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Workers' Education and Political consciousness: A Case Study from South Africa

Linda Cooper*

Centre for Higher Education Development at the University of Cape Town.

Abstract

This article poses the question, who or what 'teaches' workers political consciousness? It argues that this question cannot be answered in the abstract, but must be located in historical context. Drawing on a case study of a South African local government trade union, it argues that radical education traditions within the labour movement remain, although the trade union movement has lost much of the militancy that characterised its early years, and its education work has been weakened and compromised. The case study union's education programmes are ideologically directive and transformative in intent. Radical learning does not only take place in these organised spaces, however; members' participation in ongoing union activities develops their political understanding and working class identity, while moments of mass action 'teach' workers not only about tactics, but also about political and economic power.

Introduction

Some of the most enduring debates within worker education have revolved around the question, who or what 'teaches' workers? What is the relationship between knowledge which workers gain through their own experience, and that brought by worker leaders, intellectuals or educators? What is the role of the worker educator: to promote a political perspective, or to remain ideologically neutral? These questions have been echoed in many different ways in the literature on popular and radical education. Freire's early writings (Freire 1972, 1974 and 1984) foregrounded the experiences of participants and allocated a 'facilitative' role to the adult educator; later however, in responding to critics who maintained that his early writings failed to address power relations between the educator and learner, he argued that the facilitator cannot be other

than ideologically directive, and has a 'dialogical duty' to teach rather than merely 'facilitate' (Freire & Macado 1995). But how, practically and pedagogically, can the educator be at the same time both 'directive' and 'dialogical'?

In a wide-ranging study of popular education in Latin America, Liam Kane (2001: 155) agrees that the 'essence of popular education is that it cannot be neutral'. He argues, however, that:

... herein lies the contradictory role of the popular educator. On the one hand, educators aim to encourage independent critical thinking; on the other, in the midst of a collective investigation into the best way to bring about change, they will endeavour, naturally, to recruit people to their own particular point of view (Kane 2001: 162).

This debate in the popular education movement about the relationship between teacher and learner, like the debate over the roles of leaders and 'shop-floor' activists amongst those seeking sources of union renewal, tends to hark back to classic disagreements over the role of the 'vanguard party', often symbolised by a misleading counterposing of the thought of Lenin and Gramsci. John Holst (1999) critiques those within 'popular education', as well as social democrats more generally, for 'blunting' the fact that Gramsci shared Lenin's view that:

... it was the vanguard party that could overcome the limits of spontaneity; could form alliances with other organisations and classes without losing its revolutionary perspective ... and could overcome bourgeois hegemony (Holst 1999: 410).

Holst argues that Lenin's position did not take agency away from the working class, nor did Lenin doubt the capacity of the working class to provide its own leadership and play an active role in the development of the party's ideology. However he maintains that Lenin viewed 'professional revolutionaries' — whether workers or intellectuals — as playing a key role in educating the working class and leading its struggle for emancipation. Holst argues that Gramsci too foregrounded the role of an elite of intellectuals (both 'organic' and 'traditional'), stressing the limits of 'spontaneity' and holding that socialist consciousness comes from 'without' the working class.

The purpose of this article is to explore the possibility of a dialogic relationship between ordinary workers on the one hand, and union leaders and radical adult educators on the other. My own experience of, and research on, the labour movement in South Africa suggests that the issue of the process of working class political education cannot be resolved in the abstract. The limits and possibilities of the role of political worker educators or intellectuals are set by history and historical context. This is explored in more detail through a case study of a South African local government trade union. The case study provides instances of the roles, both of union educators, and of workers participating in workplace and mass activism, in creating class consciousness. First, however, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the shifting character of the South African labour movement over the past two decades, and its impact on worker education.

South African Trade Union History: Education as a ‘Mirror’ of Politics?

The South African trade union movement today faces a dramatically changed terrain compared with twenty years ago. During the 1980s the non-racial trade union movement was perhaps the single most important organised force of internal political resistance. The popular struggle against apartheid of the 1980s saw the increasing political radicalisation of organised workers, widespread mass action, and a growing mood of political insurrection. The key principles underpinning trade union education mirrored this militant mood and political consciousness. For example, shortly after its formation in 1985, the first General Secretary of Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu)¹ argued that worker education should:

... build worker control, collective experience and understanding, deepening working class consciousness. Education should ensure fullest discussion amongst workers thus building democracy. Education is a weapon for shaping mass struggles of the present and the future of our class (Cosatu 1986).

