

example. There was too much operating on good faith. You need always to create institutions, much like the Constitution, that protect what you are wanting regardless of who is in charge.

### ***How do you think Cosatu should proceed now?***

Continuing on this theme of dialogue, Cosatu needs to give input at ANC NECs and the ANC and government need to do the same with Cosatu. Both organisations think government should do things differently. Government has a mind of its own, it moves with speed and it can leave organisations behind. Such dialogue would help rein in those in government who get ahead of themselves and need to be reminded of certain things.

It is important to talk at the organisational level, but it is also important to talk at the leadership level. Leaders need to share and show their perspectives in order for us to understand, and to allow space where it is needed. There is no need for an agenda, there is just the need to share more broadly.

I think when you look at Cosatu today or any time you need to look beyond who is in leadership. Each leader has their own style. Each leader is evaluated in terms of the former leader and compared. Personalities are not the same. Every leader has a different style of leadership. I can be dogged and difficult at times but this is not the issue. The question is more how can the ANC and Cosatu and the SACP in the tripartite alliance work better together and deal with critical issues. We should never take the view that we are all deliberately

out to undermine each other.

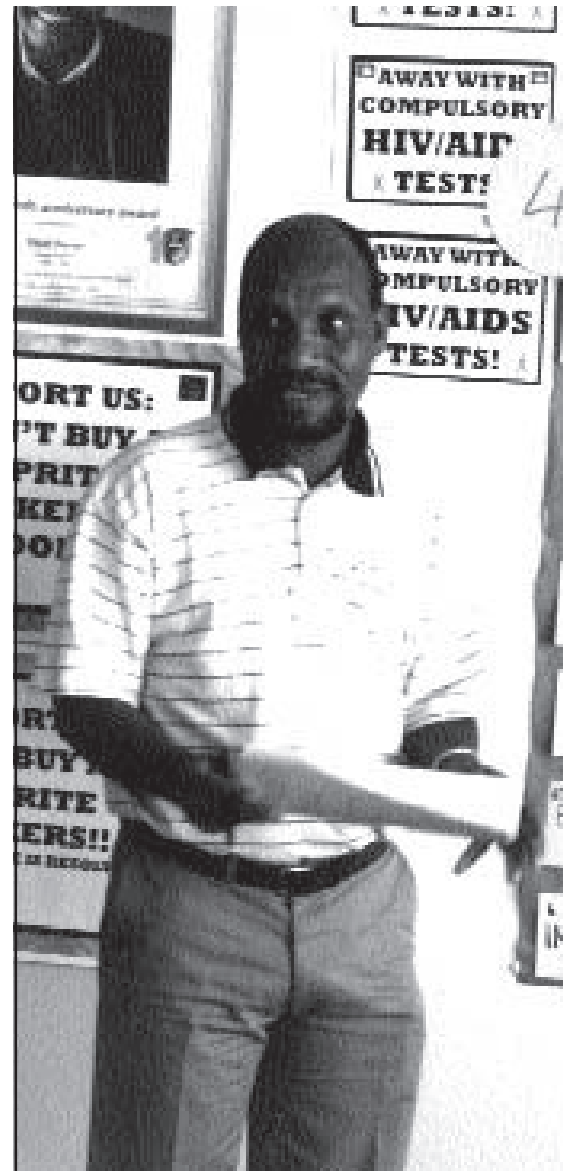
Let's take Cosatu's Job Creation Campaign. Poverty is not only a Cosatu issue. The ANC gets accused of not caring. It's counterproductive to say, 'The ANC doesn't care'. This just produces an oppositional response from the ANC. Cosatu has a huge march with the churches and civil society but the missing link is the ANC.

Many of these perspectives come from having been a trade unionist. There is no better school than the trade unions in helping people handle difficult situations. My union background has made me into someone who is willing to take risks, to be bold, to make mistakes and accept and evaluate these mistakes.

I now of course have insight into how government works, but former comrades and people in the trade union movement need to help me to keep in touch. In the Gauteng Provincial Executive Committee (PEC) there are many former Cosatu office bearers. They still have the interest of workers at heart but they are no longer Cosatu leaders.

We all have different strengths and strategic insights and I think what my time in T&G (Transport & General Workers Union, now SA Transport & Allied Workers Union) taught me is that people come from different places with different perspectives even in one organisation. People from the Midlands or Natal had a different perspective from the Western Cape or Transvaal but we still managed to discuss and absorb these different perspectives and to weld a unified perspective within the organisation. That's how it should be.

