

Skills development

A deal on a skills development strategy for South Africa may be within reach following several months of negotiations in Nedlac. The final draft of the Skills Development Bill was released by the Department of Labour late last year. The plan is to wind up negotiations on outstanding issues in the coming months so that the Bill can pass through parliament and be enacted this year. The challenge for labour, government and business will then lie in implementing the Act.

Objectives

As a central pillar of Minister of Labour Tito Mboweni's five year programme, the Bill is crucial to social and economic transition. It seeks to undo the apartheid legacy of separate development through integrated workplace education and training, eradicate the high level of functional illiteracy among black workers, align education and training issues to social and economic needs and address the urgent need for job creation.

The Bill sets out detailed mechanisms to drive this process. Education and training will be co-ordinated in sectors through various training authorities. In contrast to the old, inflexible system, workplace training needs will be monitored through macro-level research to determine the new skills demands of our rapidly changing economy.

Concerns

The social objectives of the Bill, while laudable, could turn out to be more

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ambitious than initially anticipated. Speaking at a press conference on the Bill late last year, Department of Labour Director-General, Siphso Pityana, said: "One key area of concern is about investment in training and recipients of training not landing up in jobs. The idea is surely to get people involved in the training board activities involved in the economy."

The skills strategy is in line with the macro-economic assumptions contained in GEAR. It borrows heavily from New Zealand's 'high wage, high skill' road to economic development. In doing so, it is attempting to address two principle concerns: South Africa's structural unemployment crisis and the need for higher productivity, competitiveness and economic growth. It is assumed that job security and job creation, as well as economic growth, will be improved through adjusting the (poor) skills profile of South African labour to the competitive demands of the global economy.

Oponents of this approach have highlighted potential problems for labour. Education Policy Unit researcher, Salim Vally (*SA Labour Bulletin* Vol 21 No 3), argues that in the context of a 'market-dependent macro-economic framework', an overall increase in the level of skills can only meet narrow industrial ends.

The competitive thrust of the Bill is likely to lead to a situation where the majority of workers will be trained for unemployment. Employers, on the other hand, stand to gain from an abundance of skilled and mobile labour in the labour market.

Labour

It was COSATU's own research which stimulated many of the proposals contained in the Bill. However, the Bill differs from the federation's original position, which emphasises the link between skills development and social justice.

In a recent article, Trade Union Research Project (TURP) researcher, Gary Phillips, argues that the Bill's "neo-liberal slant" will result in the "developmental thrust of labour's vision (being) lost".

COSATU has nevertheless welcomed the Bill. Despite minor criticism on the 1,5% levy on private sector employers to pay for training (the federation demanded 4%), most affiliates generally accept the need to 'engage with the market' as the only realistic way in which to provide education and training opportunities for disadvantaged black workers.

Implementation

What lies ahead is the implementation of standards and qualifications with an explicit bias to employment needs. This requires labour's active intervention in restructuring the national and sectoral training boards.

Phillips highlights two principle concerns for labour:

□ *Capacity*

Labour must ensure that it is well-represented on all standard generating bodies in the learning field. Unions might well benefit from previous experience.

The capacity-building project of the former COSATU Participatory Research Unit will hopefully enable unionists to deal with training and grading issues at

the workplace. Affiliates have already started participating in training boards. This should provide another good starting point. Numerous shopstewards are already fairly competent in setting standards.

□ *Worker control*

Labour will also need to deepen and extend its capacity to shape policies crucial for the success of its agenda. The danger is that business, with all the resources available to it, will be able to dominate the political and ideological content of accredited institutions. In Australia, government and employer funding ensured that courses accredited through the NQF were less about workers interests and more about profit incentives. Phillips points out that core learning, which gives workers 'contextual knowledge' of the workings of the labour market and broader industrial issues, is a serious problem. "The content of the curriculum, based on highly contested terms such as 'social development' can either feed ideological notions of 'competitiveness' or challenge it."

Unless labour asserts its interests, control over learning is likely to be removed from the unions. The Bill allows sectors to identify needs in companies and set targets at NQF level. Companies have failed to initiate training in the past. Labour will have to push for initiatives at company and sector level.

As Phillips concludes, "The skills strategy cannot be stopped, but (it) needs to be controlled. It originated within the progressive trade union movement as a strategy aimed at increasing fairness and vocational training opportunities for black workers, not...employer enrichment." ★

Reference

Phillips G (1997), *Cause for concern or catalyst for 'skills revolution'? a critical look at implementing the skills strategy*