In the 1980s, trade union education programmes proliferated and became increasingly planned and structured. The education focused mainly on practical areas such as wage negotiations and disciplinary procedures, but courses were also developed dealing with broader political education, labour history, labour law, political economy and international trade unionism (Cooper et al. 2002). This was a period of intellectual revival which generated in workers a ‘hunger’ for new knowledge (Grossman 1995). A wide range of literature emerged, aimed at a worker readership, including trade union newspapers, pamphlets and calendars, and a range of booklets celebrating or commemorating working class experience (see for example Barret 1985; Tom 1985). There also emerged a vibrant working class cultural movement: through music, drama, choirs and the adaptation of historic cultural forms such as praise poems, ordinary trade union members gave expression to their experiences of exploitation and oppression, and reached out to a wide range of unorganised workers and working class communities (Sitas 1986).

Since the early 1990s, however, the broader economic, social and political environment in South Africa has undergone dramatic changes, with far-reaching implications for the labour movement — and worker educators. The labour movement has shifted its role from opponent of the apartheid state, towards the goal of ‘equal partner’ with the new African National Congress (ANC) government. While Cosatu’s stated policies have remained committed to socialist transformation, trade unionists have become involved in national, tripartite forums debating economic policies and participating in the development of new institutional frameworks. Despite the ANC government’s commitment to ‘national democratic revolution’, its economic policies have been dominated by neo-liberal thinking, and oriented towards prioritising international competitiveness and attracting foreign investment. Its tight fiscal policies have been accompanied by cuts in public expenditure, privatisation, deregulation and moves towards the creation of more flexible labour markets.²

While the post-apartheid era has brought previously unimaginable new rights to South African workers,³ these economic policies and South Africa's re-integration into the global economy have presented new problems and challenges for the labour movement. Over the past fifteen years, trade union organisation has been significantly weakened by retrenchments, outsourcing, subcontracting and privatisation. The labour movement's internal membership profile has shifted notably: the contraction of the mining and manufacturing industries has seen a decline in the blue-collar membership that constituted the heart of the trade union movement in the 1970s and 1980s, and the growth of white-collar membership (teachers, other professionals and members of the public service) — many of whom had no organisational or political involvement in the struggles of the 1980s (Baskin 1996). Unions have also been weakened by the movement of consecutive layers of leadership into government or business, and there has been a decline in trade unions' participatory, democratic culture and a growing ethos of individualism and individual upward mobility (Buhlungu 2000; von Holdt 2003).

All these factors have impacted on trade union education in a number of ways. With the flow of unionists into government and business, trade union education has become increasingly focused on leadership training rather than mass-based education. Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing pressure for greater knowledge specialisation within the unions and greater reliance on specialised expertise from outside the union movement. Unions have put increased emphasis on larger, more structured, co-ordinated and institutionalised education programmes. Yet, despite all this investment of resources and attempts at greater coherence, repeated surveys have shown that the 'education capacity' of trade unions has — if anything — continued to decline (Dit-sela 1997 and 1998).

From the early 1990s onwards, labour representatives became actively involved in the development of new education and training policies and a new skills development institutional framework. Cosatu's education and training policies for the new South Africa incorporated demands for 'lifelong learning', 'horizontal and vertical mobility', 'career pathing', and 'Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)', in order to enhance workers' access to workplace training, recognise their skills and address the legacy of a racially-based labour market (Bird 1990). All of these notions, however, drew on 'global market' discourses of worker education and training, and around the building of a new education and training system there was a remarkable (even unprecedented) degree of consensus between capital and labour.

The new language of industry training has also influenced the union movement's thinking about its own education programmes. There have been increasing demands over the past decade for formal certification of union education (including shop-steward training), for 'career-pathing' and professionalisation of union officials, and for the systematisation and institutionalisation of trade union education. Over the past decade, new education and training policies have led to the privatisation and commercialisation of post-compulsory education and training: education has itself become 'big business'. This has

also impacted upon trade union education, as evidenced by the growing number of unions that have begun to contract out their shop-steward and other training to private providers who have no commitment to the historic political vision of the labour movement in South Africa (Cooper 2002).

