Policy Brief – Workers' Education

This policy brief is intended to convince trade unions, NGOs, social movements and other labour service organisations in Africa to reinvest time, energy, creativity and resources in workers' education programmes. Workers' education is key to the revitalization of the labour movement across the continent. However, to contribute towards the task of movement building, the dominant approaches to workers' education need to be reassessed.

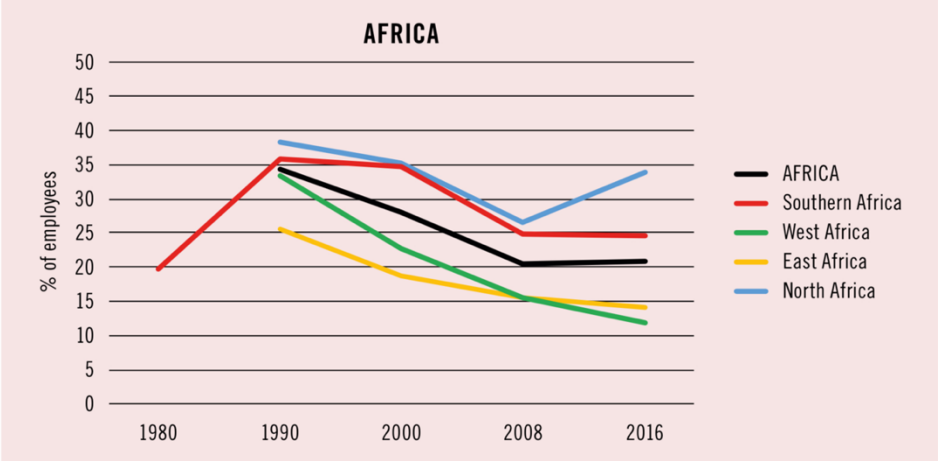
Summary

This brief begins by, **first**, highlighting challenges facing worker organisations in Africa today and links them to structural changes under global capitalism. **Second**, it explores the shortcomings of union responses in meeting the challenges posed by neoliberal restructuring. It suggests that rethinking and reinvesting in workers' education can address some of these challenges. **Third**, it explores the different and contested *approaches* towards workers' education in Nigerian and South African labour movements in the past. It argues that, in the current context, the task of union revitalisation will be contingent on rethinking workers' education strategies. It advocates for a return to a 'radical' approach to workers' education and a 'democratisation' of workers' education programmes. **Fourth**, the brief proposes that, in order to live up to the historical task of revitalising the labour movement, organisations will need to review both the *content* and *methods* of their workers' education programmes.

1. **The context: union decline under neoliberalism**

In an important recent assessment of the state of trade unionism across the world, Jelle Visser (2019: 19) noted that union density has collapsed globally from 36% in 1990 to 18% in 2016. As Figure 1 shows, the fall in unionisation rates in Africa is in line with the global trend, with countries in West Africa experiencing the most dramatic change.

Figure 1 – Union density in Africa



Source: Visser (2019)

Although, as some labour analysts have argued (Sullivan, 2010), union density and union power are not coterminous notions, the data nevertheless reflects a state of crisis facing the labour movement globally. Visser suggests that no single factor explains the collapse in unionisation rates. Instead, he offers a number of interrelated factors:

- Deindustrialisation and the rise of the service industry
- The rise of "non-standard" forms of employment
- The decline in the rate of formal sector employment in developing countries
- Changing gender make-up of the labour force (the feminisation of labour)
- Changes in education
- Growing management resistance to unionization
- Decentralization of bargaining tied to new HRM approaches
- International competition driving flexibility
- Behavioural changes in young people

Other analysts put a name to these changes, identifying them as symptoms of a fundamental change in capitalism under the phase of neoliberal globalisation (Munck, 2002; Fine, 2019; Webster & Dor, 2023). For many of these scholars, neoliberalism is closely linked to the growth of financialisaton – i.e. the rising power of finance capital over other capitals (Ashman et al., 2011). Financialisaton has rendered capital far more mobile than in previous periods, which allows firms to search all corners of the globe for cheaper and cheaper labour costs. To compete for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and appease Multinational Corporations (MNCs), governments in the Global South are engaged in a 'race to the bottom,' which takes the form of pressure to liberalise trade policy, repeal social welfare provisions and undermine worker-friendly labour legislation along with other fetters on profit maximisation (Webster et al.). It is this ongoing race to the bottom that is the underlying factor explaining union decline over the last three decades.

