

# **Why Workers' Education? Why trade unions and what's next?**

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The working class – people dependent on wages, and lacking control over their work, including workers, their families, and the unemployed, including blue-collar, white-collar and pink-collar workers – has been widely dismissed by a range of political traditions. This dismissal can be seen everywhere, from journalists who blame uneducated workers for the rise of demagogues like Donald Trump, to conservative and centre-right parties who insist that trade unions – not capitalism – cause unemployment, to radicals who proclaim the death of the unions, or dismiss organised workers as a bribed ‘labour aristocracy’.

## **WORLD-CLASS WORKING CLASS**

But the working class has not gone anywhere. By 1998, there were more industrial workers in South Korea alone, than in the entire world when Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto (1848). Around that same period, there were, American labour analyst Kim Moody notes, almost a billion people unemployed or underemployed worldwide, part of a massive proletariat thrown up over the previous 40 years, the very period when the working class was being dismissed as declining. By 2004, the working class was the biggest class in history, reaching three billion, by some estimates, with the world’s population, for the first time, predominantly urban.

At the same time, the single most important organised formations of the working class, the trade unions, have been under relentless assault. Some of the pressures have been external: casualisation and outsourcing, industry closures and downsizing and relocation elsewhere, a massive ideological barrage, including within the media and the universities. Other forces have been internal, and include: union bureaucratisation, the incorporation of union leaderships into political parties, and through these, into the state, and a complete lack of progressive political direction and vision in many cases.

This is the context where the radical right, populists, demagogues and religious fundamentalists have surged forward, massively, poisoning public debate with racism, xenophobia and other bigotries, and where empty, failed or reactionary solutions have been on display.

## **UNIONS AS PROGRESSIVE FORCES**

Yet despite this, the working class and the unions – including new unions, independent unions and innovative types of unions – have remained key agents of progressive change. Recent examples include the July 2016 general strike in Zimbabwe, the massive battles on the mines, farms and campuses of South Africa, the huge strikes that were at the core the Egyptian Spring. The growing rumbles of China’s vast proletariat are already felt globally. And, as a recent collection by Manny Ness has shown, radical forms of unionism, drawing on left traditions like anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary syndicalism, and often centred in the postcolonial countries (the so-called ‘global south’) have been central to working-class insurgency. Although some leaders have betrayed workers, unions as a whole have not been co-opted, for the simple reason that, to survive, they must represent working-class aspirations and these aspirations cannot be met, or bought-off, under capitalism and the state. It has been through titanic struggles and heroic efforts that working-class people have fought against a social order based on injustice and inequity, on exploitation and oppression, and on burning national and social questions. The right

to life and dignity has never been conceded from above, through the largesse or the wisdom of the rich and powerful: it has been won from below. 'What is important is not that governments have decided to concede certain rights to the people,' wrote Rudolph Rocker in his 1938 book *Anarcho-syndicalism*, 'but the reason why they had to do this'. The reason, he showed, lay in popular struggle and direct action.

## **CENTRALITY OF ORGANISED WORKERS**

To build a better world requires building a stronger working class and building and renewing the unions. It means understanding the centrality of the working class (broadly understood – and not confined to factory workers in boots), and the centrality of the unions. Every gain that has been made, has been through struggle and courage and love.

It is the working class that can provide, through its power, its numbers, its social role, and the justness of its struggle, the central force to end the injustice and inequity, the exploitation and oppression, and answer the national and social questions with justice and equality and solidarity.

The working class, even where small, even where a minority, even where embattled, wields enormous structural power through its ability to organise workers, and the ability to withhold labour power from capital and the state. Historically and currently, unions have played and play a key role in championing many struggles against oppression. The workers' movement has never been one simply about higher wages – although, of course, it is essential for such movements that workers get higher wages. The organised working class – in particular the unions – has fought against colonialism, racism, state repression and capitalist domination.

## **DEEP CHANGE NOT ELITE TRANSITIONS**

Real transformation in society is needed to uproot exploitation, domination and oppression. This is not the same as changing the composition of elites. It requires a deep structural change – a radical redistribution of power and wealth to the popular classes. And this can only be brought about by powerful, democratic, mass movements, armed with ideas, vision and that have accumulated power and resources and experience over time.