This brief review of changing social, political and economic conditions in South Africa since 1990, and corresponding changes in the trade union movement and its education policies and programmes might create the impression that worker education is simply a 'mirror' of the politics of the labour movement, and cast doubt on whether worker educators with roots in the radical education tradition have any power to reshape workers' political consciousness. However, a closer look at one particular case study of a South African trade union shows that radical traditions remain, although not always in very visible, organised forms.

A Case Study of a South African Local Government Union

The union in question is the Cape Town branch of the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU), a local government affiliate of Cosatu. It remains one of Cosatu's largest affiliates, despite a decline in membership in recent years. Continued militancy amongst its members has expressed itself in two national strikes, and a large number of more local protest actions in the period between 1993 and 2003 (ILRIG 2000; SAMWU n.d.). Many factors have acted to galvanise union members into action:

- Post-apartheid restructuring of local government, leading to a drastic reduction in numbers of municipalities, and confusion and job insecurity amongst workers (ILRIG 2000; SAMWU 2003b);
- Policies of privatisation and outsourcing of municipal services, leading to significant membership loss for unions (SAMWU 2003a);⁴
- Initial improvements in wage levels in the 1990s, followed by more constrained wage settlements since 2000 (SAMWU 2003b) and pressure on the union to settle for three-year agreements;
- Attacks on the union's organisational rights, and hostility from employers (McDonald & Smith 2002);⁵
- The particularly bitter tone assumed by the union's clashes with local government, because many local government representatives with whom the union has to negotiate are ex-trade unionists or ex-political activists from the liberation movement.

The larger research project on which this article is based was aimed at documenting, analysing and theorising the ways in which knowledge is produced and disseminated within the trade union context, as experienced by the workers who constitute the trade union's membership (Cooper 2005). Data were gathered through ethnographic observation of union activities and events spread over a two year period (February 2001 to February 2003) and these were complemented by data from in-depth individual and focus group interviews. In the course of analysing the data, three discrete data sets emerged, each linked to a specific organisational setting, and bearing dis-

tinct pedagogic features: (a) the union's organising but non-certificated education programmes; (b) sites of everyday organisational involvement, including meetings, organising and negotiating with management; and (c) the context of workers' mass action (Cooper 2005).

Radical Trade Union Pedagogy

SAMWU's organised education programmes are relatively substantial in scale. They include Foundation Shop-Steward Training and a range of 'special issue' courses on areas such as health, safety and environment, political economy, collective bargaining, labour law, workplace education and training, gender studies, organisational management and union finances (SAMWU 1996, 2002).

SAMWU's education programmes are aimed at transferring skills as well as building collective identity and trade union consciousness, and ultimately, at the 'building of working class power' (SAMWU 1996: 6). The union's policy documents and the actual design of its programmes reflect a 'learner centred' approach and foreground group work and learning activities. Its education materials are based on a radical humanist approach to education which emphasises that the facilitator must 'encourage democracy and be non-directive', be as 'invisible' as possible, and 'ensure an equal power relationship between all the participants and the facilitator' (SAMWU 2003c).

In practice, however, this union's education work is far from 'facilitative' or 'invisible', and takes the form of traditional, didactic styles of teaching, which are ideologically partisan and politically directive. For example, in one shop-steward training programme which I observed, participants were first asked to debate in small groups the question: 'Why does management have power?' The education officer took report-backs from the groups, and then followed this with the 'union's' position: she explained by means of a diagram — a triangle — the existence of classes under capitalism, and presented a materialist explanation of the political and ideological power of the capitalist state. She argued that the current South African state is complex in terms of its class composition: although it is led by the ANC — a party that was historically a popular liberation movement — local government is increasingly acting like 'a private company'. She concluded that strikes and stoppages and the union itself are the weapons of workers in their struggle against the power of the capitalists, and socialism is the long-term goal of workers' struggles.

In union education programmes, many group activities draw on workers' experiences, but they have clearly pre-determined and explicitly-stated outcomes. For example, the exercise described above was accompanied by 'facilitator notes' that read: 'You will get a range of responses. Through an input you need to consolidate these responses so that some of the key points emerge ...' (SAMWU 2003: 14). The notes go on to outline the key points the education officer covered in her input. Elsewhere, in an activity on how shop-stewards represent workers' interests in the workplace, the facilitator is advised:

There are a number of key points that need to be made during this session. You can make some of the points through an input, and you

can make some of them through activities. The best would be to use a combination of inputs, activities, and summarising key points after the activities, to make sure the important points are made (SAMWU 2003: 36).