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**Linda Cooper** offers two snapshots of trade union education in South Africa, one at the time of Cosatu's birth, the other since 1990. She finds that in key respects, the quality of education on offer has deteriorated.

# Trade union education then and now has it improved?

## COSATU AND UNION EDUCATION IN THE 1980S

### **Key principles**

The early 1980s saw growing political radicalisation of organised workers, and Cosatu's approach to education mirrored this. "Education is our spear in the struggle for socialism," argued Cosatu's first education secretary. At Cosatu's first education conference, the general secretary argued that worker education should build worker control, collective experience and understanding; deepen working class consciousness; and ensure full discussion among workers as a way of building democracy.

The resolutions at its 1987 conference called for education to discourage individualism, competitiveness and careerism; tackle racism, sexism, elitism and hierarchy; promote a collective outlook and working class consciousness; and build working class leadership of the struggle for a transformed society.

### **Union education programmes**

Cosatu built on traditions developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Under the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), education programmes became more structured, and there were longer, residential programmes for union leaders.

Unions began to negotiate time off for shop stewards' training and to establish education committees to enable workers to control their

own education. Education focused on the 'nuts and bolts' of union work, but included political education programmes on working class history, capitalist political economy and international unionism.

Cosatu built on this. Unions produced educational materials and media including newsletters and magazines, manuals, booklets, videos and posters. Meanwhile students and intellectuals drawn to the workers' movement began to research working class history and international labour struggles; document and analyse the actions of South Africa's organised workers; and make this information available to a worker readership<sup>[1]</sup>. Fosatu established a tradition of annual education conferences, which Cosatu continued every two years. These also celebrated workers' culture.

### **Workers' culture**

A distinctive feature of the 1980s was the vibrant relationship between workers' education and working class culture. This predated Cosatu: in the early 1980s, worker poets like the late Alfred Qabula (see poem on final page of this edition of *SALB*) adapted praise poetry into a union mobilising tool. Fosatu's education conferences saw performances of music, choirs and dance. Workers also became involved in producing their own theatre; for example, the *Dunlop Play* produced by Mawu (Metal & Allied Workers Union, now Numsa)

workers, and the SARMCOL play *The Long March*. Under Cosatu, the cultural movement was expanded and consolidated through countrywide 'cultural locals'.

The cultural movement was a way for workers to express their own experience of exploitation and oppression and knowledge, hopes and dreams, and to celebrate their collective identity. They used indigenous cultural forms to communicate with each other, with unorganised workers and with the broad working class community, in order to win their support and share their lessons of organisation and struggle.

### **Learning through organisation and struggle**

Formal education was only a part of the learning and teaching in the union movement. Far more significant processes took place through workers' experiences and actions.

In running increasingly large and complex organisations, and in the face of state attacks, worker leaders had to develop organisational skills. There was not enough organised union education to meet their needs, and it could not answer new questions. Workers had to find their own answers through 'learning by doing', by sharing and debating their experiences, and sometimes, through costly mistakes. The workers' movement in the 1980s was a site of new knowledge production. Unions were "laboratories for democracy"<sup>[2]</sup>,



where workers could test new ideas, arrive at new understanding, and develop and enrich collective practices.

Workers also played an educator's role. By recruiting members and building unions, shop stewards and others took the message of unionism into the factories. Workers who staged strikes and stayaways discovered their power to communicate with other workers, employers and the world. Strikes had a powerful demonstration effect on workers elsewhere, who learnt that they, too, could make their voices heard.

Organised workers also provided crucial intellectual and political leadership in working class communities in the 1980s. They brought to community organisations traditions of participatory democracy, accountability, worker leadership and mass action, as well as a critique of capitalism and a socialist vision. The development of Cosatu's vision of worker education was also closely linked with community and school struggles for a 'People's Education'.

Knowledge gained by workers through experience also led them

to seek more information and a deeper understanding. Union education programmes were never sufficient to meet the intense 'thirst' for new knowledge generated by active involvement and struggle. They organised self-education in shop stewards' councils and through 'siyalalas' (overnight education sessions). In organised education programmes, the intellectual self-confidence they gained led them to engage and challenge established intellectual leaders on organisational and political issues.

#### **COSATU UNION EDUCATION IN THE '90S AND BEYOND**

##### ***Impact of new education and training policies***

By 1988, the broad liberation movement was moving into negotiations with the apartheid state. The labour movement came under pressure to review its role and strategies for change. While Cosatu remained committed to socialist transformation, its leaders began shifting from opponents of the apartheid state towards being 'equal partners' of the new ANC government.

