

International study circles

responding to globalisation

Throughout the world, trade unions, social movements and democratic political forces are trying to come to terms with the 'new' world order. The triumph of neo-liberal governments in many industrialised countries coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites; the world was recast in the image of free market capitalism.

Neo-liberal globalisation is characterised by the dominance of transnational corporations (TNCs), the workings of international finance markets and international economic institutions, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

The effects of neo-liberal globalisation have been devastating for the working class. Most countries' governments, including South Africa, have been willing agents of the neo-liberal economic programme, causing a drastic decline in the living standards of the majority of people.

Labour's response

Generally, the labour movement's response, let alone opposition to neo-liberal globalisation, has been weak and ineffective. There have been a series of recent initiatives within the labour movement which have attempted to defend workers' rights internationally. These include:

- initiatives by the International Labour

Martin Jansen evaluates how international study circles, using e-mail and the Internet, can link an internationalist understanding of issues with people's local experiences and in the process build labour solidarity and people's confidence to take action.

Organisation (ILO) to get 'core labour standards' adopted and endorsed by all governments;

- initiatives to get minimum labour standards written into trade agreements;
- International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) have pursued TNCs who fail to recognise worker rights in Third World countries;
- ITSs have attempted to win international framework agreements for collective bargaining;
- many ITSs have tried to form World Councils, bringing together shopstewards from different countries within the same TNC.

These initiatives have met with varying degrees of success, but have not tilted conditions more favourably towards the

working class – increasing its confidence, capacity to struggle for better conditions and secure improvements in people's daily lives.

Workers' education movement

The International Study Circle (ISC) programme was initiated by the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA) and EuroWEA (IFWEA's European body). It combines an internationalist understanding of issues with people's local experiences, hopefully enhancing their ability and confidence to act locally. From our experience this combines best education practice with best political practice.

In recent years, debates in IFWEA and its member organisations highlighted the need to move beyond exchanging

information and experience between local and national organisations. The workers' education movement, it was agreed, needs to draw up collaborative transnational education programmes to address globalisation.

This requires new models of learning that maintain the best traditions of the workers' education movement – democratic, locally based, responsive to workers' needs and experiences, yet *global in scope, relevant and participative*. It requires a model of workers' education where learning is global in both form and content.

The experience of learning should itself be an experience in international co-operation and solidarity. It demands a model of global education that is not simply an exercise in intellectual development, but has the capacity to lead to new activity, stronger international organisation, and practical local consequence.

Processes of globalisation are complex and contradictory. There could never be a single course of workers' education on 'globalisation' as such, but rather a wide range of education programmes covering different aspects of the global agenda. However, the central and common proposed learning outcome is an understanding that international debate and experience is no longer the privileged preserve of specialist representatives or departments of labour movement organisations. It has had to become the concern of all of us, as we experience the increasingly profound effects of globalisation as it develops and inhabits our livelihoods, our cultures, and our communities.

How is this to be achieved, given limited resources? The ISC initiative is a small but important step towards a solution.

IFWEA history

In 1947, a number of predominantly European-based organisations active in workers' education formed the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA). They committed themselves to promoting and providing 'free and voluntary educational work, according to the principles of solidarity and co-operation, justice and equality, democracy, and freedom'.

IFWEA now has 90 member organisations (affiliates) in 50 countries. These organisations include 'traditional' workers' education associations, national trade unions, international trade unions/secretariats (ITUs), foundations and institutes built to support workers' education, and NGOs providing education services to trade unions and working-class communities. South African affiliates include Ditsela, Khanya College, Ilrig, Tuleu/LRS, the Workers' College – Western Cape, the Workers' College – Natal and WEP.



South African study circle (first pilot project, 1997).

The ISC project

IFWEA and Euro-WEA began the ISC project in 1997. They began using a pilot programme consisting of two international courses facilitated by IFWEA affiliates in Peru, France, Barbados, South Africa, Estonia, Sweden, England, Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Kenya and Spain. The pilot programme reached 186 participants from trade unions, community organisations and NGOs.

What is an ISC?

Karl Marx once remarked that capitalism is its own grave-digger. Technological advances spurred on by neo-liberal capitalist globalisation can also be used by the international labour movement and its working class allies in its own defence and interests.