Real freedom requires, in the final analysis, a new society, based on freedom and equality, on democracy – real democracy – where we live and work, not just through voting every five years. A universal human community, based on meeting needs, on ending inequality and oppression, based on self-management and freedom. Such a society can only be brought about by a class struggle: only the working class and peasantry have the numbers, power and class interest for its creation. This means that only class struggle provides the means to fight all forms of oppression in a way that truly emancipates ordinary people, rather than simply changing the colour, gender and nationality of politicians and capitalists.

## **IDEAS AND ACTION**

Seen this way, workers' education for the workers' movement – assumes a new significance. It is not about vocational training, but about building the power and progress and

potential of the broad working class, and the union movement, as a force for progressive change, as an ally and a spearhead of the oppressed, as a voice for the popular classes.

Of course, the working-class movement includes many views and different perspectives. But what needs to be understood by all is that union struggles, and workers' struggles, and movements cannot be neatly divided from political and social struggles, and should not be turned into narrow demands, or degenerate into top-down bureaucratic unionism.

Worker educators share a commitment to the working class: to worker organising, to unionisation, to resistance and struggle. A commitment to a better world, based on a radical democratisation of society, of freedom, social justice, and economic and social equality. A faith in the belief in the role of ordinary people in changing the world.

Central to this project is education and changing ideas. Building capacities for working class-driven transformation can take many forms. But at the end of the day, change and transformation starts with the individual. Self-transformation and development is essential. This means educating ourselves, through ideas and struggles and organising.

## **OPENING SPACES, BUILDING UNIONS**

Effective working-class movements need effective, democratic structures. But these also require open debate and political pluralism. Different views need to be expressed and debated, and positions taken as a result of evidence-based discussions, and comradely debate, rather than labelling, silencing and closure. This means we need to be open to different views, and open to changing our minds and develop a capacity for critical thinking and engagement, rather than the ability to mouth slogans.

It is important in education to debate different views, develop our understanding of how the system of capitalism, the state and imperialism works and to have evidence-based reasoned evaluation of different theoretical perspectives. This means developing critical thinking, rather than narrow ideological training. Different ideologies need to be debated and weighed up. It means not only to accumulate knowledge but also the ability to manage knowledge, evaluate arguments and engage in big ideas, or theory.

It means changing our attitudes and our relations with one another. Change starts with individuals. That means a need to fight for equality, not just in theory, but changing how we treat each other and fight to ensure that society treats all members equally. Understanding how we act and organise now, must mirror the future, and the better society we want. This means that we need to fight oppression and discrimination within our movements, such as prejudices against women, and racism.

It is precisely here that many unions fail. Debates are closed down. Education assumes a low priority and often skirts the big issues. It is rarely adequately funded in unions, and limps along. Employers try and capture the space of workers' education with vocational programmes. Union leaders are often not made of hard metal, that can withstand temptation, but of lead – soft under pressure, and slow and heavy.

## **INTERNATIONALISM AND PERSPECTIVES**

The working class cannot be united unless it fights against its internal divisions and barriers. It cannot be successful, unless it mobilises to fight against all forms of oppression in society, and that includes fighting for national liberation, racial equality and women's freedom.

People are not the prisoners of the past. We can change our attitudes and views. The spaces for these changes include union movements, working-class movements, and labour education. These spaces make change possible, but they need to be contested, remade and changed, in order to meet their true potential.

We need to share experiences, learn from each other and from best practices. This also means internationalism: learning from and about different contexts and models. In this way we share. But we also start to understand what we have in common, as working-class people, across regions, continents, colours, languages and borders.

We need to rise above divisions, network and build alliances, create spaces and forums and institutions for debate and education, empower our minds and movements. The reality is that workers who are so-called 'foreigners' have more in common with 'national' workers, than any capitalist from our own countries. Donald Trump may rail against immigrants, as may King Goodwill Zwelithini, but what has either ever done for 'their' own workers?

## **RADICAL IMAGINATION**

Class-based organisation provides a powerful lever to change the world, unite the people, the popular classes, to resist the ruling 1%, to fight against all forms of oppression, and to change the world. Not just one country. The world. Our world. We need a radical imagination, staying power and a deep, abiding faith in the mass of the people.

To fight and win, and, in the words of a great revolutionary, Nestor Makhno, to win, but not 'in order to repeat the errors of the past years, the error of putting our fate into the hands of new masters; we will conquer in order to take our destinies into our own hands, to conduct our lives in accordance with our own will and our own conception'. Lucien van der Walt teaches at Rhodes University, Makana, South Africa, and has long been involved in workers' education. This article is based on a presentation at the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Global Labour University (GLU), at the University of the Witwatersrand in May 2016.

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