRI thus sought to broaden the scope and improve the quality of worker education programmes in terms of conscientisation.

The new course thus combined knowledge acquisition and analytical skills as well as political education and critical thinking amongst workers, union leaders and officials. The course served to prepare workers and trade unionists for leadership positions at various levels, ranging from shop stewards to branch and national union structures. The course offered modules on trade union history and development as well as modules on political economy, labour law and globalisation.

Most importantly, it provided a platform for critical debate. Despite the adoption of a liberal constitution and representative democracy after independence, a restrictive political climate continued to prevail in many organisations, including trade unions. Critical debate had been

seen as ‘subversive’ in many of Namibia’s political organisations and the open contestation of ideas was hardly encouraged (Jauch 2013). This politically repressive climate that existed inside Namibia in the 1980s and the hierarchical political structure inside the SWAPO camps in exile which were shaped by a military struggle, created little space for open debate. This also aided abuses of power.

A critical aspect of the modular course was thus to create a space for open engagement. Instead of being bound by trade union positions and political directives, the worker-students were encouraged to debate freely and to substantiate their arguments, based on readings, research and their own experiences. They obtained their course marks not on the basis of the views they held but on the basis of the quality of their argument. This enabled them to explore issues and to express views on issues that were not openly discussed in their unions and in society in general.

Another important aspect was that the course broke workers’ fear of tertiary education. Especially older workers suffered the effects of colonial apartheid education and were never afforded the possibility to pursue further studies. LaRRI’s modular course thus provided the first opportunity for many of them to participate in a programme of higher learning. LaRRI also tried to ensure equal gender representation by reserving for women up to 50% of all places available (Jauch 2013).

The course’s overall aim was to strengthen the participants' ability to contribute to the building of a stronger, more conscious labour movement and the course contents tried to combine aspects that were identified as critical for trade unionists today. These included the history of the labour movement, the relationship between unions and politics, the question of worker control, gender equality, labour law, economic policy options etc. A central and cross-cutting issue was social and economic justice which is a global challenge in the face of a crisis-ridden global capitalist system that continuously widens inequality and results in mass unemployment and poverty. Understanding why this is happening globally and what possible remedies and alternatives would be seen as critical for trade unionists. Thus, the ideas and ideals associated with socialism and case studies such as Venezuela’s ‘Socialism of the 21st Century’ and the proposals contained in Alternatives to Neoliberalism in Southern Africa (ANSA) formed part of the course (Jauch 2013).

In addition to the six course modules, LaRRI also offered its worker-students supplementary courses to enhance very practical skills, such as English writing skills and computer skills. The course facilitators were drawn from various organisations, based on their particular areas of expertise. Half of them were former trade unionists and the others were drawn from the University of Namibia (UNAM) or from amongst the LaRRI staff (Jauch 2013).

We will now examine the experiences with the diploma programme against the background of the political climate of the 1990s and the years that followed. A particular focus will be on the challenges that a dominant neoliberal economic environment posed for radical worker education initiatives.

Worker education in the post-independence/apartheid era

The biggest challenge for any trade union formation is the way it navigates its way through capitalist enterprises and a system of industrial relations that draws it into the 'belly of the beast'. This was evident in both South Africa and Namibia from the 1990s onwards. Working class organisations like trade unions had to determine their identity, their ideological path and the way they engaged capital and the state in advancing working class rights and interests, attempting to build a new hegemony. South Africa's labour movement in the 1980s and early 1990s was steeped in a political orientation which saw the fight of the working class as essentially a political fight to overthrow the apartheid state, and within that fight was contained the rights and interests of the working class. The notion of a socialist state was spoken and sung about but it never materialised into concrete practice. The norms and ethics of trade union organisation were that workers were part of a collective both in consciousness and in practice, and that there was a semblance of equality, of sharing, of being equals in the struggle for liberation.

This changed after the achievement of political democracy in the 1990s and the onslaught of neoliberal globalisation with its emphasis on individual achievements. Buhlungu (2010) provides a coherent account of how broader developments impacted on the South African labour movement, particularly COSATU. Within trade unions, a compartmentalisation of activities occurred which resulted in a specialisation and division of activities which did not link, connect or inform each other.

Political worker education that was critical of the global and national economic and political agenda and that aimed to expose how states were subjected to, and complied with, the dictates of predatory, neo-liberal, global capitalism was not a priority. As trade unions became more hierarchical and bureaucratic, they were caught in contradictory processes and practices. The institutionalisation of trade unionism resulted in a mass based labour movement becoming a mere participant in the co-determination of how capitalism can work better. This was couched in terms of 'rebuilding the country', and despite the occasional radical rhetoric and instances of political posturing, trade unions increasingly tended to accommodate the neo-liberal, industrial relations paradigm that was the order of the day. This is evidenced by the development of a social distance between union leaders and members, contradictory political alliances, trade unions investment companies, careerism, power struggles, democratic centralism, and the emergence of strict hierarchies within trade unions (Buhlungu 2010).

