

Strikes

“Enormously compressed educative experience”

What's the best way to conduct worker education? Hold a strike! **Linda Cooper** looks carefully at a municipal workers' strike in 2002 and concludes that a range of inter-connected learning took place.

Over the past few years, the number and extent of strike action in South Africa has fallen. Some view this development positively, as establishing the industrial peace necessary for economic growth. Others argue that this is a sign of the political demobilisation of the labour movement, which lays the basis for more effective exploitation of workers. While identifying with the latter, this article is interested in its further implications, in particular, for workers' learning and class consciousness.

It is a truism that strikes are a site of important learning. The 1973 strikes which marked the re-birth of the union movement after the harsh repression of the 1950s and '60s, have been described as a 'school' for workers. Despite apartheid laws and employers' practices denying them rights, workers learnt that they could still demand and win some rights through collective action and that they had the power to make their voices heard by withdrawing their labour.

What are the learning dimensions of strike action? How does learning happen? Who teaches whom? And what are the lessons learnt? Some answers to these questions are explored via a case study of the actions of municipal workers in Cape Town, mainly during the large

national strike of the SA Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) in 2002. By analysing the strike 'through a learning lens', I will identify three closely interrelated dimensions of learning.

LEARNING THROUGH STRIKES

The history of Samwu shows that the mass actions of some workers may have a powerful demonstration effect on others. A feature of Samwu's more conservative predecessor, the Cape Town Municipal Workers Association (CTMWA), was that throughout its nearly 60-year history, it never experienced a strike. This changed for the first time in 1987, just before the launch of Samwu, when refuse workers went on a two-month go-slow.

The start of this transformation was brought about largely by the impact on municipal workers of mass action taking place outside of the union. This included the wave of struggles by 'coloured' working class communities and school students in the early 1980s, and two major strikes where municipal workers in the CTMWA were called upon to provide material and moral support. These struggles acted as a catalyst for workers, providing them with a model of how to take action, and giving them the confidence to do so.

In June 1990, about 10 000 municipal workers from the Cape Town branch of Samwu invaded the Civic Centre in their first, full-scale strike. Salie Manie, a leading figure in the strike, recalls how participation impacted on the consciousness of workers: "the amazing thing ... was that you would find that people who had never ever been involved in politics were shouting "Viva ANC! Viva Cosatu!", and the political slogans that they were shouting, and... posters that they made... all reflected a radical shift in consciousness... from where they were just before that and what happened to them during the period of the strike..."

In July 2002, Samwu embarked on the biggest strike in South Africa since the country's first democratic election. The strike ended after three weeks, with the union accepting a compromise wage offer from the employer organisation, Salga (South African Local Government Association). According to one shop steward, "Whatever else the strike was - it was a massive learning experience..." Where and how did learning take place, and what were the key lessons learnt?

There was little organised union education during the strike. Prior to the strike, a union staff workshop discussed preparations for and



William Matlala

An organiser addresses municipal workers during a strike

during the strike. Pamphlets and the union's campaign bulletin were circulated, providing information on topics such as making the decision to strike, essential services, and rules governing pickets.

However, learning largely took place informally in the midst of action. Through participation in the activities surrounding the strike, workers learnt lessons and acquired skills. This tacit learning was complemented by moments of self-conscious, critical reflection on experience in the midst of the strike.

For example, in one strike assessment meeting, worker leaders and organisers engaged in a heated debate about how to account for the drop in support for the strike, and the lack of 'discipline' amongst some shop stewards. There was a lengthy process of sharing experiences, drawing lessons and debating new courses of action.

The strike also awakened in workers a 'thirst' for new knowledge of a broader kind. A shop steward argued that the strike

awakened a desire to know more about how the economy functions, while another emphasised their need for more education around politics, history and the global economy.

'Lessons of struggle' however are not always positive or progressive. Historically, strikes have often been met with brutal oppression, workers' efforts to gain wider support have failed, and it has sometimes taken years for those workers to regain sufficient confidence to take action again. This leads to the second dimension of learning - what the strike teaches the union about itself.

LEARNING FROM STRIKES

In the Cape Town branch there was majority support for the 2002 strike in the beginning, but there was a decline over time. Imatu (Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union), the rival municipal workers' union, did not officially support the strike. Strikers were mainly drawn from lower-paid workers, with minimal support from

white-collar workers. In the central parts of Cape Town, many of the branch's 250 shop stewards did not support the strike.

