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Symposium abstracts

Social movements and trade unions

"What kind of worker's education is needed under conditions of globalisation?"

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Sharing experiences of educators in building unity and solidarity of the working class to resist the disastrous consequences of corporate globalisation.

Challenging unions - some notes on trade unions and globalisation: the Swedish case

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Unions are today facing neo-liberal attacks all over the world and not least in Sweden. The former high degree of organisation (sometimes above 85 percent of the workforce) is rapidly decreasing. The right-centre coalition government and the ruling by the European Union Court in the Vaxholm case (limiting the influence of the national unions) confront unions with serious challenges. Generally relatively defensive and rigid responses have dominated but at the European Social Forum (ESF) in Malmö in September 2008 there were indications of a more offensive attitude. For the first time several unions participated actively and extensively in the forum, particularly from the Nordic countries (Wahl 2008), and their ambitions to establish links to other social movements were clearly demonstrated.

The history and nature of Swedish trade unions differ from unions in other parts of the world as well as there are similarities. In the Swedish case the so-called Saltsjöbaden agreement in 1938 created a relatively stable tripartite relationship between employers, unions and the government. A certain radicalisation of the unions took place in the beginning of the 1970's and several new labour laws were launched (e.g. the Work Environment Act, the Co-Determination Act). However this was followed by a reaction from the organised employers. From the 1990's Swedish trade unions seem to have gradually lost in strength and influence.

In the paper the potential of the Swedish trade union movement to be a democratic force (cf. Laski 1951, Negt 1987) and an actor in the global social justice movement is scrutinised against the background of discussions at the ESF meeting (Lindberg 2008, Sahlström 2008) and experiences from cooperation between universities and unions in Sweden (Holmstrand and Olsson 2007). There are many good reasons for unions to reflect on their core values and potential role and to be self-critical. But if they do this, might unions even be challenging the dominant external as well as internal patterns?

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Community Unionism: Learning for a New Labour Relations Regime in the North American Service Sector

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In North America, global economic crisis has once more put on the table among many other things the matter of the effectiveness of labour relations regimes. From the decline of North American manufacturing and its most recent catastrophe in the auto sector to the effectiveness of public services delivery in a time of state austerity, questions of the way decisions about the labour process including benefits and control have once again resurfaced. It no coincidence that in the lower tier service sector – an ongoing instance of poor conditions, promulgation of non-standard employment yet where products (e.g. customer services) are perhaps most frequently re-imagined and subject to matters of quality – we see the possibility of a new labour relations regime. Labour relations regimes are understood conventionally as the institutional relations, roles and rules that together construct the employment relationship, though in this paper this is expanded to include how these regimes are also actively constructed in the work and labour organizing processes as well. The approach taken in this paper is that labour relations regimes must be actively constructed, re-constructed and occasionally transformed; and that these processes are always rooted in complex and contested institutional, group and even individual adult learning processes.

Departing from the established North American labour relations regime is the 'Community Unionism Labour Relations Regime' (CULRR) currently emerging in the hospitality sector of many of its major urban centres. CULRR is defined by broader social concerns of workers as community members which, in turn, implicates not only employers but state actors as well. Enmeshed within the everyday realities of the hospitality labour process, we see how union organizing and in turn contract bargaining, in this context is greatly expanded from the post-World War II North American model. This paper outlines the implications of labour relations regimes beginning from the experiences of workers, organizers and community allies who are struggling to create it. The analysis draws on a Cultural Historical Activity Theory framework to outline this learning process in terms of the overlapping and nested systems of activity, the competing object-relatedness of activity, the constituting artifacts and the systemic contradictions driving institutional, group and individual capacities and actions. Key findings include how informalized learning practice are constitutive of the outcomes, but more specifically that separate spheres of activity and their respective, nested constituents (i.e. union, employer, community and city government) shape one another vis-à-vis mutually available artifacts, shared contradictions, and contested objects of activity. Far from simply a systemic analysis, we see also the direct role and implications of these systemic relations for individual activists.

Education for Union Renewal and Sustainability

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The last quarter century saw a restructuring of employment, production and trade and a dramatic decline in the membership and density levels of unions. There are many explanations for this, including the hostile industrial relations framework imposed by many governments, but there have been other factors such as the growth of new non-unionised industries that often rely on casualised labour; new attitudes to unions by younger workers; a political/cultural decline in the workers' movement under neo-liberalism; and an inability by many unions to adapt to these changes.

More recently unions have developed innovative approaches to organising often in alliance with community organizations, alongside new recruiting and bargaining campaigns. Examples of the former include the US Justice for Janitors campaign, and the Australian yourrights@work campaign that was instrumental in defeating the Howard Government. Yet in our recent research into the education and training programs conducted by Australia's national union education centre, we found that union leaders are pre-occupied with a narrow and traditional view of education. Despite policy papers advocating close links between organising and education there is little evidence that education is being planned to really take account of the neo-liberal economic conditions.

Now dramatic economic changes that are likely to see increased unemployment and further industry restructuring confront unions. A skilled workforce is no less important for unions than for other organizations: the ability to respond quickly to unanticipated changes is crucial for union visibility and success. But can a focus on skills and reactive organising alone lead to real union renewal and sustainability? We argue that genuine union renewal requires all levels of the union to first critically reflect upon the last two decades - what can be learned from this experience, and how can future strategies and practices be informed by this - thus raising fundamental questions about the role and nature of union education: its reach, content and philosophy.

