

Education for socialism

putting it back on the agenda

Worker education should focus on making the second decade of democracy in South Africa one for workers and the poor, argues South African Communist Party general secretary **Blade Nzimande.**



After 11 years of democracy, it is appropriate to reflect on the challenges of trade union and working class education. The democratic breakthrough of 1994 has changed the face of our country. The working class and the progressive trade union movement played a critical role in the defeat of the apartheid regime, and continue to be an important force in the struggle for the reconstruction of South Africa. One of the biggest dangers we face is that as our democracy becomes deeper and stronger, and the memory of apartheid recedes, people may view the political role of the working class as of less importance.

But the reality is that economic power remains with the same old capitalist class. In fact, the economic

policies pursued by our government, especially since the adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) strategy of 1996, have strengthened the hand of the white capitalist class in our economy.

In addition, there is now a rapidly growing black middle class, and a tiny, but not insignificant, black section of the capitalist class. These classes, by and large, have sought to use the new space created by a democratic South Africa to advance their interests. This has been reinforced by the current trajectory of Black Economic Empowerment, which is not broad-based and tends to reinforce crass materialism.

The lack of adequate investment, the large-scale neo-liberal

restructuring of the economy which has led to a jobs bloodbath, outsourcing and casualisation also continues to reproduce and reinforce the racial and gender inequalities of apartheid.

While we have gone some way to transforming it, our state essentially remains a capitalist state whose major institutions continue to reproduce the capitalist system.

In our own movement, we have seen a consolidation and dominance of a class which has sought to strengthen the market economy. There has also been a tendency to marginalise the tripartite alliance, and in some instances the African National Congress itself, with excessive concentration of power in the presidency. This project has sought to transform the ANC into a modern political party, rather than a mass movement which campaigns for workers and the poor.

We have created a state that has prioritised an alliance with capital, both black and white, domestic and international, in the hope that this will address the needs of workers and the poor.

However, the ANC National General Council (NGC) illustrated the deep crisis of the dominant political project of our movement. The report of secretary-general Kgalema Motlanthe at the NGC highlighted the problems of corruption, patronage and gate-keeping.

What has this to do with worker education? Building a mobilised and

politically conscious working class is a key challenge if we are to overcome these problems and build the kind of South Africa the overwhelming majority of our people want.

TRADE UNION AND WORKING CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

If we are to provide education that is relevant to our needs, we must understand the distinction and relationship between trade union and working class consciousness. Marxism has always made this distinction.

Unions are workplace-based organisations which defend and advance workers' interests on the shop floor. Of course, many unions, including our Congress of South African Unions, have correctly operated in the broader political arena as well as in the workplace. But trade unions' primary focus is to defend workers' shop floor interests. Any union that abandons this responsibility stops being a union, even if it engages in broader struggles.

The organised working class, especially the union movement, is the bedrock of the working class. But the working class is broader than the trade unions. This was one of the big debates in worker education in the 1970s and 1980s: What is the role of trade unions in the broader liberation struggle and struggle for socialism?

The working class includes workers in the informal sector, spaza owners and other marginalised sections. As trade unions focus on employed workers, particularly in the mainstream capitalist economy, they cannot be the political representative of the working class as a whole.

This is even more obvious in South Africa, where unemployment is estimated at 40% and a sizeable

section of the working class is not organised and lies outside the mainstream economy. This is why a communist party is needed, to unite all the fractions and strata of the working class into an effective political force.

Also, trade unions are not political organisations. They organise all workers irrespective of their political affiliation, because to do otherwise would divide and weaken the union movement. This does not necessarily prevent them from aligning themselves with political parties they believe can advance their interests. But this has to be done through patient internal political education and persuasion, a task Cosatu has carried out with distinction.

Trade union consciousness tends to be limited to immediate workplace issues and to defending the rights of workers and improving their conditions of service. Such consciousness, however, tends to limit a broader political understanding of the overall tasks facing the working class, or even a deeper understanding of the capitalist origins of the misery of workers in the workplace.

However, Lenin also pointed out that trade unions are an important school for socialism. Workers' daily exploitation in the workplace creates a consciousness of injustice which can be developed into a broader working class consciousness. Marx and Engels wrote about a 'class *in* itself' meaning a trade union consciousness that workers are exploited, but not much beyond that. He also wrote of a 'class *for* itself', with a broader political understanding that the capitalist system and its political institutions are the cause of workers' misery, and that the whole system needs to be destroyed.