In the face of these new post-apartheid realities, education that maintained its radical, revolutionary, socialist content, and that advanced a critical discourse that challenged the capitalist order and those who were becoming comfortable with it, became a problem not only for the ruling elites but also for large parts of the trade union leadership. Education that contained dogma, mantras, slogans and blind support for the status quo of socio-economic realities, became the education that was touted by the centralised leadership. This was highlighted when, South African unions linked to the political alliance with the ruling party and who were also associated with the police and mining companies objected to Workers' College education material that related to the Marikana massacre and the complicity of the State and its security apparatus in the massacre.

South Africa's political democracy ushered in a sense that the country must be re-built (an almost Marshall plan ethos), that skilled and seasoned trade unionists should contribute their services to build democracy by being deployed to serve the government and to build a new state; that trade unions should embrace social-democratic 'worker participation' models, and that the industrial relations institutions such as the bargaining councils, CCMA, NEDLAC, SETAs, needed to be strengthened. This contributed to a shift of worker education away from political education towards more functional worker education to equip mostly shop stewards, union officials and leaders to play their roles within the tri-partite structures.

Thus, building political consciousness became marginalised within most worker education programmes which were now focusing on skills development as determined by the new political and industrial relations paradigm. This left workers and shop stewards ill-equipped to deal with the neoliberal onslaught at the shop floor as expressed in outsourcing, subcontracting and other forms of 'job flexibility'. In addition, the emerging gap between union leaders and members, as well as the contradictions between the reconstruction discourse and the lived reality of most workers, created tensions within and amongst unions resulting in a fear by some union leaders of being called to account to their membership. Such leaders also had no interest in promoting critical thinking and political workers education. In a way, keeping workers uninformed helped to control them.

The introduction of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and the establishment of Skills Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) were part of the process of directing worker education towards skills development with certification or credits promising the prospects of better earnings and employability. RPL can certainly be seen as a progressive step as it offers self-affirmation and recognition of indigenous and struggle knowledge and skill, promising to put them on a par with 'formal skills and knowledge' and offering the same 'value' in the labour market. However, the experiences in South Africa have shown that 'red tape' bureaucratic formality makes this impossible. For example, the Workers' College worked with various tertiary institutions and attempted to get the College registered as an institution for public learning. The legal provisions and bureaucratic requirements provided no room for this type of learning space and neither universities nor SETAs catered creatively for RPL.

The Labour Resource and Research Institute's experiences in Namibia showed that the commodification of education generally, and the instrumentalisation of education as a tool for career advancement had a direct impact on worker education. Alongside a general move from collective interests towards individual advancement, worker education was increasingly seen by workers themselves not only as a tool to improve the union and collective challenges but also as a tool for personal career advancement, either in the union or at the workplace. The sense of collective struggle was gradually replaced by the motivation for career advancement. This became very clear in the process of accrediting LaRRI's modular labour studies course with the National Qualifications Authority (NQA) in Namibia. The course was valued by workers not only because of its contents and relevance for the labour movement, but also because the accreditation offered possibilities for further studies and promotions at work as

well as possible key leadership positions in the unions. Notions of collective struggle and worker control were increasingly regarded as coming from another era and the new ethos was most crudely exemplified by statements such as ‘we did not struggle to remain poor’. Thus the post-independence era witnessed a delinking of workers’ education and mass mobilisation and a shift towards more hierarchical forms of organisation that focused on national leadership and tripartite engagement.

The Labour Resource and Research Institute’s modular course was an attempt to counter this trend and to create an emancipatory workers’ education programme. The course’s impact can therefore not simply be measured by the number of graduates or by the evaluation of the course undertaken by the participants themselves. These evaluations may attest to the popularity of the course but do not answer the question of the course’s wider impact, namely how has the course contributed to a strengthening of the labour movement and its capacity to articulate and promote the interests of the working class and the poor? In what ways has the course enabled the worker-students to make a difference in terms of social progress and transformation? (Jauch 2013)

These questions are difficult to answer but point to the crux of the matter. While the course has been described as an ‘eye-opener’ by many of the worker-students, it has not been able to prevent the further decline of Namibia’s labour movement which is highly divided and weakened and struggles to address socio-economic injustices. We thus need to ask in what ways can political worker education help to reverse this trend and how can these ways be embedded in an organising and mobilisation strategy? What needs to be done to support the worker-students to bring about the necessary changes in their organisations and in society? Some tentative answers to these questions are suggested in the following section.

The way forward?