2. Union responses: dualisation, fragmentation or revitalisation?

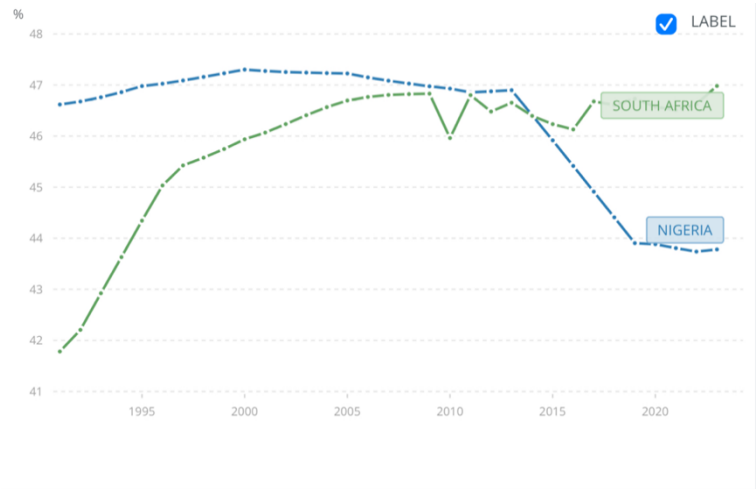
Within this global context, trade unions have put up a fight to defend worker interests. However, unions have also made strategic errors – or have at least struggled to pivot to confront the historical task of labour movement revitalisation. One key area where trade unions have been slow to respond is to address the changing social composition of their membership. In South Africa, for example, union density in the private sector fell from 35.6% in 1997 to 18.2% in 2016 (Bezuidenhout et al 2017; Bezuidenhout, Andries, Malehoko Tshoaedi, 2017). In the same period, however, union density in the public sector increased from 55.2% to 66.1% (ibid). Public sector workers tend to hold higher formal educational

qualifications and earn higher wages compared to blue-collar workers in private industry. Indeed, Onyeonoru & Hlatshwayo (2020) note that:

> *in 1994, only 3% of COSATU membership had technical diplomas and no one surveyed had a university degree. However, in 2014, 20% of union members had technical diplomas and 17% had university degrees. In 1994, 30% of the membership was unskilled workers, but this percentage declined to 8% in 2014. During the same period, members with skills increased from 21% to 37%.*

Over recent decades, unions have found it easier to recruit better skilled and higher educated workers in "permanent" or standard forms of employment. Members on higher wages mean higher "stop orders" to fund unions activities, which compensates for falling unionization rates overall. The implications for the union movement have been severe, as younger workers in more "precarious" or non-standard forms of employment often view trade unions with antagonism (Runciman). Many of these precarious workers are also often women, who are employed in growing numbers in low paying jobs especially in South Africa. The rise in precarious employment practices and the 'feminisation' of the labour force go hand in hand. The labour movement in South Africa has ultimately been slow to respond to these changes in the labour market, leaving these "new" workers without representation (cite).

Figure 2 – Female participation in the labour force



Source: World Bank Data

In Nigeria, a similar divide is emerging, although along the lines of "junior" and "senior" staff. The 2005 amendment of the Trade Union Act opened the door for a new trade union federation to emerge aimed at senior (managerial) staff – the Trade Union Congress (TUC). Junior staff are largely still organised under the old industrial unions affiliated to the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). Onyeonoru & Hlatshwayo (2020) note that the TUC has adopted a more conservative strategic orientation than the NLC, signifying the political consequences of changes in union composition.

Indeed, across the globe unions today struggle to reach beyond a narrowing membership base in shrinking industries and the public sector (Visser, 2019). Visser (2019) argues that this results in a process of "dualisation" – where two distinct sections of the labour force emerge along the lines of employment status, skill, income and union representation. "Fragmentation" has set in within the labour movement, as unions (especially in South Africa) compete to recruit a shrinking pool of workers employed in permanent positions (Onyeonoru & Hlatshwayo, 2020). The task of labour movement revitalisation must address these processes of dualisation and fragmentation head on. Workers' education has a key role to play in this regard.

3. Contested meanings of workers' education: "radical" versus "human resource development" approaches

The literature coming out of both South Africa and Nigeria make similar distinctions between 'informal' (or 'experiential') and 'structured' (or 'organised) instances of workers' education. Cooper's (2006) case study of the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) demonstrates how "informal workers' education takes place organically within trade unions" (which she calls "learning organizations"). The evidence she presents shows how learning takes place through everyday organisational routines (meetings etc.) as well as through instances of collective action (strikes etc.). Similarly, Aye and Udeh (2020:98) refer to "incidental" or "experiential" learning of workers in Nigeria, suggesting that workers' education takes place though workers' "daily interaction at work, in their communities, and through struggles to change their conditions of work and life".