The ISC project explores ways of using technology so that participants in different countries can engage in meaningful international discussion. Using e-mail, facilitators send country reports of

discussions to an international co-ordinator. The international co-ordinator then places the reports on the project web site. Facilitators can then download all these reports before every session and copy them for participants to read.

Using the Internet, an ISC brings together participants from several countries to work according to a common curriculum, set of materials and education method. Each study circle has a facilitator. Between meetings, each group has access to materials on the Internet including the results of discussions and work completed in previous sessions by other countries.

The pilot ISC programme focused on TNCs. The first course ran on a weekly basis over eight weeks. The second course ran fortnightly. ISC facilitators met in Spain to design the education materials, methodology and project website. They then met in Sweden to evaluate the first pilot course and adapted the programme for the second pilot. An overall evaluation of the pilot programme and the future of

the project took place in Hattingen, Germany.

Course content

Our experience has been that themes for ISCs have emerged spontaneously from current issues and programmes within the labour movement. Participating IFWEA organisations stressed that a theme should be chosen on the basis of need rather than funding possibilities. Current and past themes include:

- ☐ tackling TNCs;
- ☐ the Asian crisis (for the Asia-Pacific region of IFWEA);
- ☐ women and the global food industry;
- ☐ migrant labour.

The main problem was making the topic immediate, relevant and manageable for participants. It was clear that for trade union members, international topics were not as immediately relevant as the more traditional areas of trade union education (such as health and safety, collective bargaining or shopsteward training). Facilitators had to make the link between local problems and international issues explicit for the course to make an impact. The evaluation of the first pilot project revealed that the course content was too general and did not have enough concrete relevance to participants' daily work and lives.

In a course that is being delivered internationally, the precise links to local situations will obviously differ. This meant that there needed to be flexibility in the curriculum at a local level. In the second pilot, the facilitators introduced local content which also helped to add context to the wider global issues.

An interesting debate emerged about the political orientation of the course. Participants argued that facilitators should have presented independent perspectives on the role of TNCs to give participants

access to different views. Underlying this debate are the vastly different political contexts in which the study circle facilitators and participants are located and the different traditions of workers' education organisations. It raises the question of how to design courses to accommodate these different political experiences and traditions. Facilitators need to construct education materials to enable participants to thoroughly debate the underlying political issues, whilst respecting local historical and political realities.

Participants felt that the materials on the first pilot course on TNCs were not linking wider global economic issues with current, more tangible problems that people face in the workplace and in the community. Participants suggested that the second pilot needed to incorporate concrete and recent case studies of positive action taken in response to TNCs. This would help participants who were feeling powerless in regard to TNCs.

The second pilot therefore focused on:

- ☐ privatisation and how TNCs have benefited;
- ☐ protecting workers' rights;
- ☐ exercising democratic control over the activities of TNCs.

Participants

Participating organisations encouraged trade unionists (shopstewards and officials) and active members of community organisations to participate. The aim was to develop common activities and links between these organisations.

The majority of the 186 participants were from trade unions. In South Africa, the Cape Town based study circle consisted of shopstewards from SACCWU, NUMSA, SAMWU, CWIU (now CEPWWU), MEWUSA and TGWU. Representatives from Ilrig and Tulec

facilitated the sessions.

The evaluation showed that the target group of future ISCs needs to be defined more narrowly. Participants on the pilot courses came from diverse industries and companies, with only very general interests in common. They also had different levels of prior knowledge on the issues being discussed, and brought different political experiences to the discussions.

For ISCs to result in sustained international links and concrete activities between workers and trade unions, the target group must share a practical need for this level of contact. Such needs are more likely to exist between communities facing similar issues, or workers in the same TNC. This can also be the case for workers who face similar problems such as young workers, women workers and workers experiencing privatisation of their workplaces.

How it worked

All the sessions dealt with a theme. Each session drew on discussions held in the previous session and looked forward to the next. The facilitator wrote up each session's report and e-mailed it to the web manager on an agreed date. The web manager then placed these reports onto the web site.

