

# Worker education

## *the role of history*

**I**n an ideal world, there should be no limit to the range of subjects which should constitute a worker education curriculum - it should be as wide and as open as it is to a member of the bourgeoisie, whose choice of field of study is limited only by the available resources.

However, worker education has limitations imposed not only by the restricted availability of resources but also by the worker's position in the production process

There are obvious areas of importance:

- Economics: elements of production, the dynamics of agriculture, manufacturing, primary industry, and the service sector, the distribution of products and pricing mechanisms, the fundamentals of investment and banking.
- The role of the state and private enterprise, fiscal policy in a regional and global context.
- The organisation of production from the point of view of management and labour: legislation and labour law, health and safety.

The list could be continued. Specific South African applications would include the rights of workers under the South African Constitution, the implications of government policy on workers' lives and conditions of work and particular issues which arise out of the South African situation, including the legacy of colonialism and apartheid and how to deal with it.

*Jeff Guy argues for worker education which enables workers to challenge the ideas and concepts through which capital seeks to control them. The teaching of history should play a central role in such a project.*

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### **The historical perspective**

All the subjects mentioned would have to be seen in an historical perspective. To understand the world and its institutions, the mechanisms by which it is ordered, the ideas that people have about it, we have also to know something about the way in which it developed. It is only with a knowledge of the history of capitalism that we can understand it as one system amongst others. We have to know something about the great changes in society which have enabled the capitalist system to come to dominate us as it does today. We have to know something about the way men and women have struggled to extend it and have struggled against it, to understand not just the labour movement, but also the modern world system under which we live.

To understand the way in which

production is organised today, we have to know something about how it was organised in the past - to understand, for example, what is post-Fordist, we have to know something of what Fordist production was, or that flexible accumulation depends on systems of accumulation which are considered rigid, non-flexible.

More than this, we have to understand what features of South African workers' lives are shared with workers in the rest of the world - what is specific to the South African working class experience and what are the fundamental features of that experience.

It is the historical perspective which attends to all these questions.

### History as challenge

At this point in time, worker education has to be oppositional. We live in an age where capitalism is triumphant, and philosophies, modes of thought, political, economic and social systems built on opposition to capital have been beaten back.

Part of this is overt. Day by day, we are confronted with ideas and concepts which pose as serious and objective analysis, but are, in fact, profoundly ideological. For example, it is assumed that we all agree that we live in a post-capitalist age, that new technologies and new managerial techniques have blurred the distinction between capital and labour. It is widely held that we live in an age of greater freedom and greater opportunity.

There are those who would question this viewpoint. They would argue that we still live in the age of capital, that we are observing not the end, but the intensification of capitalist exploitation. If we look at the *world* of capital and labour, the disparities of wealth are greater. Even if labour is more mobile, it is the mobility of insecurity. If opportunities are greater, they are opportunities to labour, not to

accumulate.

We live, we are told, in the age of globalisation, South Africa has to become a competitor in the global world to participate in its wealth. There is another point of view which historically sees globalisation as part of the process of capitalist development and as old as capitalism itself. So many of the concepts which are called new are new names only, trying to cover old concepts. A hundred years ago, capitalism used the advance of civilisation as its justification for acquiring the resources and the labour of others. It was called imperialism. Today, capitalism uses the free market to do the same - it is now called globalisation.

One of the objectives of worker education is to develop an informed and rational critique of such concepts and ideas. In an age of capitalism, it is the role of worker education to provide the understanding and the knowledge to challenge the conventional ideas of the time. Effective graduates of a 'Workers' Academy' would, for example, expose as preposterous the claims of certain South African businesspeople that they not only challenged apartheid, but were victims of the system as well.

Such a Workers' Academy would need funding and recognition, at a time when the demands made on educational resources and skills are immense. History is not considered to have much to offer in these days where the vocational outcome is all important. What is more likely is the incorporation of worker education into the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Of course there can be no objection to facilitating this - but the ideal of worker education based on a workers' perspective as a challenge to the dominant ideologies of the day is not part of such a scheme.

The experience of teaching labour

history for the Labour Diploma at the Durban Worker College provides many insights into the future of history and the future of worker education.

The course drew on the traditions of social history, developed in adult and workers' education projects in Europe and the USA and the History Workshop movement which entered South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s as a radical alternative to the historical establishment.

### Concepts

The course consisted of a weekly two-hour meeting over 12 weeks. We began by looking at some basic analytical concepts – modes of production, forces of production, forms of labour, technology, commodity, class. These were examined first within a South African context – as part of African systems of homestead production as they existed before colonialism.

