

Transition to democracy & worker education

The coming of democracy in 1994 as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union affected worker education which tended to move more towards supporting capitalism than building a socialist society write, **Salim Vally, Mphutlane Wa Bafelo and John Treat.**

When attempting to come to terms with the precise nature, dynamics and constraints of the ensuing shifts in worker education, it is important to bear in mind the dramatic nature of the social and political backdrop against which the negotiations with the apartheid state and the discursive shifts took place. Despite fierce repression by the state in defence of capital, the workers' movement continued to grow in strength and sophistication. The dramatic increase in worker-led resistance of the 1980s, combined with increasing international pressure, eventually compelled the apartheid government to agree to enter into talks with the liberation movement aimed at negotiating an end to minority rule. At the same time, international developments at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s dramatically shifted the terrain against which these negotiations would proceed.

Neville Alexander recounts how the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of what has come to be described as a new configuration of dominant capitalism called 'neoliberalism' together profoundly reshaped the landscape for political struggle in many colonial and industrialising contexts. Although

such factors undoubtedly had a significant effect in determining the timing of South Africa's political transition, he argues, the primary impetus for that transition must be seen to lie in 'the overt and covert internal struggles of the oppressed people of South Africa against the economic and social deprivations of the system of racial capitalism coupled with international sanctions and diplomatic isolation'.

Nonetheless, the loss of a supporting superpower after the fall of the Berlin Wall, for the ANC in particular, all but eliminated militarised resistance as a viable tactic in pursuit of revolutionary social transformation, requiring radical reconsideration of strategy and tactics. The ANC faced substantial additional pressure to adopt peaceful, 'realistic' tactics from the various liberal and capitalist donors and western countries. Although the ANC had been from its inception a multi-class organisation, Alexander observes that its 'dominant, indeed hegemonic, ethos' has always been that of 'the upward-striving black middle class'.

According to Alexander: 'The complete pragmatism of the ANC leaders in matters economic is now well attested. Mandela's

notorious somersault on the question of 'nationalisation' (of mines, monopoly companies, banks, etc) is one of the more dramatic examples of this phenomenon. The ditching of the social democratic Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) for the neo-liberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) strategy was the logical outcome of this trajectory within the global context of the transition.

In part due to this highly radicalised recent history of the liberation movement, Alexander suggests that the ANC's rapid and enthusiastic embrace of neo-liberal orthodoxy caught many by surprise – including crucially the ruling apartheid National Party (NP). Simultaneously, from the perspective of the intellectual and economic elite representing the 'white' Afrikaner minority, although they may not have secured all they had hoped from the process of negotiations, they were clear and resolute as to what they were unwilling to give up.

It is against this backdrop, Alexander argues, that the 'Madiba factor' can and must be understood: the decisive role played by former President Mandela – one of Alexander's fellow prisoners

on Robben Island – in effecting the negotiated settlement that brought political democracy, even as it effectively entrenched existing economic relations, advantages and incentives through the new constitution's property and sunset clauses. The politics of reconciliation and 'social partners' thus became essential components in the process of suppressing awareness of real, material divisions and managing majority dissent and unrest. Mandela's unmatched combination of political savvy, personal charisma, 'struggle credentials', and commitment to parliamentary democratic institutional forms made him the ideal leader of such a project.

Alexander summarised the net effect of these contextual factors, movement dynamics and exceptional personalities – 'the entire dilemma and tragedy of the national liberation struggle' – as follows: 'To put the matter bluntly: the capitalist class can be said to have placed their property under new management and what we are seeing is the sometimes painful process of the new managers trying to come to terms with the fact that they are managers certainly but not by any means the owners, of capital ...'

'Ownership and control of the commanding heights of the economy, the repressive apparatuses of the state ... the judiciary, the top echelons of the civil service, of tertiary education and strategic research and development, have remained substantially in the same hands as during the heyday of apartheid.'

