Trade Union Education and the Organising Agenda

by Dave Spooner

In recent years, many trade union educators around the world have been in a dilemma of how to support the development of training programmes for tougher, smarter, centrally-planned and more strategically focused organisation, yet maintain its traditions of collective and participatory education for rank-and-file activists. Some have worried that there would be attempts to marginalise or undermine trade union education in favour of a narrow, skills-based training agenda.

Trade union priorities have necessarily changed, affecting policy and priorities for education. IUR readers will not need reminding that the worldwide attacks on trade union rights and the associated decline in trade union membership and power over the last twenty years has forced a rethink of strategy and approach. Very few unions can now rely on the automatic delivery of trade union membership through collective agreements in major workplaces. Employers, supported by state legislation, have been on the offensive, and the workplace itself has been splintered, out-sourced and mechanised: the "hollow corporation", as William Street explained in the last issue., ("A global union's direct action promotes organising in the US", IUR Vol 18 Issue 3)

As Sharon Graham from Unite described using the example of the meat industry, unions have had to rethink their organising strategies, recognising that social and economic justice depends on democratisation of decision-making and power to the workplace. Yet strategic organising also requires concentrated and centralised (albeit democratically determined) decisions on priorities and resources

In common with substantial numbers of unions around the world, Unite's original 'strategic organising agenda' was strongly influenced by the techniques and methods developed in the USA. Some unions such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) developed a blueprint for trade union renewal: concentrated heavy investment in organising, corporate research, strategic targeting of employers, time-limited campaigns, building sector-wide power – based on well-trained teams of organisers and activists.

The SEIU training agenda sat uncomfortably with the traditions of democratic participatory workers' education. On the one hand, since the 1970s, unions throughout the world had adopted education methods rooted in 'learning from your own experience' student-centred learning, a 'negotiated curriculum' – influenced by the ideas of Paulo Freire, the Swedish study circle tradition, the old TUC 'Red Book' etc - focused on education as the driver of grass-roots democratic union processes, culture and renewal.

On the other hand, strategic organising totally depended on organisers and activists being trained in specific skills and approaches for pre-determined priority targets, using very different training techniques, methods and language.

Perhaps there has always been a tension between the democratic, self-directed and participatory traditions of the workers' education movement, and the need for trade unions to provide training to achieve centrally-determined strategic objectives, but in the last ten years there have been fears that this tension would become institutionalised between union organising departments and education departments.

New Approaches – strategic organising meets critical pedagogy?

There are signs however that the organising and workers' education agendas are converging. As unions

adopt a strategic organising approach at the core of their work, the techniques, approaches and language are being adapted and reshaped to meet local or sectoral circumstances and the need for the democratic involvement of the activists at the workplace.

A key driving force is recognition that the 'classic' strategic organising approach only works when resources are time-limited, prioritised and concentrated in certain places, sectors or companies. As Michael Crosby, SEIU Regional Organizing Director explained:

> "When our organising resources are so limited, we have to be honest with workers and let them know that we have a limited time – and then we must move on to the rest of their industry. That will mean that when potential members ring with a problem, we might have to say that no we can't help them organise just yet. That we have to concentrate our resources in quite another part of the industry. We will get to them later".
> (Michael Crosby, 2003. http://www.actu.org.au/organising/news/1054172545_875.html)

In the meantime, in what could be a very long wait, activists and shop stewards need education opportunities to develop their own organising strategy – without the benefit of substantial resources or teams of professional organisers. This requires learning and adapting from the organising techniques, integrated in a broader education framework.

Unite, for example, is developing new organising courses for shop stewards in specific sectors to support the development of national and international industrial combines that integrate some of the strategic organising methods with trade union traditions of critical pedagogy. In other words practical skills in developing union power combined with an understanding of some of the root causes and context of the key issues facing workers.

In addition to the skills needed to map the workplace, develop workplace leaders, identify the campaign issues, build membership communication, and so on, this requires an understanding of the broader industrial, economic and corporate context – "getting inside the head of the Corporation" as Jennie Formby, Unite National Officer describes it:

> "It's absolutely essential for our stewards and activists to be fully engaged in all aspects of organising rather than something done by separate Organising Units. To do this meaningfully they have to understand why companies do what they do and how global capital operates. If we maintain an insular, reactive approach we will consistently lose. We must be better at predicting how employers are going to behave and act accordingly. It's vital to ensure that all our members, not just our stewards, are fully involved at all stages and understand the underlying motivations of transnational companies if fight-backs are going to be effective."