The key challenge facing the working class is the transformation of a 'class in itself' into a 'class for itself' or in other words the development of trade union consciousness into broader working class consciousness. This is principally, though not exclusively, the task of the communist party.

Trade union consciousness does not automatically translate into socialist consciousness. This has to be nurtured, which is where the importance of socialist worker education and mobilisation lie. To deepen and advance the national democratic revolution and move closer to a transition to socialism, it is important to develop socialist consciousness among workers.

MAKING THE SECOND DECADE ONE OF WORKERS AND THE POOR

It is important to locate worker and socialist education in the context of the immediate and medium-term challenges facing the working class. Otherwise we may embark on good education programmes which are abstract and unconnected to working class realities and challenges.

In advancing the goal of making the second decade of liberation in South Africa a decade for workers and the poor, the South African Communist Party's special congress in April 2005 identified four key sites of struggle for the working class:

- **The state.** The working class must mobilise and bring to bear its collective muscle in building a developmental state biased towards the workers and the poor. This must include strengthening the public sector and ensuring that key state-owned enterprises remain in state hands. If the ANC and its allies are biased towards the working class, we cannot have a state with a free market bias. It should be a



developmental state, with a particular relationship with the working class, while not yet socialist. We must mobilise and educate the working class for the creation of such a state.

- **The point of production.** The SACP congress noted that there has been very little change in the power relations on the shop floor.

Management continues to take unilateral decisions with very little worker involvement, except in matters designated for collective bargaining. This calls for renewed efforts to strengthen trade union organisation, and improved services to members. The SACP commits itself to building workplace branches as a key contribution towards strengthening workers' power at the point of production.

- **The community.** The challenge of development goes beyond the workplace into our communities. This is a critical site of struggle, where working class power needs to be felt. For instance, the tripartite alliance has adopted the Know Your Neighbourhood Campaign, which involves going door to door in households and hostels, listening to the people, identifying their problems, and acting with them to resolve these problems. This work must be done regardless of whether an election is looming.

- **The battle of ideas.** Cutting across the three terrains of struggle is the all-important ideological battle to advance the interests of the working class. The challenge here, particularly in the context of worker education, is producing ideologically-rounded

cadres through combined political education and activism. This is where theory and practice are dialectically linked.

The capitalist class and its media are waging a massive ideological struggle against the working class, as part of consolidating South Africa as a capitalist state. There is a renewed use of the label 'populist' to discredit legitimate working class struggles, such as Cosatu's jobs and poverty campaign, SACP's demands for a credit amnesty from credit bureaux, and to delegitimise legitimate concerns about Jacob Zuma's treatment by the justice system.

Underpinning these struggles must be a conscious debate and development of our vision for socialism. Does it mean that everything is controlled by the state? What is the role of independent but progressive trade unions and other mass formations? Are our stokvels, burial societies, cooperatives and land committees not a foundation for viable, progressive, working class-led people's power for socialism? Our education programmes need to feature these questions strongly.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKER AND WORKING CLASS EDUCATION

Education should be based on understanding the major, unfolding contradictions that the national democratic revolution seeks to address: national, class and gender contradictions. These contradictions need to be understood in relation to each another - to emphasise one at

the expense of the others may confuse the working class.

A key challenge is to create an education commissariat in the trade union and broader working class movements. This is the purpose of the Chris Hani Brigade, and what the Chris Hani Institute is partly trying to achieve. We need to train thousands of cadres as working class and socialist educators.

We must develop integrated education programmes that include technical education to equip workers with bargaining and related skills. But it cannot ignore explicitly socialist and communist education, which forms part of producing ideologically rounded working class cadres and transforming trade union consciousness into working class, socialist consciousness.

I feel strongly that we should work towards the formal accreditation of worker and socialist education. While we should avoid paper-chasing, accreditation is important to ensure that worker education is recognised. Accreditation should also be seen as part of the overall struggle to challenge capitalist education in our higher education institutions and society.

We also need to undertake a thorough evaluation of all progressive institutions offering worker, working class and socialist education in South Africa. The aim should be to work towards co-ordination of these important institutions, and ensure that they make the maximum impact in producing ideologically-rounded working class cadres.

This is an edited version of notes for discussion for a National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) education indaba conducted in October 2005.