The ups and downs of worker education can only be meaningfully comprehended with these broader political and economic developments firmly in view. Even as negotiation talks started, the state and capital continued their attacks against progressive forces. Thousands of workers aligned to progressive structures were

murdered by 'third force' groups supported by the apartheid state machinery, Inkatha in the then Natal province, the Witdoeke in the Western Cape province, and others. The trade union movement itself was deeply divided, with powerful factions eager to cooperate with capital interests in reaching a settlement that would prevent radical shifts in economic and social relations to serve the interests of the long-oppressed minority.

As Cooper and others note: 'By 1988, it was clear that the broad movement was being led into a course of negotiation with the apartheid state. The labour movement came under pressure to review its role, as well as its strategies for change and its vision of the future. In line with the newly dominant politics of a negotiated settlement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the trade union leadership responded by shifting its declared vision from that of opponent and adversary towards a stated goal of "equal partner" with business and government ... Increasingly, the leadership of the labour movement insisted on a partnership with the former "capitalist enemy" and a common commitment to international competitiveness and appeals for foreign investment.'

Accompanying this conceptual and ideological shift, the dominant conception of 'worker education' increasingly changed. From a tradition in which the dominant self-conception of workers' engagement with their own learning involved images of worker-led choirs, plays and poetry – aimed at entrenching the self-consciousness of the working class as a force capable of demanding progressive change in the interests of the oppressed – new images came to dominate, of individual employees earning certificates and filling out paperwork in pursuit of their own advancement.

'This would have two main impacts on worker education

activities: Firstly, the priorities, form of delivery, and key target audience of trade union education were shifted; secondly, the labour movement was to become increasingly involved in workplace training issues guided by a new commitment to increased productivity and international competitiveness', add Cooper and others.

In the years following the 1994 transition, the trend continued of a rapid move away from mass worker education and towards the provision of more specialised, modular training programmes for sharply defined groups of workers. Dramatic changes to the country's economic, social, and political environment in the wake of the transition had profound implications for the trade union movement, and consequently for worker education. As Cooper observes, this led to a change in the role of the leading labour formations from being in an adversarial relationship with the state, to attempting to negotiate as an 'equal partner' with business and the state. Despite its stated commitment to socialism and worker control, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) has been key to the Tripartite Alliance's retention of unassailable political dominance.

Unsurprisingly, shifts in the conception and forms of worker education in post-apartheid South Africa largely parallel the wider shifts that have occurred globally with the rise of neo-liberal macro-economic policy regimes and political imperatives. By 2000, the radical vision of worker education that had animated so much of its practice during the struggle against apartheid had dramatically dissipated, having lost ground with the rise of a dominant 'consensus politics' led by the ANC, which 'assumes the essential compatibility of all stakeholder interests,' argued Cooper and others.

As Hamilton, drawing on Cooper, argues, with the transition to a liberal democratic political regime, worker education has gone from having 'a strong emancipatory objective, emphasising the value of experience in the collective struggle to build new knowledge and in developing democratic participation and decision-making for a socialist society' to one in which 'a human capital approach to worker education, which emphasises individual access to vocational educational and training and upward educational and economic mobility' has become dominant within trade unions. Unions now 'outsource' the training of shop stewards to accredited private providers in order to access training funds available through Sector Education and Training Authorities (Setas).

At the level of terminology, this has led to a rise to dominance within policy discourses of terms like 'adult education' and 'lifelong learning'. Of the latter term in particular, Mojab writes that it 'shifts the burden of increasing adaptability to the workers and at the same time, offers it as a ray of hope for a more democratic engaged citizenry. Stated another way, implicit in this shift in conception is the notion that unemployment can and should be attributed to "deficits" among the un- or under-employed - to a "skills gap".'

Another key development affecting worker education in post-apartheid South Africa was the introduction of the 'National Qualifications Framework' (NQF) in the mid-1990s, which imposed a standardised set of principles, guidelines and definitions for the creation of a national certification system for educational qualifications, overseen by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Hamilton cites Jones' observation that the NQF 'looks both ways ... [to] social

upliftment through enabling access to educational opportunities for people to improve their lives, but at the same time commodifies education, training and experience and ascribes it with a market value; a credit currency.

While some unions continue their own shop stewards' training, whole departments within unions and federations have been established to engage with education and skills development structures, often, at the expense of trade union education. In the skills terrain alone, trade unions are represented in 21 Setas with representatives from government and business and many require more than one representative from each stakeholder to serve on their sub-structures.'

