

Shop floor and chalk-face a new partnership?

The globalisation of capital has stripped workers internationally of social protection. **Eddie Webster** discusses a new initiative, the Global Labour University (GLU), which through the power of alternative ideas aims to engage and contest neo-liberal practices.

GLU assumes that labour's power lies in its strategic location in the workplace and in its capacity to mobilise and organise. But it also assumes that power lies in ideas and the ability to challenge market-driven development and provide alternatives that point towards a labour-friendly global order.

Globalisation has profoundly changed the nature of work. Although the new economy has created unprecedented opportunities for wealth creation, it is undermining the social fabric of many societies by giving capital the ability to by-pass regulatory systems set in place by industrialised nations after the Second World War.

Capital can ignore labour standards by relocating to low wage areas. The expansion of the labour market to China, India, Russia and Central Europe has doubled its size creating, for the first time, a global labour market. It has also led to the re-emergence of un-free labour and a retreat, in some countries, to the working hours and conditions of the 19th century.

PESSIMIST AND OPTIMIST VIEW

These changes have led to a pessimistic view on the future of labour. Capitalist mobility has

undermined union bargaining power, state sovereignty, the welfare state and democracy. States that maintain expensive social compacts with citizens risk investors abandoning them.

There is however a counter argument. Capital mobility has created new, strategically placed working classes in the global South. These have the potential to produce powerful labour movements in expanding manufacturing industries. If you include 41 million 'unionised' workers in China, global union membership has never been greater.

Secondly, just-in-time production creates global chains that increase the vulnerability of capital to labour disrupting the flow of production which enhances workers' bargaining power.

Thirdly, new technology enables workers' to communicate directly and cheaply opening opportunities for a network of labour internationalism. Activists can take advantage of global pressures through codes of conduct, global campaigns and the vulnerability of multinational companies to new workplace norms.

GLU LAUNCH

From this optimistic perspective, global restructuring is a force that

both undermines and potentially strengthens labour. However, strengthening does not occur spontaneously, nor is it produced by capital accumulation alone. It requires labour to identify new sources of power, develop new organisation and strategies, and forge new alliances.

This is the goal of GLU. It is a network of universities, international and national unions and the International Labour Organization (ILO). In response to globalisation the ILO set up in 2002 the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation, which included leaders in politics, unions, business and civil society across the world.

The Commission presented the ILO with a challenge on the basis that it has "an integrated economic and social mandate and the responsibility to evaluate economic policies in the light of their impact on social and labour policies". The report called for a stronger ethical framework: "The governance of globalisation must be based in universally shared values and respect for human rights. Globalisation has developed in an ethical vacuum, where market success and failure have tended to become the ultimate standard of behaviour and where the attitude of the 'winner takes all' weakens the

fabric of communities and society.”

In response, the ILO launched GLU to strengthen the intellectual and strategic capacity of unions and to establish closer links between unions internationally and the union movement and university intellectuals.

The aims of GLU are to:

- provide a post-graduate master's degree for unionists, labour activists and experts on labour and globalisation
- undertake joint research, faculty and student exchange, and organise conferences on global labour
- publish text books, research and discussion papers on labour and globalisation.

WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED?

- Four years ago Kassel University and the Berlin School of Economics launched a master's degree.
- In 2007 the University of the Witwatersrand launched a master's course. In its second year, it has 12 students from South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
- In 2008 the University of Campinas in Brazil launched a master's course and soon one begins at the Tata Institute of Social Science in Mumbai, India.
- In Kassel in August 2007 GLU held an alumni school and launched three research. Alumni from 12 countries conducted the first, 'Closing the Representational Gap in Micro and Small Enterprises'. They will present their findings to the Second Alumni Summer School in Berlin in September.
- GLU has held three international conferences in Germany in 2006, South Africa in 2007 and Brazil in 2008. Papers from the South African conference appear in 'Globalisation, Labour and Development' in *Labour, Capital*

and *Society* (Vol 40, 1&2, 2007).

- Two papers on trade and economic policy have been published and GLU is preparing text books.
- Faculty and student exchanges take place regularly between campuses.

CHALLENGES

The first challenge is managing the demands of the university with the needs of unionists. There is tension between academics wanting students to conform to academic requirements, and unionists impatient for members to get useful knowledge and skills. This is made worse by GLU students only having a year to complete an academic programme that takes mainstream students more than a year.

The second challenge lies in building a common global intellectual project across four countries. This goes beyond the difficult question of language. Although English is the language of GLU, universities have different intellectual traditions, criteria for entrance, structures and course content and ways of assessing. As a result, GLU abandoned a common curriculum (but will develop common texts) and university exchanges between students and teachers.

A third challenge is for the labour movement. What do unionists want from universities and what can universities offer that they cannot do on their own? GLU assumes that labour needs to develop new research partnerships to engage and contest neo-liberalism which dominates international financial institutions.

In the past labour and universities tended to approach each other in instrumental ways – labour when it needs research and researchers when they need access and support for funding proposals. A true partnership rests on reciprocity and a willingness to learn from each other. The test for

GLU is that its alumni revitalise the labour movement with ideas, skills and commitment.

A final challenge is funding. GLU depends on support from universities and their partners, with vital funding from the ILO and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development through the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung. This arrangement cannot continue indefinitely and GLU's sustainability depends on a larger number of funders especially from local universities and unions. For universities to give a long-term commitment, GLU needs to graduate 20 students a year and produce many publications.

CONCLUSION

We wait to see if GLU is sustainable and can contribute to union revitalisation. Links between the labour movement and universities go back to the beginning of the last century. What is new is that globalisation has eroded protective regulatory frameworks for workers, without providing new frameworks.

The post Second World War compromise emerged out of the economic insecurity of the 1930s. Labour faces today a new age of insecurity. If it does not construct new forms of social protection it may, as in the thirties, turn into xenophobia and find scapegoats in 'foreigners'. Under similar circumstances in the thirties, fascism grew.

GLU is an attempt to re-empower labour through engaging space and scale in new ways. It's an opportunity for a new generation of labour leaders and academics to form a partnership based on social justice, decent work and fair globalisation. LB

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