As the independent unions were emerging in the 1970s in South Africa, before they developed structured workers' education programmes, the slogan "learning by organising" emerged (Cooper, 2005). This rooted the concept of education in the politics of movement building. As the union movement grew, learning by organising was supplemented by more structured programmes provided by trade unions and labour support organisations that included workshops, seminars and reading groups (ibid). On top of this, cultural work was consciously deployed as an educational tool through the production of plays, poetry and media such as newspapers, pamphlets and union posters (ibid). Lastly, Cooper notes that

worker self-education played a key role in the growing union movement, through worker-led sleep-in seminars (called *Siyalalas*). This comprehensive approach to workers' education drew from international traditions, but also emerged organically out of the struggles of workers in the workplace and against a racist state. Workers' education in this period was synonymous with movement building, and it took on an explicitly political character. The approach to workers' education during this period has therefore been described as a 'radical transformative tradition'.

A competing tradition emerged from the South African union movement just prior to the transition to democracy. This has been described as the "human capital perspective" or "human resource development" approach, which focuses on providing vocational training and certification for individual workers to generate opportunities for upskilling and social mobility in the workplace (Cooper, 2005). In recent decades, workers' education as a "political practice" has been sidelined as the human resource development tradition has gained hegemony within the South African labour movement. This has a lot to do with COSATU's political alliance with the ruling party, but it is not unique to the federation. Similarly, Aye and Udeh (2020) define the dominant approach within workers' education programmes in Nigeria as "adult-liberal education" aimed at training individuals to advance their career prospects.

4. Rethinking workers' education today: Radical, democratic and participatory

Rebuild the radical transformative tradition! Hlatshwayo (2024) insists that education is never politically neutral. In fact, he contends that the hegemonic versions of workers' education in both the South African and Nigerian trade unions today effectively "uphold exploitative relationships between workers and employers". A return to radical traditions of workers' education is necessary to stage a response towards neoliberal restructuring, which has (as shown above) developed dualised labour markets and fragmented the workers movement.

Democratize workers' education! Importantly, workers' education today needs to go beyond the union member, to target non-unionised workers in precarious working conditions. For too long now, workers' education programmes have been offered to a shrinking number of workers and often workers in leadership positions within the workplace or union. Part of a return to a radical tradition will have to involve what we call a "democratization" of workers' education – to target both union rank-and-file members and non-unionised workers in precarious employment and in the informal sector, many of whom are women.

Revive participatory pedagogy! The radical workers' education traditions of the past were rooted in a pedagogical approach that was developed by Paulo Freire (Vally et al. 2013; Freire 2020). This method of teaching values the insights and knowledge of its participants. It brings ordinary workers together to produce and share knowledge collectively. This differs significantly from mainstream forms of education, as Sauviat explains:

> *Mainstream education is for Freire a "banking" concept of education, top down, where teachers as depositors give knowledge and pupils as depositories receive it, memorise and repeat it (Freire 1973). In order to be freed from the oppressed/oppressor relationship the concrete situation of oppression must be transformed. The pedagogy of the oppressed is the pedagogy of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation; through "problem posing education" people gain a deepened consciousness of their situation that leads them to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation*

(Freire 1973) (Sauviat, 2015)

Participatory pedagogy of the Freirian kind has proven to not only develop skills, but importantly aims to build the confidence and consciousness of participants. In a context in which the trade union membership must reach out towards non-union members in order to revitalize their organisations, the mainstream methods associated with the human resource development approach will simply not work. Workers' education must once again be viewed as an all-encompassing movement building project aimed at rebuilding working class consciousness and power at a grassroots level.

5. **What could a workers' education programme look like today?**
    a. **Rights-based education** – Workers' education programmes should focus on using the law to bridge the gap between existing labour laws and actual practices. In many cases, workers are not able to access the rights that are entitled to them. Therefore, the primary goal is to educate workers in Nigeria and South Africa about their labour rights through a dialogical approach.
    b. **Organisation building** (education is organising, organising is education) – One important task is to create independent organisations of workers that are controlled by the workers themselves. In many cases, existing trade unions have been co-opted to collaborate with management. Progressive NGOs and intellectuals working alongside workers can develop educational programmes and

campaigns aimed at building independent trade unions and other worker organisations. These efforts can help advance the interests of precarious workers and others in similar situations.

6. How can new technologies be used to advance radical workers' education?

Workers, their organisations, and NGOs can utilise information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance workers' education. Devices such as smartphones, tablets, desktops, and laptops should serve as platforms for facilitating interactive education for workers in South Africa, Nigeria, and other regions around the world. Social media and online platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Zoom, and Teams can significantly contribute to educating workers about their rights and challenges in an engaging manner.

However, access to the internet and ICTs remains a significant barrier to delivering online education to workers. Addressing this issue requires dedicated campaigns and efforts within each country.

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