Another workshop involved a debate around a conflict taking place at that time between Cosatu and its alliance partners around accusations of 'ultra-leftism' made by prominent ANC leaders against Cosatu unions. The General Secretary of the union presented an input criticising the way in which political 'labelling' is being used to stifle open debate. He drew on the classic Marxist literature of Engels and Lenin to put forward his view on the difference between an ultra-left, 'no compromise' position on the one hand and a left-wing position of critical engagement on the other. Therefore, while the union's education policies espouse a commitment to a 'learner-centred' approach that foregrounds critical reflection on experience, in practice, union education is aimed at recruiting members to a class-based identity, and transmits a powerful and explicit working class view of the world which challenges hegemonic power.

Historical studies of worker education in South Africa suggest that politically 'directive' forms of pedagogy have been a constant feature of worker education in South Africa dating back to the early years of the twentieth century and the beginning of trade union and left wing political organisation (Bird 1984; Szucs n.d.; Freidman 1987; Ginsberg 1997; Andrews 2003). These forms of political education played a key role in developing a vision that went beyond the immediate 'bread and butter' issues of trade unionism, and sought to challenge the very existence of apartheid capitalism in South Africa.

On the other hand, a look at the history of the labour movement in South Africa suggests that these more visible, formally organised education activities have simply been an adjunct to far more significant processes of learning and teaching which takes place through day-to-day organisational experience and through worker mass action. Continuing with the SAMWU case study, the next two sections consider the pedagogic and learning dimensions of workers' routine forms of participation in the organisation (mainly in meetings), and their experiences of learning during the course of a major, national strike of their union.

Learning Through Routine Organisational Participation

Welton has argued that workers' education needs to be seen as a dimension of workers' culture and politics, and that there are therefore 'notorious difficulties in delineating the boundaries of worker education' (1991: 25). These boundaries need to be drawn, he argues so that we can study both 'labour's schools' and 'schools of labour'. Whereas 'labour's schools' are

... those spaces that workers themselves, their leaders or sympathetic pedagogues open up for reflection on the meaning of their work and culture', 'schools of labour' are the socially-organised workplaces where important technical, social, political and ideological experiential learning occurs (Welton 1991: 25)⁶.

A number of union activists interviewed related stories of how their experiences in the workplace had a deeply politicising effect. For example, one shop-steward described how he had started working for the City Council in 1977 in 'an extremely oppressive depot'. As a new union member, he decided to confront the manager, and entered the manager's office carrying a copy of the union's training manual, with its red cover and union logo. The manager was 'rude and aggressive'; after the worker had been forced to stand waiting on his feet for some time, the manager demanded to know what he wanted:

(He was) like, very rude. And I said, 'I've got some grievances that the workers have given me to address. He said, 'Sit down', and I sat down. I was petrified, you know, at the time ... because I hadn't undergone any training ... And I — when I put the file down on the desk and I looked up at him, his lip was quivering away. Then I thought: 'Here am I all scared, and look at this guy, I mean he's really crapping himself!' He couldn't take his eyes off the red file ... And I opened it, you know! I just had that ... tool in my hand, you know ... And I thought, 'Look at this guy: he's scared out of his wits! This union must be strong', you know. And of course it was little things like that, that gave me the strength to challenge them ...

'Armed' with the symbolic power of the union (in the form of his red training manual), this worker took action for the first time in support of his fellow workers, and the self-confidence he gained from the success of this action led subsequently to his becoming a shop-steward and a leading activist in the union.

The union is not usually regarded as a workplace in a traditional sense, but it may also be regarded as a 'school of labour'. The most common form of 'work activity' engaged in by union members in SAMWU are meetings. There is a range of forums in SAMWU in which workers participate and take collective decisions, from general meetings of union members in their municipal work depots, through meetings of shop-stewards who represent workers of a particular sector (such as electricity, water or waste management), to meetings of shop-stewards who represent their constituencies at the branch or regional level of the union. Worker representatives also participate in meetings with management and in bargaining forums with employer groupings. The primary purpose of union meetings is to take collective decisions rather than to carry out education; nevertheless meetings are educational in that they facilitate information-sharing amongst members, help to develop common perspectives, and contribute to the renewal of leadership capacity at a time when worker leaders are constantly being siphoned off into positions of greater responsibility within the union or, increasingly, into management or government.

