

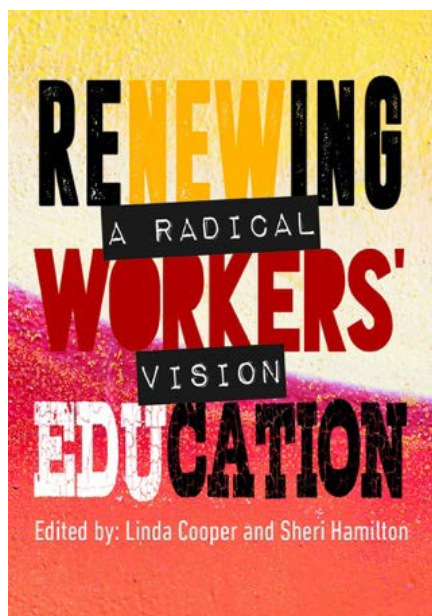
# Renewing workers' education: A radical vision

Linda Cooper and Sheri Hamilton (eds.)

Publisher: HSRC Press 2020

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Workers' education was once the most prominent feature of South Africa's trade union movement. Grass-roots education mobilised a highly organised mass-movement of workers that struck the hammer-blows that brought down the apartheid regime. Rahmat Omar reviews a new book of essays.

This book raises important issues in the current context where workers' organisations are grappling with

shrinking resources and in which workers' rights, livelihoods and living standards are being eroded in South Africa's 'elite transition' from apartheid.

Recurring themes in the book are about workers' education in the context of the rise of precarious work resulting from work reorganisation, outsourcing, casualisation and informalisation of work, which is seen as "the present and future of work" (p. 157). The hard-won rights and benefits gained by workers in formal employment through earlier struggles and sacrifices are threatened as all workers face insecurity in the context of ongoing retrenchments and work reorganisation, which downgrades them to various forms of precarious work. These processes have led to divisions in the workforce, diminishing of the role and power of the labour movement and a decline in workers' education.

These arguments carry echoes of a pessimistic 'end of labour' thesis that suggests, as Standing argues in his book on the "precariat", that trade unions have become irrelevant as a result of the informalisation of work (2011). Castells argues that under network capitalism labour is becoming "localized, disaggregated, fragmented, diversified, and divided in its collective identity"

(Castells, 1996: p 475). In Castells' view, the informalisation of employment has made collective organisation impossible and the labour movement seems to be "historically superseded" (1997: p 109).

It is clear that the authors in this book do not support the arguments associated with the "end of labour thesis". On the contrary, they present case studies and discussions about the role of workers' education in mobilising and organising workers who are involved in these changing work contexts. Chapters on workers' education in South Africa are supplemented by chapters on workers' education in Namibia, Nigeria and Canada as well as a chapter on experiences and ideas about strengthening education for informal workers in Kenya, Uganda, India, Brazil, Colombia and South Africa.

## **LEARNING FROM HISTORY**

The chapters by Sikwebu and Grossman reflect on the central role of workers themselves as active agents in processes of struggle, learning and making history. Sikwebu sees workers' education as "structuring a process of appropriation by workers of their own history" (p. 2). He highlights the



need to avoid fetishising experiential learning and to recognise that there is a possibility of simultaneous education and mis-education, given the role of ideology and media which workers engage with as members of communities and society. The rise of xenophobia, chauvinism and other tensions inside the labour movement illustrate the point. Grossman focuses on a particular moment in the struggle of a group of dismissed workers for reinstatement, “studying history as they make history, documenting and using their own account of their own history as an educational, organising, agitational and mobilising weapon to share with other workers” (p. 29).

Moodley and Jauch discuss workers’ education “as both a product and weapon of working class struggles” (p. 13). They argue that newly formed democratic unions in Namibia and South Africa gained wider support in the 1980s by linking workers’ complaints at work with the broader political questions of liberation in their struggles against employers, multi-national corporations and colonialism/apartheid. In the post-independence/apartheid period, however, the assimilation of Namibian and South African trade unions into the capitalist mode of production “has had a direct impact on the shape and outlook of workers’ education programmes” (p. 26) and political workers’ education has become “merely one site of the broader struggle to bring about radical change to social, political and economic relations” (p. 13).

### **INSTITUTIONALISING WORKERS’ EDUCATION**

The second part of the book focuses on structured education programmes initiated by traditional unions. Hartman and Pillay each present a critical discussion of the impact of women-only education programmes delivered through partnerships between unions and universities. Both chapters highlight the tension between the heightening

of consciousness and sense of agency experienced by individual participants and the limited opportunities they had to “plough back” their learning in the context of their unions. Opportunities arose more directly for some women outside the union context through political activism and participation in churches and structures of the ANC and SACP (p. 91).

Ayeh and Udeh look at developments in the labour movement in Nigeria after 1999, following the unbanning of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) after a protracted struggle against a military regime. They argue that systematisation of workers’ education within the framework of the NLC’s annual schools “has transcended ‘stop-start’ and ad-hoc education delivery for trade unionists” (p. 109). But the aim of building political consciousness among the working class towards a struggle for social change is yet to be achieved and can only be met with the spread of a counter-hegemonic view of capitalism within the labour movement.