We argue, spaces for critical education of union officials and delegates have been constrained by a growing instrumental emphasis, reflecting a general shift in adult education and training in Australia and elsewhere. Drawing on the concept of a tension field between instrumental, communicative and critical learning in adult education (Illeris 2002, Sawchuk 2006) we analyse the current state of Australian union education. Through this, we identify spaces and places for new forms of critical education that could inform genuine union renewal and sustainability in the challenging times ahead.

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Mission (im)possible? Power, competence and learning in Swedish trade unions.

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The Swedish trade union movement has had a considerable importance but its position is now challenged by changes in politics and working life. The aim of this paper is to discuss the contemporary demands of trade union competence and learning. Two local trade unions have been studied and a socio cultural perspective of learning has been used to analyse what processes of learning the everyday activities shape. The trade unions didn't manage to on their own develop the competence giving them power to handle the new challenges of contemporary working life

Questioning Favoured Truths of Work and Learning Research

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This paper seeks to open a discussion about some of the assumptions that underpin policy and research on work and learning. Our rationale for the paper is that there exists a set of ideas that are still too often taken for granted. From among this set of ideas we focus on the three key areas: a) human capital and productivity, b) skill, and c) the notion of work experience. Each of these intersecting concepts is informed by specific empirical projects yet in this paper they are undertaken in the first instance as a conceptual problem. Each section of the paper undertakes its exploration on the basis of questions of social justice, empowerment and economic democracy, and raises questions about how framing these concepts as individual traits conceals exclusionary social practices.

In terms of human capital and productivity we argue that the contribution of education and training to overall economic development and growth, as well as to an individual's economic future, has been recognized for some time. The idea of human capital in this regard comes from the individualising of the argument: if workers wanted good jobs and avoid unemployment they had to "invest" in their own education and learning (this was no longer primarily a state responsibility). This must be also grasped at the level of the firm where employees can learn and contribute to organizational learning producing collective human capital. The importance of labour productivity in growth, competitiveness and trade is often closely linked here, and yet notions of productivity cannot easily be generalised.

The notions of skill, de-skilling and up-skilling likewise are more often presumed than they are critically analyzed in much work and learning research. There is a long tradition associated with these questions but still this persists. To what degree is skill presumed to be an individual capacity? Even accepting a social dimension to the notion of skill – is 'de-skilling' possible if workers are learning all the time? And finally what is the role of value judgment in assessing instances of 'de-skilling' and 'up-skilling'?

In terms of the notion of 'work experience', we argue it to be a central term used to understand access to labour markets. We argue that this term is often seen as an unproblematic for the functioning of labour markets particularly in policy-making research. What are the most relevant ways to critically understand this notion of 'work experience'? We argue that answers to this question must recognize its construction in relation to global market-driven ideologies, and differential effects (e.g. for immigrants). Our approach highlights work experience as a set of relational practices which mobilize, organize, and concert work across various settings to shape access to the labour market.

Worker's Education to Build Political Consciousness – Lessons for South Africa from Brazil

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This paper is about the role of workers education in the development of political consciousness. It argues that globalization and the philosophy which inspired it, post-modernism has contributed to the disorientation and thereby to undermining the resistance of the working class to neo-liberalism. This has had a temporary success in casting doubt on the philosophic foundations of Marxism. One of the strategies proposed here is to reclaim the 'consciousness of workers as a class for itself' by using workers education as form of counter hegemony. The study examines the experiences of workers education in trade unions and social movements in Brazil 'to identify and explore ongoing experiments in forms of radical education that can be used to fashion 'new utopias and visions' to inspire and motivate workers beyond a sense of powerlessness in the face of current challenges. A model of analysis of pedagogy in formal, non-formal and informal contexts is applied to view the experience of workers education in Brazil to draw lessons for South Africa and beyond.

"Where has all the training gone?". A critical review of trade union involvement in workplace learning in one South African city.

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From the early 1990s, the South Africa trade union movement played a leading role in shaping post-apartheid education and training reform, pressing for the transformation of a training system which was severely under-resourced, dominated by the interests of employers and craft unions, where workers receiving narrow, strictly job-specific training, where workers' experiential knowledge was not valued, and where women workers seldom had access to training.

With trade union involvement, a range of new legislation was formulated in the late 90s, including the Employment Equity Act of (1998), aimed at reforming the apartheid-based job structure; the Skills Development Act (1998) which allowed for the establishment of training committees at the enterprise level, involving workers and their union representatives in planning skills development; and the Skills Development Levies Act (1999) aimed at ensuring that there would be an adequate financial base to broaden access to workplace learning.

Despite the introduction of a new legislative and institutional framework, recent research has found that the majority of enterprises neither train nor participate in the levy-grant system, and that current training practices in firms "seem to reinforce key racial and gender characteristics of the segmented labour market of the apartheid era" (Badroodien, 2004:156). According to unions themselves, control of education and training 'is in the hands of big business/employers', and skills priorities are set by the demands of competitiveness rather than social or development needs (Cosatu, 2003). Why does the South African trade union movement – so proactive in the initial, post-apartheid period in training reform – today seem to have so little influence on implementation of that policy?

This paper reports on a survey of workplace-based, trade union skills representatives in the broader Cape Town metropolitan area. The survey sought to critically assess representatives' understanding of skills development; the degree to which they participate at a shop-floor level in shaping the content and direction of skills development; and who – if anyone - is benefiting from the new skills dispensation. The findings of the survey are evaluated against the background of comparative literature on 'union inspired training reform', and the critical literature on trade union involvement in workplace learning (eg. Brown, 2006; Forrester, 2002).

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