

Education International Congress

A critique

From 22 to 26 July 2011 more than 1 300 delegates from teachers' unions across the globe will convene in Cape Town to attend the congress of Education International. **Wouter van der Schaaf** argues that unless there is vibrant, open debate at this congress the survival of teachers' unions across the globe is threatened.

Education International (EI) was launched in 1993. It was the merger between two international teachers' organisations that had until that point emphasised their differences: professional organisations versus trade unions, anti-communism versus uniting teachers irrespective of ideology.

The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 had apparently brought the world to the end of history. Capitalism had won and ideological differences no longer existed so the differences melted away. It was in this political climate that EI was created.

A decade later a third international association of teachers' unions joined EI. Meanwhile the international of socialist teachers' unions had disappeared completely. Nowadays EI has a monopoly over organising teachers' unions. Three South African teachers' organisations, each with its own history and identity are affiliated to EI: South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu), National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa (Naptosa), and South African Teachers Union (Saou).

Unity amongst trade unions can be an asset. It can be a show of strength in numbers and can be a strong force in the collective bargaining process. Unity amongst unions, particularly internationally, can also be a liability

and a risk. It can lead to forced uniformity and lack of identity. It can lead to lack of internal debate and diversity of opinions. In those countries where a socialist political system imposed unity upon unions, the strength in numbers equalled the weakness in internal debate.

In this respect the analysis in *SALB 34.4 Oct/Nov 2010* on the Congress of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) held in July 2010 is telling. The authors note that the congress had turned into an event where all decisions had been taken prior to the congress. Debate never reached the floor of the congress itself.

Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and others complained bitterly that only a few big affiliates were calling the shots and that there was no opportunity to voice a more progressive opinion. For instance, speaking about 'class struggle' was a no-go area. In other words, unity can lead to self-congratulatory remarks and a focus on gadgets and glamour rather than on content and debate. Any controversy is ruled out in advance in pretence of union unity.

The coming EI congress will most likely be much the same. Again it will be a show of lack of choice, orientation and debate. A pity because there are some tough choices to be made on education and on the

'survival' of teachers' unions.

A great number of teachers' unions are confronted with governments that prefer to hand over state responsibility to private enterprise. Teachers' unions in many countries face declining membership and do not organise teachers in private schools. Also new employer-employee relationships are emerging which will have wide ranging effects on teachers' unions. In short, there is no shortage of items to address. There is however a lack of will to present options and choices all in the interests of harmony and unity.

By avoiding options and choices, all EI affiliates can stay on board and feel more or less comfortable: progressive and conservative unions, unions who choose to be part of the broader labour movement and teachers' organisations that deliberately choose not to be associated with other worker organisations. All, irrespective of size, orientation and even representivity can join.

In order to maintain harmony and unity, ideology is declared a 'taboo' in the international world of organised labour - ideology in the sense of 'where do we stand when it really matters'. This congress will again show that only a minority of affiliates operate from a strong political agenda and ideological background.

Many point to Brazil where the

labour movement takes a powerful political stand and at the same time maintains its political independence. Is this a working method which can serve as an example to others? What can be the contribution of South African teachers' unions all organising in the public sector to this debate?

What is the position of the African continent during a global event like that of the ITUC, EI or for that matter any of the international events of organised labour? Looking at the voting strength, the African continent as a whole has fewer votes than half of the European affiliates combined, and as many as one affiliate from the United States. However voting on content, strategies and political choices is a rare phenomenon at EI congresses. Actually, voting only takes place on seats in the Global Executive Board. Here, Africa has little or no influence. The choices are made elsewhere.

In fact the situation is even more grim. The move towards global unity has led to the decline of regional African trade union structures. In the postcolonial era the drive towards pan-Africanism was given shape through African structures and the development of African identity and policies.

Former teacher leader Tom Bediako from Ghana deeply regrets that the African continent has not succeeded in achieving self determination. 'In the past,' he noted, 'we had the All African Teachers Organisation, AATO. This has disappeared from the map completely.' In his view, the African profile and identity got lost in striving for global unity. It was simply swallowed in the drive towards globalisation.

This is a serious loss. Looking at Europe we see quite the reverse. Europe is building unity and developing a European agenda, including in the area of education. In order to remain economically strong, Europe takes a keen interest in strengthening segments of the education sector. It is an issue of debate, choice and developing a common agenda. This is also reflected in the unionism of

teachers at European level. It is time African teacher unions moved again towards strengthening their own regional voice on education matters. International allies can be of assistance but should not take the lead nor set the agenda as happens too often.

EI is facing a number of challenges politically, ideologically and, last but not least, in its democratic profile. For instance, the current EI general secretary faced his first unopposed election in 1981 and has since then been re-elected nine times, every time unopposed. In 20 years of existence the top leadership in the management of the organisation working at its headquarters in Brussels has never included anyone from Africa, Asia or Latin America. Sadtu's general secretary, Thulas Nxesi, was elected in 2004 as president of EI, but he stepped down in 2009.

CLOSING REMARKS

A congress in the labour movement should be more than a show of unity. It should be a show of content, where opposing views lead to lively debate,

where unity in opinion is achieved through expressing a diversity of standpoints rather than through avoiding differences of opinion.

All this is difficult to achieve when internal debate is not encouraged and content is overruled by power positions. Thus controversy is prevented and an international labour event is degraded to a de-politicised gathering.

Does this make the EI congress in Cape Town an event lacking interest? Not quite: it can be the platform for seeking new directions in teacher trade unionism. It will be a meeting place for teachers worldwide which in itself is of value. But it is not enough. ¹⁸

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About Education International

Education International represents organisations of teachers and other education employees across the globe.

It is the world's largest federation of unions, representing 30-million education employees in about 400 organisations in 170 countries and territories, across the globe. Education International unites all teachers and education employees.

Education International promotes the principle that quality education, funded publicly, should be available to every student in every country.

Education International promotes the interests of teachers and other education employees.

Education International represents the interests of teachers and other education employees at the international level.

Education International assists the development of independent democratic organisations to represent teachers and other education employees and builds solidarity and cooperation between them.

Education International advocates for equity in society. It combats racism and xenophobia. It challenges discrimination on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and racial or ethnic origin or characteristics.

Source : EI Website