What we learned

The pilot programme showed the need to further develop our methodological



Many ISC participants wanted information on TNCs.

approach to global education. It became clear that educational methods used for local or national courses are not necessarily appropriate or effective in an international education programme. Since IFWEA is attempting to run ISCs that are integrated and coherent at an international level instead of simply running the same programme separately in different countries, a methodology is needed which results in learning outcomes which have an international dimension.

In this respect, the ISC approach has significant strengths.

The methodology has international contact and communication at its core – international experiences and solidarity are not abstract ideas in education but

part of the educational practice itself. This approach helped establish the reality of globalisation for participants and highlighted the value of international trade union and worker co-operation.

Most of the participants had little or no previous experience of international work, and were excited and inspired by the direct international links and contacts gained through the project.

Moderator's role

In the weekly reports from sessions, each country would raise a wide range of issues. This made it difficult to develop a clear focus in the international communication between groups. Facilitators identified a need for an ISC co-ordinator to act as an international 'moderator' - to focus the different inputs to ensure that participants debated commonalities and differences. However, this could only work and ensure the programme retained its international coherence, if facilitators submitted reports on time.

Facilitators role

Facilitators should ensure effective local delivery and maintain coherence at an international level. This was underestimated in the pilot project, and it became clear that:

- Facilitators must be experienced educators who have been given the time and space by their organisation to *carry out a fairly demanding activity*. They must also be able to communicate in the language of the ISC.
- Facilitators must help participants work through a session by drawing out their experiences, stimulating debate and assisting them with new concepts. Since globalisation is a process impregnated with so many different views and new concepts, members of study circles might have difficulty

discussing and understanding these issues based solely on their own experiences. Facilitators therefore play an important function in introducing new information.

Given the crucial role of the facilitators in delivering the education process, participating organisations recommended that there should be more intensive training for facilitators in future programmes.

Using technology

From the beginning of the project, only facilitators used the technology - that is computers and the Internet. Since the project was mainly about education, facilitators felt that using computers was simply a means to make links between the groups in different countries and should be kept to a minimum. However, participants developed a keen interest in using the Internet as a tool for education, campaigning and international work.

There are, however, difficulties in using the Internet to sustain an exchange of ideas and information. Participants are not in physical contact, and it is therefore difficult to get to know each other. The technology cannot give the same sense of human contact that is possible with direct meetings. This 'distance' between groups was compounded by cultural and other barriers. Language, for example, was a fundamental factor influencing the flow and nature of discussions between the groups. Translation through the facilitators lost the *spontaneity of free flowing communication*. Furthermore, written communication tends to be *more formal* and less dynamic than direct conversations between people.

We did not experience any major technical difficulties in the pilots. Each country had to have access to a computer and the Internet to participate in the

programme. There were no major differences in technical efficiency between the small organisations based in developing countries and larger European-based organisations. Whilst their technological capacity differed, this did not impact significantly on implementing the ISC which required only a basic infrastructure. The web site was designed so that each organisation could make use of it without having the most advanced hardware and/or software.

Työvaen Sivistysliitto (TSL), an IFWEA affiliate in Finland, managed the project web site. It is important that a central person/organisation, with technological expertise and time services the ISC web site efficiently. A web site for ISC purposes cannot function effectively if there is no central point from which information and communication is sorted, organised and distributed.

Language

The international communication in the pilot programme was conducted in English, whilst local study circles were conducted in national languages. This solution to the 'language problem' was far from adequate. It was extremely time-consuming for facilitators to translate education materials and weekly reports. Whilst facilitators spoke English confidently, participants did not. Language barriers between participants therefore made international communication extremely difficult and increased the facilitators' power in relation to participants.

We have not yet found an appropriate



Technology can be used to share information and strengthen solidarity.

mechanism to deal with the language 'problem'. Where resources permit, it would be useful to attach a skilled translator to each local group. Another possibility would be to select countries that have a language in common, for example the Francophone countries. However, this may narrow the target group geographically and culturally.

Finances

The pilot programme was financed through a variety of sources, but on the whole it was under-funded. It became apparent that many donors' structures and priorities do not yet reflect the need to work globally. Some funding agencies operate through regional desks (Africa, Asia etc) and therefore do not know where to place an international project. Others are still only interested in supporting activities in developing countries.