The history of conquest was then considered – the loss of land, taxation, the undermining of the homestead base, its incorporation into the South African capitalist system, the logic of the migrant labour system and its social consequences, the changes wrought on African agriculture, the nature of indentured labour. The emergence of modern nationalist politics, the further integration of South African capital into the world system, segregation and apartheid and the exploitation of labour, resistance to apartheid and the growth of the modern labour movement, and the collapse of the system of racial capital which supported apartheid, were studied.

### Identification

Up to this point South African history was studied as a straightforward narrative, concentrating on labour history informed by certain analytical categories drawn from the left. There was one essential

point, however. Students were always asked to relate their own lives and their own experiences to these analytical concepts and the historical narrative. Many students felt that they were unable to push their personal narratives far into the past – they felt that they could date their historical lives back to, say, their schooling or their entry into the labour movement in the late 1970s or 1980s. But others had access to parents' or grandparents' experiences, and could tell stories of work on the coal or gold mines, in manufacturing, of labour tenancy, of removals. Some students had documents at home. Others were able to record the lives of old family members or friends.

This personal involvement in history was absolutely crucial to the course. For many students, this direct engagement with the past was crucial both in sustaining interest and in the learning process.

### Contextualisation

After the main ideas had been drafted, the facilitator was able to advise the student where to find documented material which could be used to supplement and contextualise the students' research. Once this was done, the student wrote the final draft, following academic conventions, of their own history, or that of their family or community, and the part they played in the labour history of South Africa.

This essay was assessed internally and by an external examiner expert in the field. Finally, a panel of examiners was set up and the student examined orally on his/her research and its findings.

### Achievements

With very few exceptions, students found the course to be a genuinely educative experience in which students made positive gains in a number of areas. It was a rewarding experience for the facilitator



*Worker education should challenge conventional ideas.*

as well. The most successful essays – perhaps one in five – were genuine pieces of research, which added to the body of knowledge of South African labour history, and gave greater insight into the lives of South African workers.

### **Problems**

There were also negative aspects of the course. The time available for study severely restricted the students' ability to do sustained reading and research. As a result, the essays drew too heavily on subjective experience, were too biographical and too anecdotal.

A significant number of students did not express themselves in written English in a conventional manner. The criterion used was whether it could be understood, not whether the English was written in accordance with academic demands. Students were not marked down for unconventional English. An individual facilitator has that freedom – what happens

in the future when worker education falls within the ambit of the NQF?

### **Skills**

The most serious problem is one which stretches way beyond the Durban Worker College. This is the notion that the study of history has no practical application – that it leads to no recognised qualification. In the minds of management and many progressive educators, history is a study which has no vocational outcome.

Consequently, it does not attract funding, and does not attract students. Training – in keeping books, in law, in mediating and negotiating skills, can be put to use – the study of the past is a waste of time.

The point has already been made that understanding the past is integral to understanding the present. However, there are other reasons why history should form a central part of worker education. The sort of historical research which has been outlined, which is student centred,

confidence-building and, it could be argued, outcomes-based, is very real training as well. The student has, first of all, to identify a set of often difficult sources of information, some oral, some documentary. These then have to be assimilated, become part of the student's own understanding of the world, the student's own ideas. They then have to be set down in a structured form for effective communication.

The identification, assimilation and communication of information are integral to a vast range of tasks which are of vital importance in the workplace. These are real skills with a wide application. A student who can effectively carry out such a project is left with far more than a piece of personal history. She or he is also left with a set of skills with relevance and wide applicability.

### Information technology

The processes of controlled and guided research into labour history creates difficulties because of the demands it makes on the limited amount of time available to workers. Part of the problem is the time it takes to get hold of sources in libraries with restricted opening hours, copying facilities and so on.

However, advances in information technology are revolutionising our lives. Computerised learning and the application of the computer to research and instruction could well provide a range of solutions to these problems. It could make a vast range of information available to the student, at times and in places



*Computerised learning could solve problems.*

where it is not accessible at the moment.

Worker education should go beyond training. A Workers' Academy should seek to empower workers by enabling them to challenge the ideas and concepts by which capital seeks to control them. Worker history should play an essential role in such a project. It allows students not only to understand the concerns and ambitions of the working class, but recognises the importance of their own experiences, perceptions and knowledge.

This is an ambitious project, an over-optimistic one, perhaps, given the resources and skills needed and the manner in which they are currently appropriated and distributed. It is a project, however, which needs to be taken seriously by all who are involved in worker education. ★

*This is an edited version of a talk given at a workshop on worker education, Social Policy Programme, University of Durban Westville, November 1997. Jeff Guy is Professor of History at the University of Natal, Durban. He taught the Labour History course for the Labour Diploma at the Durban Worker College from 1991 to 1995.*