

Towards national council on workers' education

Sheri Hamilton reports on a recent Ditsela workers' education summit which committed itself to developing an alternative to the ravages of capitalism. It defined the meaning and practice of workers' education and called for the setting up of a national council on workers' education.

The Ditsela Workers' Education Institute ended the year in November 2009 with a Summit on Workers' Education following a series of discussions in various platforms by labour and government about the crisis in education.

The reality of worsening matric results announced a month after the Ditsela summit was a harsh but recurring reminder of the failure of government policies to reverse the legacy of apartheid education. These results have served as an annual barometer of the extent of the crisis in education that, like the crisis in health, transport and in service delivery more generally, is the outcome of years of neo-liberal economic policies.

The institutional changes swept in following Polokwane, were widely viewed as a welcome development in the wake of calls for the scrapping of OBE (outcomes-based education) which Jonathan Jansen long predicted would fail, and that were echoed in relation to the Sector Education and Training Authorities (Setas). However, whether the newly established departments of Higher and Basic Education and Training

will come to realise the goals of an integrated and transformed education and training system remains to be seen.

At an institutional level at least, one of the obstacles towards achieving the integration of the education and training system has been removed through the formation of DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). In taking over responsibility for the Setas previously under the Department of Labour, the potential is there to realise the vision of an education and training system that removes the false distinction between the work of the head and of the hand.

Similarly, in schooling, where the new Department of Basic Education may not have abolished OBE, it has eliminated some of the more inane and bureaucratic requirements that will create the space for teachers to focus on teaching as opposed to ticking off checklists and filling in forms.

However, these institutional changes will not in themselves bring about the reforms needed to arrest the declining literacy, education enrolment and achievement levels, that alongside

those of health and mortality, form some of the basic indicators of South Africa's limited progress in human development. As was widely reported, South Africa has been performing abysmally in education indices with countries like Zimbabwe performing much better.

Therefore, clear alternatives have to be put forward that will form the basis of a platform of demands to inspire workers to exert the necessary pressure that can result in real change. Improving literacy has to be prioritised because although it is no guarantee it does improve chances of escaping absolute poverty.

DITSELA SUMMIT

The Ditsela Summit on Workers' Education was an attempt to establish a platform for the organised working class to re-insert its voice and authority into the debate on education in a way that would widen its focus from the narrow interpretation and preoccupation with skills.

The objectives of the Summit therefore were to explore the development of a common understanding of the role of

workers' education in society; to analyse policy developments in the macro education and training arena and its implications for workers' education; and also to generate new ideas to inform national debates, strategies and policies to promote workers' education in society.

The Summit discussion paper argued for a return to workers' education that is based on a class perspective as part of challenging the dominant discourse in education and training. The Ditsela programme offered a platform to understand the policy shifts in the education and training arena and the opportunities for workers' education in the new dispensation. Through the input from John Pampallis, special advisor to the Minister of Higher Education and Training, delegates were able to contrast this with a thought-provoking presentation by Enver Motala from the People's Participation in Education Network on deconstructing the current education and training dispensation from a Marxist perspective.

Sarah Ryklief, the general secretary of the International Federation of Workers' Education also introduced an international dimension to the discussion of workers' education.

Some reflections on the inputs were offered by representatives of labour federations whose delegates formed just over half of 100 conference attendees. The rest were made up of representatives from labour service organisations, government, academia, Setas, funders and friends and staff of Ditsela.

The working groups following the main speakers grappled with questions of the role of workers' education in: building consciousness, unity and class

solidarity; transforming education specifically in relation to questions of adult basic education, the recognition of prior learning and skills development; and in building a broad based movement for the promotion and advancement of workers' education.

Experienced education activists and academics such as Salim Vally, Linda Cooper, Alan Ralph and Britt and Ivor Baatjes led the discussions in the working groups whose reflections were incorporated into a conference declaration.

The declaration which underscores the context of the global recession as a backdrop to the Summit, clearly assigns responsibility for the crisis to the system of capitalism. It reaffirms the view that the working class can alter the course of history and commits to a society based on an alternative to capitalism whose building blocks would comprise:

- access to quality health care as part of a public health system;
- free quality public education which is linked to a system of lifelong learning;
- decent work and sustainable livelihoods including through alternative forms of production of basic goods and services;
- a society based on social solidarity, cooperation and production for need and not profit;
- strong vibrant democratic organisations of the working class which are at the centre of leading a radical transformation of society.

The Summit helped to clarify the meaning and practice of workers' education and confirmed the view that

- workers' education is not neutral;
- it has a specific orientation and is controlled by workers;

- it is part of building the unity and struggles of the working class in workplaces, communities and in society;
- it instils critical thinking, collectivism and deconstructs dominant ideas;
- it helps us learn from history;
- it represents the voice of all sections of the working class;
- it must help the working class articulate a common vision;
- it must help the working class create its own intellectuals rooted in the struggles of workers.

The Summit declaration calls for the transformation of existing education and training institutions but also for the creation of workers' own institutions. It calls upon workers to influence all aspects of the curriculum including through the insertion of labour studies in public schools.

It further calls on workers to confront the paradox of large sums of money available for education while large and important areas of education including workers' education remain grossly underfunded.

The Summit endorsed the concept of a national council on workers' education guided in its main aim by the ideas that emerged at the Summit and those that exist in the movement. Ditsela together with labour service organisations was mandated to establish a small steering committee to give effect to this proposal by developing terms of reference, composition and an action plan which includes the possibility of reconvening the Summit in the near future to assess progress. LB

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