In the global south, many of the traditional trade union development programmes have been replaced by training programmes for organisers – sometimes at the request of OECD country union organising departments seeking to gain campaign 'leverage' over transnational employers through international solidarity action. In truth, large numbers education departments of unions and their respective national centres in the south and east had in effect already ceased to function in a sustained and programmatic way, having become dependent on shrinking short-term project funding from external agencies (see below).

Moreover, the numbers of workers who are in a recognisable formal relationship with an employer are in a minority of the global workforce, and shrinking. While organised labour in the 'formal economy' remains, at least for the time being, the power base and the backbone of the trade union movement, the last few years

have seen a dramatic increase of interest in the need to organise precarious and informal workers. The rise of precarious work, particularly for young workers, has sounded alarm bells throughout the movement. The democratic organised voice of informal workers, precarious by definition, is becoming increasingly articulate. There is a growing realisation that 'standard employment' or decent work is actually a relatively recent and perhaps temporary phenomenon, enjoyed by no more than a minority of workers, even at the best of times.

Despite many challenges, trade union educators are increasingly turning their attention to programmes designed to support the organisation of precarious and informal workers. The workers themselves are becoming increasingly organised – still in relatively small numbers, but growing[1].

New education and training approaches are being developed for work among precarious and informal workers: re-thinking the functions and operations of a union when there may be no discernable employer, constructing new models of collective bargaining, fighting for labour law reform to assert rights for all workers, not just those in waged employment.

Again, the response has been to develop education programmes that appropriate some of the tactics and methods of strategic organising, but adapt it to a very different context. Recent examples can be found in StreetNet International (the international network of unions and associations of street vendors and market traders) in training activists in collective bargaining with local governments; the Bulgarian home-based workers' association, in campaigning for the national ratification of the ILO Homeworker Convention; or the training and education work that lay behind the recent successful global struggle of domestic workers for their own ILO Convention.

New Demands for Political Education

There are causes for optimism – the new international agenda for strong industrial organisation, evidence of increasing corporate vulnerability to well-organised and targeted campaigns, and a new generation of activists emerging from movements for democracy and climate justice.

Yet there is a political vacuum. Union members want an international political alternative to neo-liberalism and corporate capitalism, but little emerges beyond rhetoric. Many of the formal institutions of the international labour movement have retreated into a bland lowest common denominator of politics, shy of even basic principles of social democracy, let alone any mention of democratic socialism. Trade unionists fighting to emerge from the shadow of dictatorship find their democratic labour histories and traditions destroyed and unrecorded after generations of suppression and censorship. Yet this is the time when radical political solutions are required, a new sense of political direction for the international trade union movement.

There is a growing demand for new workers' education initiatives to debate and question what are, and what should be, the politics of the international trade union movement. Programmes and events are needed to stimulate discussion on democratic socialism, radical democracy, and the political agenda of the international trade union movement, in the context of the global economy, of the general attack on the labour movement, financial crises and environmental destruction.

In other words, what are we organising *for*?

[1] See Bonner & Spooner (forthcoming), The Only School We Have: Learning from Organizing Experiences Across the Informal Economy, WIEGO.

A bit of history….

This is nothing new. From a historical perspective, the early international workers' education movement included a broad alliance of the education institutions of socialist and social-democratic parties, trade unions, cooperative societies, and independent workers' education associations. By 1924 a conference was convened to establish an "International Federation of Labour Organisations concerned with Workers' Education". This was not agreed without considerable debate however. The Austrian socialist party delegate proposed that the federation should be "for the purpose of assisting workers' educational associations in the various countries and coordinating their activities, *and the systematic awakening and strengthening of the class-consciousness of the workers of the world*". Debates on resolutions concerning the "character of workers' education" agreed that workers' education should be under workers' control, should be considered an instrument for social emancipation, and "to give an intelligent impetus to the demand for a new social order"[2]. (Marius Hansome, 1931. World Workers' Educational Movements – Their Social Significance, Columbia University Press).

Today, the involvement of major socialist political parties has virtually disappeared. Trade union political education has been in decline for decades. Many of the old 'workers' education associations' have retreated towards vocational training and leisure education. The cooperative education movement has little contact with its historical partners in the trade union movement. The more recent wave of workers' education organisations in the global south are certainly more directly political, and many are engaged in political education work with their respective national trade union movements, but the majority struggle for financial survival.