In union meetings, learning may be seen as taking place through 'participation in a community of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991). This participation may take the form of simply being present, listening and observing, with 'old-timers' modelling the roles and values that 'newcomers' are expected to acquire. For example, one shop-steward recalled in an interview how, when

he first joined the union, he learnt from observing the general Secretary in meetings:

He never taught me ... but I used to watch him very closely, you know ... His style, and the manner in which he speaks, and the manner in which he treats people, and all of those things ...

Participation also takes more active forms. One shop-steward who had been involved in the union's Women's Forum emphasised the value of what she learnt from participating in meetings of this structure:

We really learnt a lot there ... The women in the Women's Forum developed to the extent that they could open up their mouths and challenge the men ... For me, in terms of not getting formal training within the union, a lot of my training I got through the Forum.

When asked what she had learned from her involvement in meetings of this structure, she described how it taught her not only practical skills, but also general, analytical skills as well as broader dispositions:

Public speaking ... the ability to read and analyse documents ... the ability to be able to develop policy ... Debate, develop positions ... Chairing meetings ... Also the practical skills, listening skills, learning to listen to others ... It taught me that you've got to do your research, you've got to prepare, then you'll be able to speak to people at whatever level ... or whatever qualification you have ... And then the ability to guide others and give direction. So quite a lot of things ...

While much learning takes place invisibly or unconsciously through observation or participation, there are also forms of pedagogy — more specifically peer mentoring or 'guided participation' (Rogoff 1995) — going on in the day-to-day life of the union. Some shop-stewards have union leaders acting as their mentors (deliberately or unconsciously) but often, it is ordinary workers and shop-stewards who play reciprocal peer-mentoring roles for one another. The brief extract below, taken from a dialogue in one shop-steward council meeting, illustrates how more experienced shop-stewards assist newer, less experienced colleagues to interrogate, analyse and conceptualise their experiences. The meeting had been discussing a report from the branch's Health and Safety committee, and the issue of privatisation was mentioned. One shop-steward could not see the connection:

Ss1: What is the link between privatisation and Health, Safety and Environment?

Ss2 (Health and Safety representative): They are using every excuse to get rid of our people — so when a shop-steward has an injury — suddenly documents disappear; next thing, he's retrenched ...

Ss3 (Chairperson): Members who've been injured on duty are first to lose their jobs with privatisation.

The peer mentoring that goes on in meetings is not only conceptual, but also political. In another meeting, a senior shop-steward presented a report on the restructuring of local government. He drew links among a wide range of

issues: restructuring, corporatisation and privatisation, equity issues, questions of service delivery, and retrenchments. Heated and lengthy debate ensued on how best to counter privatisation, and on the preparedness of union members to embark on mass action:

Ss1: Management is pushing with this privatisation – because they have this objective: at the end of office, they will buy into the private companies. We can't just sit here — we need to take this thing to the streets ... !

Ss2: What is the union doing? What is the leadership doing? SAMWU is affiliated to Cosatu — linked to ANC — how can they do this?

Ss3: To say, 'let us take this out to the streets' — we shop-stewards are in danger of being out there on our own — they don't want to support us there. The workers are not willing to go to the streets even for wages ...

Ss4: Yes, the weapons we have to use are changed ... We have new legislation — we need to use it — use the new laws ... Old tactics are no longer effective.

Ss1: I want to disagree ... We need to understand: it's not a matter of wages, it's a matter of life and death! We need to go out into the streets ... We need to make clear to our members ... this new legislation is bringing about privatisation. This is a matter of life and death! ... It's not an issue of how we use it [the law] — rather, how do we challenge it?

The trade union may therefore be seen as a community of practice (Ball 2003), where the process of participation in union activities, supported by forms of peer mentoring and modelling, inducts workers into their trade unionist roles and identities. Collective spaces offered by the union provide the workers with opportunities to share and compare experiences, develop new understandings and forge a common identity and political project. These collective learning spaces do not only comprise routine organisational processes, however, but also include those more singular moments in history when workers embark on mass action.

The Educative Role of Strike Action in The History of SAMWU

The predecessor of SAMWU — the Cape Town Municipal Workers' Association (CTMWA) — was founded in the 1920s. Unusually in the case of black trade unions in South Africa, the bulk of the union's membership was 'coloured' rather than 'African' workers,⁸ and the union was dominated throughout much of its history by an elitist, politically conservative leadership of more highly skilled workers. Rudin (1996) argues that the CTMWA's defining feature was that throughout its history, it never engaged its members in strike action. By the time the union joined the Cosatu in 1985,⁹ however, it had undergone a remarkable internal transformation.

