

Reclaiming the Radical Traditions of Workers' Education: Some Notes

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Thanks to the organisers of this long overdue seminar (organised by the NRF-SARChI Chair in Community, Adult and Workers' Education (CAWE) based at the University of Johannesburg), which has great importance for workers and social movements, radical educators, and for all society too. And thanks, comrades, for asking me to conclude. I know there are many people here who could do that too.

I thought about two approaches for these closing remarks. The first was to examine the presentations and responses by respondents and try to provide a lucid summary of the discussion over the last two days. This approach was likely to omit, or even misrepresent, the nuances of discussion and could also be repetitive and boring. So, I don't think that would be useful since you have all heard what was said anyway. I thought that it would be more meaningful to examine the implications of what was discussed—especially as it relates to workers' education, its theory and practice—and highlight key implications. I apologise that I will not point to any particular presentation or response even though there were many remarkable ones.

Naturally, this approach is based on the interpretations I bring derived largely from my own past experience, which comes from the formative period of the democratic union movement of the 1970s in South Africa. Then we did not deal properly with some issues such as those relating to social reproduction, and hence about the relationship between organised workers and working-class communities, except fleetingly. We did not discuss environmental issues or have a deeper analysis of the social relations of knowledge, science, innovation, and the democratisation of work.

Comrades, I want to emphasise that today I will not provide a critique of the limitations of the present state of workers' education in the labour movement. Nor will I deal with the contents, forms, and principles of radical education for working-class communities. These have been dealt with by participants here in some detail. Also, given what was



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said in the last session, about the way forward, it is clear to me that there are some fairly fundamental differences in relation to the purposes of workers' education—at least at the level of trade unions. These relate not only to the objectives of education, but also to its relationship with specific worker constituencies, the orientation to the state and capital, and—very importantly—its connection to wider working-class communities, social movements, and organisations. All this will ultimately affect the content of mass-based education programmes for working-class communities. I think that these issues must be taken forward and engaged, using the platform now created by CAWE.

Today I will focus on just some issues that I hope will be of value for radical working-class education and its political and social objectives. Naturally, this is hardly comprehensive, but hopefully this will reflect on some of the strong debates in the discussions here. I agreed to write this up and so here it is.

Firstly, and perhaps the most important thing about education in the struggles of the working class has to do with its location in a political economy that is undergoing huge structural change driven by the power of globalised corporate, extractivist, and militaristic capitalism. And that political economy is shepherded on behalf of capital by complicit states through policies such as the privatisation of public goods and cost recovery, massive public support for corporate enterprises, deindustrialisation, and a raft of neoliberal strategies that are also evolving. These dramatic—some might say fundamental—changes in global capitalism are reinforced by the monstrous regimes of trade, debt, finance, exchange, and information imposed by deadly militaristic and surveillance systems. We know the cumulative effects of these policies on human and environmental sustainability as evidenced in the mountain of data about this referred to by comrades here.

Objectively, these changes are a response to the inherent contradictions and successive crises in capitalism. Now the working class is being forced into massive structural fragmentation. These changes need deeper re-analysis, since we cannot continue to rely on past ways of understanding the relationship between capital and labour or capitalism and work, and the active role of the state in shaping the terrain for capital accumulation. Possibly the majority of the global working class is in precarious, casualised, unrecognised, minimal rights labour, made informal and easily expendable. And the state—as we can see from the recent moves to change the law in South Africa—is a key instrument in this. This is manna from heaven for the bosses. It demands of us that we examine these changes and their effects on both the character of the working class and the theories and practices, organisational forms, and strategies for radical working-class education. We need to fully understand these sea changes in the system of production and their effects on work under capitalism.

In addition, we must pay more attention to the analysis of how capitalism reproduces itself—beyond the system of production. The process of capitalist production and reproduction, as we all know, has its roots in the earliest forms of capitalist

accumulation—called primitive accumulation—through racist slavery, colonisation, conquest, and critically, through the exploitation of unpaid household and domestic labour. This production process is also characterised by the division of productive and reproductive work, the separation of exploitative paid-labour and unpaid reproductive work. The mode of capitalist reproduction based on household work and care has been neglected in past analysis although it is intrinsic to definitions of working-class communities and struggles. And this has huge implications for how we understand gender and intersectional issues, radical feminist critique, and the gender orientations of organisations. We have largely neglected this issue, and it too has meaning for how we understand capitalism and work. Although working-class struggles are simply projected as struggles over wages and work conditions, they are in fact about the wider social, economic, and political struggles of working-class communities as the conditions of precarity and reproductive work demonstrate so graphically.

