

# Rethinking popular education today

What thinking shaped popular education and why has it disappeared from discussions. What has replaced it and what are the chances to build a popular education movement. **Mojalefa Musi, Mandla Sishi and Mputlane Bofelo** explain.

It is generally accepted that popular education draws its inspiration from a variety of political contexts and ideological traditions. In South Africa, similar to other contexts the world over, it was and continues to be influenced by different stands of Marxist traditions and other radical traditions on the one hand, and liberation and anti-colonial political traditions on the other. For this reason, popular education is arguably contested among forces of the broad Left and thus makes it very difficult to pin down.

Despite these differences, its common feature is that it constitutes a working-class response in their struggles against conditions of social oppression. Thus it represents all creative energies and power of the working class in their struggles to change conditions of their social existence and imbue new meanings to such conditions. A leading Bolshevik education scholar, Anatoly Lunaschasky remarks that (popular) education, for the working class, is a process of self-education and thus means with which creative power of the working-class is manifested. In this article, we argue that popular education is core to reconstituting the working-class anew and repositioning it for struggles ahead. By so doing, the working class becomes a self-agency through a variety of socio-cultural and political

initiatives such as mass campaigns, reading groups, poetry, theatre/drama and songs.

As already argued, popular education was enriched by different traditions, it is also critical to state that oppressed communities of Latin and South America in their different struggles against different colonial regimes are considered the originators of such forms of education. Its basic idea is that the working class, and allied strata in society, are producers of knowledge and in their struggle for emancipation are consumers of that knowledge in their the realisation of their freedoms. The core features of popular education could be understood as follows:

- There is a horizontal (equal) relationship between the educator (facilitator) on the one hand and participants (not students as they participate in knowledge development) on the other.
- It rests on lived conditions, experiences and continuous reflections of oppressed people thus neither class neutral nor ambivalent.
- Popular education is responsive to needs of social action by an organised group: this could be an issue-based working-class organisation and/or campaign and should help it shape a strong vision, and a social and political strategy.

- There should be collective planning of popular education interventions and its resultant political action.
- Popular education, in its theory and practice, must affirm the working class as producers and thus the owners of their knowledge in the struggle for emancipation.

As argued previously, popular education faces many challenges, some of which have to do with varied origins and sometimes the non-sectarian character it carries with it.

## CHALLENGES

The first challenge of popular education is that it exists and continues to operate in the 'belly of the beast' of capitalist relations. It is vulnerable to all manner of influences and the weight of power in society and thus ownership and custodianship of its development escapes its originators: the working class.

A Canadian-based popular education network called Viva! Project argues that popular education is also vulnerable to colonisation by dominant imperial culture, especially from the United States. This imperial domination threatens to blot out creative energies of racial minorities meant to resist the US cultural domination. Similarly,

popular education is vulnerable to colonisation by forces of neo-liberal globalisation. This increases with ongoing commodification of knowledge and knowledge production in the mainstream academia and in society as a whole.

Popular education has mainly operated as a core part of movements against national oppression in this country: 'people's education for people's power' movement, according to Linda Cooper. It is not immune from the taint of capitalist exploitation and its attendant social oppression. There are many ways in which popular education can be affected by the contagion. Accreditation is potentially one of them other than values in which all activists are socialised in their daily engagement with the capitalist system.

We concede that some of the arguments presented in the so-called 'accreditation debate' within the labour movement and especially the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) that span more than a decade now, point to the inner contradiction of popular education itself and its contradictory location in the context of transformation of education and training of South Africa. Due to the varied influences that popular education has had from strands of activist politics, the debate is ongoing and cannot be concluded as easily as attempts have been made in the past. Arguably, the accreditation debate is in and of itself one of the many challenges spawned by the democratic transition of the South African society and thus it suffers the limitations of that context including quasi-corporatist structures such as Sector Education and Training Authorities (Setas).

The relentless debate on popular education and its relationship with these new structures meant to advance social transformation of

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*Participants at a Ditsela workshop in Johannesburg.*



*Expressing a point at a Ditsela workshop in Johannesburg.*

education and training systems of the country is textured mainly by where one stands in relation to the strands of activist and Left politics that influences popular education as known today in South Africa. We submit that due to the fractured relationship among activists, it is seemingly inconceivable to engineer a movement similar to the one that made a clarion call for 'people's education for people's power' mainly pioneered by the National Education Coordinating Committee (NECC) of the 1980s.

Unfortunately the debate is caught in a seeming rut: whether popular, or for that matter, trade union education, should be accredited or not without consideration of activism geared towards movement-building and sustaining the demands made by

the popular education movement of the past. It seems it is similar to the 'registration debate' of the late 1970s and early 1980s: a legacy of the Wiehahn Commission labour law reform. One of the limitations in this debate has been that it is an obsession of the 'educated' lot in the labour movement who command enormous academic capacity from formal institutions without regard of the exclusion of the majority in the working class from formal education. We are arguing that the shortcomings of a market conditioned democratic transition in relation to access to public education and unmet expectations of workers and the broad working class with regard to lifelong adult education and a generalised condition of deprivation had a serious bearing on the accreditation debate especially from the point of workers and the working class. Thus we argue that one of the many challenges of popular education, felt everywhere including the labour movement, is a fractured relationship within the ranks of the working class and a social distance between those that are seen to be 'educated' with specialised skills to run democratic organisations, on the one hand, and the rest whose education is non-formal and excluded from the system that builds the much-needed capacity that enables them to participate effectively in public affairs of society.

#### **BUILDING A POPULAR EDUCATION MOVEMENT**

As already argued, the accreditation debate is textured by one's politics and more importantly the characterisation of the South African state within which the corporatist Seta model of participation is situated. Our view is that the education and training system, similar to the labour relations system post-Wiehahn Commission in the late 1970s into the 1980s, should

not be left to the whims of the government, employers and the academia. Conceived outside a movement built on true politics of popular education: non-sectarianism, solidarity and anti-capitalist orientation the accreditation debate becomes an infatuation of the few 'educated' people and not part of movement-building initiatives to realise the very objectives captured in the clarion call of the Freedom Charter (1955) that: 'the doors of learning and culture should be open to all'.

In a sense, our view is that a position where one refuses to take part (total abstentionist position) will not help this struggle to reclaim popular education. The structural relationship between popular education and public formal (higher) education has enormous impact on the character and the content of popular education itself. Thus the struggle to reclaim popular education in the context of skills development dispensation in this country is similar to the struggle for asserting the working-class authority and world view on the education and training landscape of South Africa post the democratic transition albeit its shortcomings. This should be anchored in building a broad education transformation movement we prefer to call a popular education movement. **LE**

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