There is evidence that the start of this transformation was brought about largely by the impact on municipal workers of mass action taken outside of the

union at the time. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a wave of struggles by 'coloured' working class communities and school students swept through Cape Town. There were also two major strikes where municipal workers in the CT-MWA were called upon to provide material and moral support (Rudin 1996, Chapter 5). These struggles acted as a catalyst for municipal workers, providing them with a model of how to take action, and giving them the confidence to do so. Workers' growing political consciousness led to the ousting of the 'old' layer of leadership, and a new, more radical and accountable leadership was pushed to the fore.

The growth in militancy amongst coloured municipal workers came to a head in June 1990 when an estimated ten thousand municipal workers from the Cape Town branch of SAMWU invaded the Civic Centre in what was to be their first ever, full-scale strike (SAMWU 1997: 24). The strike lasted for twelve days, and was hailed as an explosion of political consciousness and as 'shattering the image of a complacent coloured working class' (SAMWU n.d.). Salie Manie, a leading figure in the strike, recalls how participation in this action impacted on the consciousness of workers:

... the amazing thing out of that was that you would find that people who had never ever been involved in politics was shouting 'Viva ANC! Viva Cosatu', and the political slogans that they were shouting , and ... the posters that they made – their own posters — all reflected a radical shift in the consciousness, the political consciousness of the workers from where they were just before that and what happened to them during the period of the strike.

After the strike, workers had new confidence to confront management:

'... we really were working with our heads held high and our chests pushed out ...'

When, in 2003, SAMWU embarked on the biggest strike in South Africa since its first democratic election, I had the opportunity to observe at first hand the 'learning' dimensions of mass action. What struck me most was not simply that workers experienced the strike as a powerful learning experience ('Whatever else the strike was, it was a massive learning experience' according to one shop-steward), but that during the course of the strike, workers visibly assumed the role of 'collective educator'. On the placards waved high, the messages communicated to the general public had not only an economic but also a political intent:

- Phantsi¹⁰ managers and councillors eating themselves fat while the workers starve!
- Down with Gear¹¹ , Starvation wages
- Privatisation equals Retrenchments equals Poverty
- Forward to R2200 minimum wage
- Rate payers note: while workers struggle to stay alive, top managers get R62000!

The strike was also a symbol of worker power communicated to management. One of the full-time shop-stewards noted in her interview that they had 'this urge' to make it a success:

It was not only SAMWU comrades' eyes on this ... The employer was watching the strike very closely and they wanted to see [how strong we were] ... That was always on your mind, that ... workers must be mobilised, they must come out on strike, it must be a success.

Thus the withdrawal by workers of their labour did not have only an instrumental function, but also a symbolic or expressive significance. There were many aspects of the strike that were carnivalesque in form and celebratory of workers' sense of their own power, for example the workers' marches where they carried posters, banners and flags, their use of a truck as a moving 'stage', and their use of symbolic colours, signs, songs and dance. There was also widespread 'trashing' by some of the strikers which aroused much public indignation. The up-ending of garbage bags and bins was a deliberate act of defiance: the union's National Education Officer commented that this was an historic tactic of garbage workers who went on strike: 'Why should they wait for two weeks for rubbish to become a real problem?' These acts had a clear symbolic purpose in that they aimed to communicate — not only literally but also metaphorically — the enactment of a world 'turned upside down' (Gardiner 2000 61). The actions can be seen not only as destructive, but as constructing the possibility of a world where the work of cleansing workers would be more visible, and where the value of their work would be appreciated by society.

Workers' experiential knowledge and their anger over poor wages, the privatization and outsourcing of municipal services, and the freezing of posts expressed itself in the embodied symbolism of collective action, which communicated outwards a critique of the contradictory logic of post-apartheid public policy.