Whilst an ISC programme does not require a large amount of funds, it needs

support for running facilitator workshops and for covering the running costs of local ISCs, including the facilitator's work and time. An ISC must secure funding for local groups so that small organisations are not put under undue financial strain.

Outcomes and products

At a national level, there were important education spin-offs from the pilot programme. Several countries reported that they incorporated sections of the ISC education materials into local education programmes. In Bulgaria, a group of brewery workers who were interested in the topic set up a separate local study circle using the ISC materials. In Peru, PLADES (a Labour Service Organisation) is now running an information technology/communication course in response to demands which arose out of the ISC. It has also convened a Social Watch group on TNCs and foreign investment in Peru. Members of this group were all recruited from the two ISC pilot courses.

Whilst the pilot programme did not result in long-term links between participants, there was one exception which captures what the potential outcome of an ISC might be. It was through the ISC pilot programme that the Volvo workers in Peru established links with Volvo workers in Sweden. This resulted in a delegation from Sweden visiting Peru and the Peruvian workers have now become involved in the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF) World Council for Volvo workers.

Many participants in different countries expected the ISC to continue. Facilitators felt that they should encourage participants to develop international links through their organisations using the skills and contacts developed in the ISC. It is important that the ISC encourages independent activity and is outward

looking rather than self-perpetuating. IFWEA affiliates in each country could provide support to those independent activities that emerge. However, if this process is to occur, then part of an ISC's curriculum must focus on how participants can take course materials, activities and links back into their organisations and reproduce the education process.

Several education resources will be produced from the pilot programme to support the independent activities of participants and other organisations interested in running ISCs or education programmes on global issues. They include a project web site, a manual, and a CD-ROM facility containing all the educational material together with a course booklet.

The pilot programme has resulted in a group of facilitators who are now confident and skilled in ISC methodology. It was decided by participating organisations at the final evaluation that these facilitators have an important role to play in promoting the programme at a national and regional level. Thus these IFWEA affiliates will now begin to operate in a more decentralised manner, taking the initiative to offer ISC courses linked to their particular areas of interest and work. Using the IFWEA web site, they will attempt to recruit IFWEA participants from other countries who share similar interests. Possible topics include structural adjustment, European Works Councils, racism and xenophobia, recruiting and organising. ★

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For more information see the IFWEA web site: <http://www.ifwea.org/isc>

COSATU members' views

joining unions and union democracy

Why did you join a union? What support do unions enjoy from civil society organisations?

These are some of the questions put to workers by researchers from Naledi and the universities of Cape Town, Rhodes, Port Elizabeth, Natal, and Witwatersrand. The survey was conducted in 1998 amongst 646 COSATU members at various workplaces in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape, and Eastern Cape. The survey included all COSATU affiliates except SADTU, POPCRU and SASBO.

Joining unions

Researchers asked COSATU members why they belonged to their current unions. The respondents provided a variety of answers. The overwhelming majority of respondents (83%) indicated that they joined unions so that 'worker interests and rights can be protected'. In other words, their union membership was a way of ensuring that worker interests at the workplace were promoted and defended.

Eight percent reported that they were interested in wages and related benefits. Seven percent said they became union members simply because there was already a union in the workplace so they joined 'automatically'. Other respondents mentioned socialism, political reasons, working conditions and so on, as reasons why they joined their current unions.

The findings, therefore, suggest that

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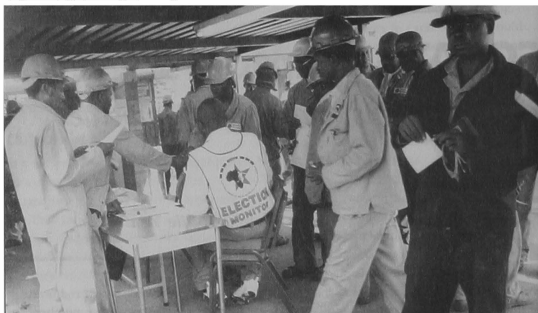
worker solidarity and worker rights are most important in recruiting members and unions need to consider these patterns of 'interests' in their organising activities.

Solidarity

The importance of the unions receiving solidarity from other civil society bodies such as community-based organisations (CBOs), NGOs, civics, political organisations and so on cannot be taken for granted. This is because in recent times, unions' capacity to mobilise and organise members has been put under a severe test. Action, such as the public sector strikes last year, show the importance of gaining broader public support, if workers' struggles are to be successful.