Ngcwangu summarises Samson and Vally's critique of the NQF's 'outcomes-based' qualifications framework for education and training as follows: '(1) the NQF system would create an unwieldy bureaucracy with Standard Generation Bodies and similar structures resulting in an extensive "paper chase"; (2) international experience indicates that outcomes-based systems focus on what people can do, to the exclusion of other knowledge which they may have; (3) one of the underlying assumptions of "human capital theory" is that there is a direct link between education and economic growth [which obscures or underplays other, more important causes of unemployment]; and, (4) post-Fordist production methods would influence the logic of the development of the NQF: For post-Fordists, investment in education and training must be justified by proof that they are an efficient means of ensuring increased productivity.'

In a subsequent article, Samson and Vally identify further challenges the NQF would pose to union education in South Africa: (1) the NQF's focus on clearly

identifiable performance outcomes reinforced these trends and further marginalised more overtly political, class-based forms of mass worker education; (2) linking union education and training efforts to the NQF in order to satisfy training certification requirements would undermine the ability of unions to maintain control over their own education programmes; (3) disparities between level of training achieved and level of employment opportunities available - an unavoidable disparity over which unions have little if any control - would tend to result in 'educational inflation' (i.e., higher and higher credentials required for jobs that neither utilise nor remunerate workers according to the required skill level); (4) learning moments such as strikes and experiences of building and controlling organisations collectively, which are important elements of worker education that cannot be certified through the NQF system, could become devalued and marginalised; (5) limitations on the number of days off to pursue training would translate into pressure on workers to emphasise industrial and skills-based training over other forms of union training aimed at organising and collective advancement of workers' struggles; and, (6) outcomes-based training and education models define outcomes in terms of individual displays of competence and hence learning understood as a social process would be undermined.

Continuing, Samson and Vally write: 'The issue of collective vs. individual learning and evaluation processes highlights larger issues regarding the NQF's focus on generic competencies that are applicable in all spheres of learning. One of the 10 'essential outcomes' proposed by the Inter-Ministerial Working Group is 'solving problems and making decisions'. The ability to make decisions and solve problems is by no means



Worker education also include choral music. Credit: William Matlala.

a ‘natural’, neutral or singular thing across different contexts, however. For example, a manager may be very talented at quickly identifying what s/he sees as a problem, formulating a solution, and instructing others to carry it out, and at the same time completely incapable of participating in a joint identification and assessment of a problem, facilitating the collective development of a solution through a consensus-based decision-making process, and participating in a collective strategy to implement the group’s proposed solution. Two very different sets of competencies are involved in these two different scenarios, and the skills applicable to each are not transferable to the other. Canadian and Australian critics of outcomes-based education have drawn on the vast body of work on learning processes and have argued that in fact there is no such thing as a de-contextualised generic competency or essential outcomes.

The discourse of ‘Adult Basic Education’ (ABE) – and later ‘Adult Basic Education and Training’ (ABET – had replaced the previous, informal discourse in which the term ‘literacy’ was dominant, understood to encompass more than the ability to read and write, but familiarity with the structures and forces that shape lived opportunities, and a sense of self-driven agency to engage with them. Soliar argues that this was more than a mere change in terminology, but rather an indicator of the rise to dominance of a conception of education for economic skills, with the discourse and practice of ABET focusing mainly on the ‘T’ for training and leaving aside any suggestion of education that would encompass the full range of skills, values, capabilities and competencies that equip one to participate in the transformation of power and social relations.

Thus ABET, ‘lifelong learning’ and the construction of ‘worker education’ to focus on certification together promote a widespread ‘flexibilisation’ of the workforce through a state-led training regime to maximise economically exploitable skills for the production of value within the (private) formal economy, and to increase a ‘reserve army’ of skilled labour in advance of market demand. Even as it adopted struggle language of empowerment, participation and a people-centred approach, ABET discourse and practice remain firmly within, and in service of, a political economy of vocationalism, market values and individualism. This is reflected in the fact that the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in higher education institutions and in the private sector are focused on – if not restricted to – providing access to education and the market on the basis of established norms and standards in these institutions.