Resources – workers' education and the state

From the outset one hundred years ago, there was a further internal debate in the international workers' education movement that still has resonance today –whether or not workers' education organisations should seek financial support from the state[3]. This was a time when the growing political power of social democratic parties in some countries made grants and subsidies for workers' education possible.

Since then, the major source of finance has been (directly or indirectly) governments, particularly those committed to broad social-democratic politics. In the global north, particularly in northern Europe, this frequently meant direct financial support for workers' education associations, trade union education programmes and workers' colleges, with few conditions attached. Post-war, state money was supporting workers' education programmes throughout Europe.

Northern government funds were also channelled to union and labour-NGO education programmes in the global south, through national and international union federations, and specialist labour-movement or social-democratic institutions such as the German-based Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) or the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (the Solidarity Center) and its forerunners. Similar institutions were given state aid in the Nordic countries (SASK, LO-TCO, OPIC etc), Netherlands (FNV Mondiaal), Spain (ISCOD), Japan (JILAF) and elsewhere. While not necessarily focused on workers' education, inevitably all

[2] Sadly, the 1924 initiative stalled, interrupted by the rise of fascism, the splits in the socialist movement, and the Second World War. It was not until 1945 that the international organisation was created: the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA).

[3] The discussion was sometimes vitriolic, exemplified in the UK by the pre-war arguments between the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the National Council of Labour Colleges.

support programmes for the development of trade union organisation and effectiveness rely on education as the main method of delivery.

Interestingly, there have never been comparable large labour movement grant-awarding institutions in the UK. From time to time, the TUC International Department has had access to financial support from the Foreign Office, and more recently under the Blair government, from the Department for International Development, but the scale of funding has been very small compared to the TUC's continental European counterparts.

Today, the most direct and practical impact of the current economic and political crises on workers' education has been the reduction of funding available – both in the global north and south. Where funding does exist, the extent to which trade unions and workers' education organisations are free to determine their own curricula and educational methods has been considerably restricted. Resources for long-term institutional support in the development of workers' education programmes, such as there were, have by and large been replaced by short-term project funding, with increasingly strict criteria imposed by funding agencies.

With few exceptions, the budgets of the European labour movement institutions have been cut by their respective neo-liberal governments. Some have closed altogether. In former decades, the European Commission was a lucrative source of support, particularly for union education in central and eastern Europe. Very little now survives, and the few funds that are available are notoriously complicated to manage and administer.

Other non-labour movement funding agencies, which have supported trade union education programmes from time to time in the past, have shifted position in response to the political and economic climate. Oxfam International's programme on labour rights, for example, was closed in 2010.

Where government support has continued, it has been far more conditional on specific criteria, and more tightly monitored and controlled through stringent application and reporting procedures. In some countries, the administration of project proposals and management have been contracted to the big consultancy companies, such as PricewaterhouseCoopers – part of a larger trend towards privatisation in the international development industry.

In many countries, particularly in the global south, this has further disadvantaged trade union education departments, very few of which have the practical management skills to apply for, manage and report on funds in the format, language and detail demanded by the funding bureaucracies.

The impact on workers' education organisations has been profound. With rare exceptions, long-term support for basic trade union development through broad education provision has disappeared, replaced by short-term highly targeted project activity – often with little or no contribution to core budgets.

In many northern countries, education programmes to support the work of trade union workplace representatives and provision of broader political and cultural workers' education has been eclipsed by accredited skills-based and vocational training, such as UnionLearn in the UK. In some unions, this has also proved to be a valuable tool in union recruitment, but there are many who fear that it has been a distraction from the core purpose of union education.

Self-sufficiency?

Nearly one hundred years ago, many socialists argued that unions and workers' education organisation should not accept state finance. Maybe they had a point. Certainly, in many countries and in many unions – both north and south - there is a dependency culture in the trade union education movement that has been entrenched over decades. It is common to meet trade union education officers who explain that they are unable to provide programmes for their members, because they are "waiting for the funding". In some unions, 'education officer' is virtually synonymous with 'fund-raiser'. Somewhere along the way we've forgotten how to run education from our own resources, as meagre as they may be.

Perhaps a new generation of trade union education is emerging – rooted in the traditions of participatory learning, concentrated on building union organising power, built around the big questions of democratic socialism in a corporate world, and based on financial self-reliance.

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