The strike acted as a significant evaluative moment of the union's organisational strength, as well as the effectiveness of its education programmes.

Uneven support indicated that many shop stewards failed to exercise the roles, skills and political leadership they were supposed to have acquired through their shop steward training.

The strike also revealed different ideological and identity positions amongst union members. One shop steward argued that the ideology of working class solidarity was being rapidly eroded by an alternative ideology of competitive individualism. There were "very few of the old cleansing people... left" after nearly a decade of privatisation, casualisation of jobs, retrenchments and upward mobility of others. She argued that amongst those still employed, "there's a different breed" of workers who

had “started building life-styles on overtime” and who regarded themselves as “a cut above everybody else”.

Following the strike, the union’s leadership made attempts (via a questionnaire and through verbal reports in meetings) to gain more understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation. There were lessons in terms of strike strategy and tactics. For example, the need for a strike fund, the need to counter more effectively the divisive tactics of management, the need to clarify internal roles and responsibilities and the need to build community support in a sustained way.

Conclusions included that not enough preparation had been done, and that not enough strategising had taken place around how to deal with the issue of essential services workers, who are legally barred from striking.

The strike also put internal power relations within the union under the spotlight. For example, one shop steward felt that union representatives had committed the union to agreements regarding essential services in which workers had no say, and which seriously hindered the strike.

The strike was an opportunity for ordinary workers to reflect critically on the quality of their leaders and what they wanted from them. One group bitterly criticised the lack of a strike fund, and accused leaders of sitting, “there in their offices, ‘op hulle gatte’ (on their arses), with full wages, with no deductions, but they don’t look after the workers...”

They also accused union leaders of lack of accountability: “... we have to go and jump, and viva, and whatever, and when the strike is over, they don’t come and see us, they don’t come to the depots to salute: viva! comrades, and say... we

called off the strike... this is how far we’ve come... what did they manage to achieve... So that we can get that information...”

It is interesting to note that shop-steward elections after the strike brought in a new layer of leadership. A shop steward explained: “... a lot of shop stewards did not come out on strike. And a lot of their members came out on strike. And I think we can see the fruits of that especially with our new elections this year... that... a lot of the shop stewards didn’t come back... into positions again. And a lot of those militant members that led the strike... those are the guys that actually came in...”

‘TEACHING’ THROUGH STRIKES

The final educational feature of the strike is that it was as an exercise in ‘public education’ and counter-hegemony (against the dominant thinking). Workers assumed the role of ‘collective educator’, insofar as their actions communicated their demands and acted as a symbol of their power to management.

A shop steward said that they had “this urge” to make it a success: “It was not only Samwu comrades’ eyes on this... The employer was watching the strike very closely and they wanted to see (how strong we were)... That was always on your mind, that... workers must be mobilised, they must come out on strike, it must be a success.”

The strikers’ mass action carried a message not only to the employer, but to all spectators. Posters, pamphlets and public statements to the media projected the strike as a protest not only against low wages but also huge inequalities in public sector wages generally, and high wages of municipal managers in particular.

The message transmitted to the public was that the problems facing local government workers were

bound up with those experienced by poor communities and that they needed to join hands in opposition to local government. The strike was an exercise in counter-hegemony against the ANC government’s neo-liberal economic policies, including privatisation, and the ideology of upward mobility of a new black elite.

The widespread ‘trashing’ in the streets by some of the strikers aroused much public indignation. The union’s national education officer commented that this was an historic tactic of garbage workers on strike: “Why should they wait for two weeks for rubbish to become a real problem...?”

However, the up-ending of garbage bags and bins also had a symbolic aim. These actions may be seen as constructing the possibility of a world ‘turned upside down’, where the work of cleansing workers might be more valued and appreciated by society.

The strike was not only a collective expression of discontent and critique of the current order, but also articulated a vision of what might be possible. This was visible in the posters which demanded a Living Wage, and in speeches that spoke of a ‘united working class’, and a ‘socialist future’. It was also visible in instances where workers struggled to find a shared identity, and when workers said that they supported the strike “Because there’s a future for all of us”. LB

Linda Cooper is a senior lecturer in adult education at the University of Cape Town. This case study formed part of a larger research project on ‘learning, pedagogy and knowledge’ in trade unions: see Cooper, 2005. The title of the article is from Vladimir Lenin after the 1905 Russian revolution.