Unions are often portrayed as 'labour elites', concerned only with their own members' interests. On the other hand, COSATU's September Commission categorised COSATU as falling under the concept of social movement unionism, which stresses the unions' role in promoting wider social interests.

One of the questions posed to the respondents during the study was whether union members received solidarity from the social and political forces during their recent strikes. Judging



Fifty percent of respondents used a secret ballot to vote.

by the respondents' answers, it is clear that the union members did receive solidarity. Workers indicated that solidarity came from:

- ☐ other unions (31%);
- ☐ the community (21%);
- ☐ political parties (15%);
- ☐ other sources (6%).

These findings show that unions are challenged to mobilise other sectors of the society in order to increase their bargaining power and accelerate the process of socio-economic transformation.

Union democracy

In order to test issues of union democracy in the workplace, researchers asked respondents questions in relation to their participation in electing shopstewards.

An overwhelming majority of workers (83%) indicated that they participated in the election of a shopsteward. Twenty-seven percent of respondents participated in the elections within one month to two years before the survey.

Democratically elected shopstewards are the backbone of worker control and

democracy in unions. It is therefore worrying that about 79 respondents (12%) said that they either did not know when they last participated in the elections or had never participated in such elections. Furthermore, the fact that 12% of the respondents last participated in the election of shopstewards more than two years ago, may cause problems for accountability within the unions in the long run. COSATU's current proposal for the 'standardisation' of shopstewards' elections might therefore help avoid some of these problems.

In terms of the method used in the election of shopstewards:

- ☐ 50% of the respondents said that a secret ballot was used;
- ☐ 42% indicated that a show of hands was used;
- ☐ 6,7% of the respondents did not know or could not remember the procedure.

The use of a secret ballot during the process should be encouraged in order to ensure that the elections are fair and free. Such a process might ensure that ordinary members of the union elect quality

leadership that will take the organisation to new heights.

Respondents also had particular expectations regarding the role of elected leaders. Most of them expected shopstewards to behave in a manner that is accountable, transparent and democratic. Three quarters (76%) of the respondents felt strongly about the issue of report-backs. These respondents expected shopstewards to provide a regular report-back to workers. One quarter of the respondents (23%) felt that elected leadership should give report-backs to workers only on important issues. Only 0.3% indicated that it was not important for elected leadership to provide report-backs.

Another question, linked to the issue of democracy in the workplace, tried to find out about the existence of a forum in the workplace. Just over half (53%) the respondents indicated that there was/were no forum/s in their respective workplaces. Forty-one percent of respondents confirmed the existence of forums in their workplaces. When these

respondents were asked to describe the nature of such forum/s, the majority of them (48%) cited management and shopstewards' forums. Twelve percent said that management, supervisors' and workers' forums existed. Only 4% of respondents referred to the presence of workplace forums in their workplaces.

The fact that the majority of respondents referred to the existence of management and shopstewards' forums signals the strong presence of organised labour at the workplace.

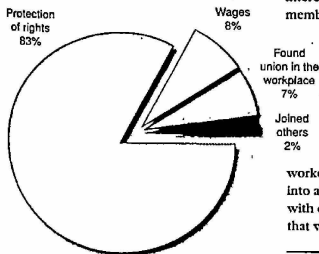
Workers were also asked if these existing forums in the workplace were promoting the ideals of worker control. The majority of respondents (65%) who mentioned the existence of forums at the workplace believed that the forums did not hinder unions' programmes of advancing worker control. This is a signal for unions to look into developing strategies to utilise workplace structures and forums.

Conclusion

The research has shown that workers have particular reasons why they belonged to unions. Most of them regarded the defence and protection of worker rights and interests as a primary reason being a member of a union. Many workers also felt

very strongly about the advancement of union democracy. The challenge facing the trade union movement is to defend and consolidate the gains obtained through worker struggles over the years whilst venturing into new arenas of worker interests. Secondly, it must enter into alliances and solidarity campaigns with other social forces. This will ensure that workers' voices are heard. ★

Why did you join your current trade union?



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