Wa Bofelo discusses challenges presented by the formalisation and institutionalisation of workers’ education in South Africa. He draws on debates in the 1980s about the possibility of combining “registration” and “struggle”. He argues for avoiding simplistic binaries and for exploring possibilities for “holding the tension” between accreditation of workers’ education programmes and an orientation towards heightening workers’ consciousness and agency and pursuing an agenda for radical transformation of society (p. 64).

Moussouris and Van der Walt criticise “the contention on the left that it was the unions’ embrace of the post-apartheid’s stress on accredited, skills-focused education that crippled union education” (p. 200). They do not dispute that revolutionary education has been weakened, but challenge the argument that it was the focus on accreditation

and developing vocational skills of individual workers which led to this weakening. They argue that vocational skills training and revolutionary education are not intrinsically or mutually exclusive, that it is necessary to have both and that anarchist and syndicalist education manages to balance the two imperatives as part of a larger “integral education” (p. 207). The central problem, in their view, is that the labour movement has turned away from revolutionary class politics and towards “a corporatist alliance with the state and capital – and that includes the ANC and SACP alliance – bringing in its wake top-down, intolerant Marxist-Leninist approaches to politics and education” (p. 211).

It could be added that the preoccupation on the left with accreditation and skills-focused education may explain the rather perplexing silence in Cosatu on literacy and adult basic education, which were underpinned by radical and transformative approaches and drew inspiration from mass literacy campaigns in revolutionary Cuba and Nicaragua.

### **EDUCATING WORKERS ON THE PERIPHERY**

A compelling feature of the book is the way it accepts the reality that traditional unions are unable or reluctant to “organise the unorganised” and focuses on workers’ education within initiatives to mobilise and organise workers involved in various forms of precarious work.

Bonner nevertheless demonstrates strong links and continuity “with the best traditions of workers’ education and [contends] that these links could be deepened to the mutual benefit of traditional and new worker movements” (p. 115). Hlatshwayo’s case study focuses on the work of the Casual Workers’ Advice Office (CWAO) in Germiston, Ekurhuleni in supporting education and organising initiatives for precarious >

workers. A chapter on Canada looks at the situation of workers employed by temporary agencies (or labour brokers) and how they collectively talk through their conditions and possibilities of change. Choudry, Henaway and Shragge discuss the daily organising work of the Immigrant Workers' Centre (IWC) in Montreal. They argue that temporary workers and migrant workers have become "permanent and core features of the way many capitalist economies are organised" and that there is an urgent need to move "beyond the limits of traditional unionism and build a broader working class movement that supports the struggles of both temporary and permanent employees, of unionised and non-unionised workers regardless of national origin and immigration status" (p. 141).

Von Kotze pushes the "non-union education" boundary further by focusing on a drama project of the Popular Education Network involving unemployed women from a working class community in Cape Town. The women devised a play and worked through some of the painful and difficult issues they faced in their daily lives – such as daily food shortages, insecurity in housing, domestic violence, drug-related violence and the stigma surrounding diseases such as TB and HIV. Their story-telling activities became part of an educational process through which they could move "beyond the sharing of familiar experiences, towards analysis of the link between personal troubles and social, economic and political issues" (p. 161). She suggests that an earlier history of workers' education through cultural action in South Africa, which was "interrupted in the 1990s", is currently undergoing resurgence and renewed interest.

## RETHINKING WORKERS' EDUCATION

The three contributions in Part 4 theorise workers' education from different political perspectives. Hamilton focuses on "Rebuilding workers' education on Marxist foundations: Reclaiming ideas of working-class struggle and socialism". She argues that the pedagogy of workers' education must be rooted in concrete struggles for rebuilding trade unions and other organisations of the working class. These struggles can be "guided by Marxism, which is the basis for transforming the consciousness of workers to struggle for the socialist transformation of society" (p. 196).

Moussouris and Van der Walt discuss the revolutionary potential of workers' education in their chapter, "Anarcho-syndicalism and union education in South Africa".

Cooper discusses the current crisis in workers' education in a reflective chapter on workers' education and working-class hegemony. Cooper argues that Gramsci's concepts of "hegemony" and "counter-hegemony" and his ideas about the educational value of "praxis" provide tools to guide current struggles. She associates renewing workers' education not simply with re-establishing a working class movement, but also with building solidarity between organised and unorganised workers and with those involved in struggles outside the workplace, including struggles for environmental justice, climate change, women's rights, LGBT+, land and other struggles.

## CONCLUSION

The strength of this collection is how it seeks to recover lessons from decades of union experience in legal, collective bargaining, education, literacy

and cultural campaigns to build workers' organisation and contribute to social, economic and political change.

However, the authors recognise how upheavals in politics, globalisation and capitalism have made a world that is fundamentally changed. Building working class solidarity – through campaigning, mobilising, organising and education – must recognise that migrant, casual, temporary and informal sector workers, who may not be organised at all, are a permanent feature. Therefore renewing workers' education needs to look beyond "organised labour".

The authors represented in the collection do not share the same conception of workers' education but, as the editors remark, they all have a commitment to reclaiming a radical vision of workers' education that is linked to struggles for "advancing the social, economic and political interests of the working class" (p. xii). The authors engage with both local and international experiences and make a wider contribution to the debates on workers' education and adult education. Their perspectives, arguments and ideas highlight that struggles in different contexts can promote independence of workers' education from capital and the state.

Overall, the book succeeds in its aim of making a contribution to an under-researched area in the literature and can, as intended, become an important resource for unionists, social movement activists and workers.

## REFERENCES

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