The contradictions this generated are nowhere clearer than in Cosatu's involvement from the early 1990s in developing new education and training policies and a skills development framework. Its policies incorporated demands for 'lifelong learning', 'horizontal and vertical mobility', 'career pathing', and recognition of prior learning (RPL).

These notions drew on widely criticised 'global market' discourses. Critics point out that capital uses 'life-long learning' to justify workplace restructuring and labour flexibility, adding that 'mobility' and

'career paths' exclude most workers, particularly those in part-time, temporary and informal jobs. Research shows that RPL<sup>[3]</sup> has been used to demonstrate what skills workers lack, rather than recognise what they know. The formal certification of all education and training under the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has led to a 'paper chase' for qualifications, and greater competition and stratification among workers.

The new language of industry training has influenced union thinking about education programmes. There have been increasing demands for formal certification of union education, for 'career-pathing' and professionalisation of officials, and for union education to be systematised and institutionalised. The argument is that these measures will improve quality and strengthen unions' educational capacity.

The question is: who should judge the value of union education, union members or the South African Qualifications Authority? And what 'capacity' must education build?

Another consequence has been the privatisation and commercialisation of post-compulsory education and training<sup>[4]</sup>. A growing number of unions are contracting out their training to private providers who have no commitment to Cosatu's political vision. 'Labour' has become a lucrative new market for the 'education and training industry' in South Africa.

##### ***Impact of organisational changes***

Much has been written about the unions' lack of capacity with the





exodus of unionists into government and business. They have responded by focusing on 'leadership training' to 'rebuild capacity', and on developing larger, more structured programmes<sup>15</sup>. However, these have focused on building new kinds of capacity needed to engage in the 'politics of partnership' and on gleaning knowledge from 'experts' rather than drawing on workers' knowledge. Most unions no longer have structures through which workers can control union education.

Yet Ditsela-commissioned surveys<sup>16</sup> report that union education remains very weak and often reaches small numbers. They highlight the meagre focus on membership education, top leaders' lack of support and a lack of educational structures, policies and resources. Most education officials are new<sup>17</sup>, skills are lacking, and education has been depoliticised.

#### TRADE UNION EDUCATION: WHERE TO NOW?

Many problems of union education today are not new. In the 1980s, it suffered from inadequate resources, limited time-off facilities for workers, and organisational pressures. Worker control was not always successful: meetings of education structures were often poorly attended and worker educators often lacked skills and

confidence. Union education reached small numbers of workers, and there was conflict on its political purpose, with debates often dominated by non-worker intellectuals.

However, remembering history is also important. Trade union education before and after the formation of Cosatu did produce a rich experience of learning and teaching, and an alternative vision of what these can mean. This poses crucial questions for workers and union educators.

Can education itself produce political consciousness and engagement? Or is vibrant education the result of high levels of political consciousness and engagement? If the latter, what is the educator's role now, when labour is at a much lower ebb than in 1985? How can union education again support workers in struggle?

Education is linked to organisation and struggle. The decline in worker militancy in the post-1994 period has meant less learning, a weakening of workers' role as educators of other sections of the working class and of their voice in their own education, less thirst for knowledge among workers, and a weakening of the role of service organisations in responding to this.

We need to look beyond organised union education. Educators must find a way of

connecting with worker struggles in and outside the union movement. Where are workers learning today? What are they learning? And how do we support or shape this learning? What is 'capacity' and why does it matter? Who has it, and can it best be shared through organised education programmes or in another way?

Finally, what knowledge do workers need, and how do they learn it? How do we produce new knowledge? By giving research contracts to experts or by workers drawing on their own experiences? How these interact will determine who leads knowledge production. It also has implications for what we teach, how we teach it, and who is seen to be teaching whom.

#### References

- <sup>15</sup> A rich range of resources and media emerged, produced by labour service and adult education organisations like Sached-Lacom, Ilrig, WIP and Learn and Teach.
- <sup>16</sup> Cosatu's first education secretary, quoted in Friedman (1987).
- <sup>17</sup> Lugg et al (1998).
- <sup>18</sup> This is shown in research by Stephanie Allais.
- <sup>19</sup> See for example, Cosatu's Summer and Winter Schools in the early 1990s, and the establishment of Workers Colleges and Ditsela.
- <sup>20</sup> See Ditsela, 1997, 1998 and 2000.
- <sup>21</sup> Less than two years in their posts (Ditsela, 1997).

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*This is an edited version of a paper by Linda Cooper 'Cosatu and trade union education: 1985-2005'. Cooper is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Higher Education Development at the University of Cape Town and teaches on Ditsela union courses.*