Within trade union structures, these changes have decisive impacts on roles, responsibilities and self-conceptions. Perhaps most significantly, they promote the conversion of shopstewards – arguably the single most important function within unions for sustaining political consciousness, and therefore a site of often fierce contestation – into ‘trainers’ (or even ‘trainers of trainers’).

CONCLUSION

Roux presciently notes: ‘Trade unions all over the world have had, and still have, noble aims regarding their education programmes, but it is interesting to see how differently these aims are applied. Unions may have many wonderful sounding resolutions, but it is their concrete plans, strategies and programmes and how these are applied in practice that spell out what their resolutions really mean.’

It is crucial to bear in mind that if worker education is to serve an emancipatory purpose, it must be grounded in the contexts and experiences of working people themselves. For this reason, it is important to resist the temptation to pursue the ‘right’ or even the ‘best’ conception of, and approach to, workers’ education, outside of an active and concrete engagement. Scholarly research and analysis can provide evidence and conceptual resources for use by working people who are engaged in struggle – not merely for improved working conditions but for deeper collective self-consciousness and greater self-determination – but in the absence of such grounding and accountability such scholarship can quickly become irrelevant or even distracting. Additionally, as Cooper and others observed ‘a tight definition of worker education is difficult because its boundaries are fluid and dynamic, moving within the full range of learning experiences of workers’.

Cosatu’s position on worker education is currently under review

in the wake of a rejection at its 2009 Education and Skills Conference of a proposal to adopt accreditation processes and standards for union education programmes and activities, in favour of a more explicitly radical and collectivist conception of worker education. This renewal of interest in more politically responsive forms of worker education may indicate resistance among rank-and-file members of Cosatu’s member unions to the increasingly de-politicised and individualistic conception of worker education that has been operative in recent years.

The effectiveness of worker education efforts in shaping political consciousness and in supporting workers’ struggles for fundamental social transformation depends to an important degree upon the opportunities those efforts provide for learning through and from concrete activities of resistance and struggle. For this reason, it remains vital that formal union structures actively resist tendencies towards formalisation, technical functional division, and the rise of certification schemes and standards. In South Africa, this resistance has not been sufficient to prevent a profound de-politicisation of trade union structures, and of political consciousness among workers. Nevertheless, there remains a significant legacy and influence of the traditions of worker education and militant trade unionism in South Africa among some trade unions, community-based organisations and social movements. Perhaps most noteworthy among these are the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), South Africa’s largest union, which is currently in conflict with the ANC/SACP; independent trade unions whose members have left the Alliance, such as the General Industrial Workers Union of South Africa (GIWUSA), associations of ‘shack dwellers’ such as Abahlali base Mjondolo, and other social movements rooted in working-class communities.

South Africa’s proud history of resistance in and through education continues. The ‘peoples’ education movement’, ‘worker education movement’ and ‘popular adult and/or community education movement’ are examples. This praxis, relative to the struggle against apartheid has diminished but still exists, and its centre of gravity today has shifted away from trade unions to the new organisational forms, as workers and the unemployed resist the impact of neo-liberalism and increasing poverty and inequality two decades into post-apartheid South Africa. Tendencies towards de-politicisation can be countered and even reversed through worker education that is critical, but this requires structures, activities and arguments that favour independent, democratic control, and that foster skills of critical thinking, building and maintaining solidarity, and cultivating collective self-awareness aimed at the self-emancipation of working, poor and oppressed people.

While the legacy of worker education in South Africa is a rich and proud one from which an enormous amount can be learned, new developments brought about by ongoing capital accumulation as well as the waxing and waning and changing forms of class struggle have brought forward new challenges. Only a few of the most notable among these are the widespread casualisation of labour and the rise of ‘precarious work’; social, political and economic challenges arising from the movements of migrant workers, including xenophobia; and, the accelerating ecological crisis wrought by continuing, unfettered industrial expansion. It is more vital than ever that worker education efforts remain clear, vigilant and resolute in their analytical, organisational and practical commitments. ¹⁸

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