Conclusion

Internationally, worker education has comprised numerous strands. Historically, these have clustered around two dominant approaches: a radical, 'transformative' approach to which emphasizes the building of class consciousness and can be located in a long-standing radical or socialist tradition, and an alternative 'instrumental' approach which can be located within a reformist tradition of trade unionism and which prioritises training for organization-building and to facilitate the conduct of union business (Aranowitz, 1990, London 1990). By the middle of last century, the 'instrumental' approach had come to dominate much trade union education in Britain and North America (Field 1988; Aranowitz 1990; London 1990). Holtz has recently argued (2006: 49–50) that in the last few decades under globalization, the very foundations of historic organizational forms such as trade unions and social democratic or labour parties, have been undermined and that they have had to adapt to neo-liberalism to such an extent that they can no longer play a role as agents of social

change. He claims that radical adult educators rather need to recognize the potential for social change in new emerging movements such as those of the indigenous, the landless, the homeless and the unemployed, and to the global justice movement particularly in the global South.

The SAMWU case study shows however that a particular form of the radical education tradition still flourishes in some 'pockets' of labour movements — particularly in the global South. Although politically- and ideologically-directive in form, this style of radical union pedagogy is not 'top-down' in character, and ordinary union members contribute to the union's principles and perspectives in a variety of ways.

In structured union education programmes, directive pedagogy co-exists with lively, open debate and contestation amongst the different ideological positions, and significant attempts are made by educators to 'reach' the experiences of the worker participants in the union's programmes, and to integrate the union's political perspective with their experiences. In union meetings a wide range of union activists assume the role of 'political educator', and there is a significant amount of peer mentoring and support. The participatory character of meetings and other forums allows a wide spectrum of ordinary workers to express their 'voice' in issues, to share their experiential knowledge with one another, and to contribute to the collective values of this community of practice. The strike may be seen as engendering a special community of practice where union members learn through their participation in collective action not only about the strategy and tactics of 'struggle', but also about the nature of political and economic power.

Through this South African case study, I have tried to show that the question of 'who' or 'what' teaches workers political consciousness, and the question of whether worker education can be both ideologically directive and dialogical, is not a given, but is shaped by history — in particular by the 'rhythm' of the workers' movement itself. I have also shown, however, that traditions of collectivity in the South African labour movement are being undermined by a broader, aggressive ideology of individual upward mobility prevalent in the new South Africa. Growing numbers of union leaders are moving 'up and out' into positions in business or government, while those elected into leadership positions tend to be more formally educated and literate in matters of policy and labour law. Traditions of workers' control and democracy are weakened as decisions by union leaders increasingly get taken in tripartite forums with government and business, remote from the spaces where ordinary workers participate in their union.

Even in a relatively democratic and participatory union such as SAMWU, there are signs that the contextual conditions that have allowed for a dialogical relationship between the union's leadership and rank-and-file have also come under strain. It is therefore not a given that the conditions that have allowed the experiential knowledge and ideas of workers within SAMWU to engage critically and creatively with the knowledge and ideas of their more intellectual leadership in the past, will continue in the future.

Notes

- ¹ The largest trade union federation in the country.
- ² Although Cosatu has been vocally critical of these policies, it has thus far refrained from breaking from the Tripartite Alliance, involving Cosatu, the ANC government and the South Africa Communist Party (SACP).
- ³ The right to organise, protection against arbitrary dismissal, the right to maternity and paternity leave, and the setting of a minimum wage in weakly organised sectors of the workforce, such as farm-workers and domestic workers.
- ⁴ The Municipal Service Project (MSP) argues that the last decade has seen a fundamental shift away from a 'service delivery' model of local government, towards a neo-liberal model where the state acts as a service 'ensurer' rather than 'provider', and pursues policies that are market oriented, such as full cost recovery, corporatisation and privatisation (McDonald & Smith 2002:1).
- ⁵ McDonald and Smith (2002) found that many managers and councillors made reference to 'labour problems' as one of the key reasons for privatisation, perceiving workers as 'lazy and paid too much' and claiming that the job security of municipal workers is responsible for low labour productivity.
- ⁶ He cites Marx who called the workplace the 'harsh but hardening school of labour' (Welton 1991: 25).
- ⁷ Successive speakers who were shop-stewards are labelled Ss1, Ss2, and so on.
- ⁸ Through the divisive, racist policies of the white government, the Western Cape was a 'coloured labour preference area'.
- ⁹ In 1987, the CTMWA merged with a number of other municipal affiliates of Cosatu to form SAMWU.
- ¹⁰ Down with!
- ¹¹ The government's Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme — a set of neo-liberal economic policies involving significant cuts in public expenditure, and privatisation of public services.

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