The specific aim of maintaining a type of worker education programme that focuses on critical thinking, questioning existing hierarchies and vested interests, and envisaging a fundamentally different future society, invariably clashes with the general political and economic trends in southern Africa. Thus it is hardly surprising that unlike the cases of the Workers’ College and LaRRI described above, most of the mainstream worker education programmes, even within trade unions, tend to focus on either particular skills or specific topics that are important for particular union functions such as collective bargaining.

Given the general societal orientation towards individual advancement or elite-driven initiatives such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) Programmes as opposed to class-based redistributive changes, the type of political worker education that existed in the 1970s and 1980s became increasingly rare and its relevance was questioned even within the labour movement.

The modular courses introduced by the Workers' College and by LaRRI attempted to counter this trend to some extent by providing a platform for the expression of critical ideas without subjecting them to any form of 'organisational discipline'. However, this has not translated into organisational change which would require a more systematic and deliberate intervention. Such an intervention has proved very difficult for participants in the Workers' College and LaRRI courses to effect. When confronted with traditional and hierarchical, often patriarchal practices and structures, these students were seen as 'trouble makers' and at times, the organisations providing the courses, were viewed with suspicion. Thus, course participants had to face the dilemma of either adjusting to the existing environment within their unions or challenging it at the risk of being marginalised. There are also indications that some of the radical education programmes of these two organisations are being changed with a greater focus on accreditation, skills formation and career advancement.

There is no doubt that if trade unions want to be agents for social change and transformation, then union education must be political and radical in order to contribute towards improving workers' lives and to transforming society in general, including consciousness and values. The envisaged role that unions are willing and able to play has a direct impact on the kind of workers' education that will be offered and the impact that it can have. The kind of modular courses developed by the Workers' College and LaRRI will be shaped by the organisational and ideological outlook of working class organisations, particularly trade unions. Thus, education can take place in a 'sanitised' academic environment without making the slightest contribution to worker control, redistribution and transformation. The political interest underpinning worker education will determine to a large extent which form it will take.

The assimilation of Namibian and South African trade unions into the capitalist mode of production and the acceptance of the key values that underpin that system (see Klerck and Sycholt 1997) has had a direct impact on the shape and outlook of worker education programmes. The assimilation has not only affected union leaders but also the rank and file

members who are increasingly more interested in ‘practical courses’ rather than those that deal with broader political and socio-economic issues, including class contradictions.

Based on our experiences of the past 30 years, we have to note that radical or left education within the labour movement, and for that matter, within the working class organisations broadly, has been erratic to say the least. Whilst there have been organisations that have advanced this type of education, the energies and resources of the trade unions have focused primarily on organising and negotiating. We have to ask ourselves why the various initiatives to promote radical working-class education have not succeeded in bringing about fundamental social change. Was this education too erratic and inconsistent? Was it embraced by the leadership or did it also become embellished in the sloganeering? Were the other influences such as the lure of power, prestige and money far greater than that of a commitment to the collective? Did the global change in left-wing politics of the late 1980s impact on its relevance? Did the assumption of political power and consequently, the running of a state apparatus, bureaucracy and machinery, demand an institutionalisation of struggle politics and formations?

We witnessed it unfold before our very eyes: first, the overwhelming belief that the democratic state would deliver the left project, and then the unravelling began. In South Africa, the scrapping of the reformist Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the deployment of trade union cadres who embraced a different politics, the very leadership of trade unions in the past now in government, denouncing socialist practices (which they themselves had passionately championed before) and advancing the trickle-down effect of fiscal discipline and market driven policies.

Conclusion

Broader forces and developments certainly countered and undermined the effectiveness of radical worker education programmes. The modular courses of the Workers’ College and LaRRI have provided merely a starting point for a reflection on the current contradictions and for exploring possible solutions from a working class perspective. Social change and substantive transformation, however, will only be achieved if radical worker education programmes are linked with new practices of organising and mobilisation in order to counter current trends, and to the building of a labour movement that is capable of bringing about

fundamental socio-economic changes. In the end, the struggle for political worker education is merely one site of the broader political and economic struggle.

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Notes

[1] Whilst LaRRI was predominantly a research organisation, it successfully incorporated education into its work as a natural outlet for its research work. The Workers' College, on the other hand, is an educational organisation which has attempted, at various stages of its history, to develop either a research unit or alternatively, designed research projects within its education programmes, as a form of action research.

[2] These were apartheid 'homeland leaders' or councillors of so-called Black Local Authorities.

[3] The 'Transitional Government of National Unity' comprised of various ethnic organisations which were willing to collaborate with the South African regime. It excluded the largest liberation movement - SWAPO - and gained no international recognition. Locally it was widely referred to as the 'puppet government'.