This is also where the problem of patriarchy lies, expressed in the division of productive and reproductive labour. We know that it has a long history in human development prior to capitalism (through racialised slavery, indenture, and feudal relations), and is now exacerbated by the capitalist production through the forcible reproduction of social relations that are not only inherently racist but also reinforce pre-existing forms of patriarchal and other oppressive relations. These oppressions are reinforced in social and family systems, bound by unequal work, gendered control, and a host of oppressive cultural institutions. These hidden institutions need to be examined openly and frankly to deal with their oppressive consequences and must be central to any programme of workers' education if we are not to reproduce what exists in society. This issue is not simply about organisational and demographic or gendered representation in organisations, institutions, and their practices—it is that and much more as comrades have explained to us. It is central to any critique of contemporary capitalism. Such analysis is not an end in itself, but without it, proper strategies for working-class struggles and education cannot be developed.

Secondly, this means that the very definition of who constitutes the working class, especially in societies such as ours in South Africa, cannot be read from conventional European definitions of the proletariat—which we have used for a long time—while there are major structural and technological changes taking place in the workplace affecting the very nature of work, conditions of employment, and workplace regimes of control. In contexts that are prevalent for possibly three quarters of the world's population, we must ask the question: "Who constitutes the working class?" The answer, I think, would be obvious to anyone who can see and understand the extensive processes of social fragmentation and precarity we have heard about and their consequences—precarity and informalisation, deliberate social exclusion, violence, and now the global process of large-scale migrations of refugees seeking places of safety. Millions of people—as part of the global working class—are forced to be on the move all over the world. Restricting a definition of the working class to those who are in full-time, now often precarious and casualised, employment as well as in insecure,

unprotected, seasonal, and migrant work is simply untenable, especially in the way in which working classes are being organised. A wider definition of the working class does not for one moment reduce the role of workplace trade unions and other forms of organisation, but it does require a proper examination of their limits and the necessity of much wider forms of collaboration associated with other forms of collective organisation, such as for casualised workers, and the social and community movements in struggles of the working class in general. A proper conceptualisation of the working class is fundamental to the development of radical social consciousness in working-class struggles. But it is also critical to unified forms of solidarity and collective struggle against the divisions which exist at present. It is the answer to the fragmentation of social movements, unions, and other organisations, all of which are independently involved in social struggles.

Thirdly, Kapital has consciously developed the ideological, media, and communication systems to foster its underlying messages. Capitalist production systems produce their own ideology, which, regrettably, overwhelms the working class and its leadership. This is not surprising because it is everywhere—in the public and private spheres, and now so widely spread through social media. It overtakes cultural ideas and substitutes these with commercial ones, and it drowns out radical educational demands with talk about labour markets, filling all of us with racist, gendered, and ethno-nationalist, fascistic ideas. Millions of workers vote for neo-fascist governments throughout the world as we see from the support for US President Donald Trump, and in many European countries, in India, Argentina, Hungary, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Fascism is now on the march everywhere, and the working classes are being dragged into it. Even in this country it has grown stronger, as we see from the rise of ethno-nationalist ideas and the support for political Zionism harking back to its fascist roots. We can see how imperialism has forced workers into crossing national boundaries (boundaries not of its making but those of colonial powers) and has given rise to the worst forms of divisive and xenophobic ideas associated with rampant ethno-nationalism and the politics of neo-fascism. They face the ravages of penury, violence, and war not of their own making, but which are perpetrated on working-class communities. Hundreds of thousands, millions in some cases, of the working class are on the move, whether in Latin America, the Middle Eastern states, or in Africa. What is common to all these forced migrations is the chaos, dysfunction, and naked aggression whose causal basis lies in the interests of transnational capitalist corporations and the states that support them. The Congo, Sudan, Palestine, Haiti, Myanmar, among others, are in fact simply a metaphor for a condition of war against the global poor.

And so, it is critically important that workers' education deals with the problems of ideology and culture. Let me quote what the great revolutionary leader José Mujica (2025) and late President of Uruguay says about this:

I am not thinking of culture that is sold, like professional music or dance. All that is important, of course, but when I speak of culture I am referring to human relations, to the set of ideas that govern our relationships without us realizing it. It is a set of unspoken values that determine the way in which millions of anonymous people around the world relate to each other. Consumerism is part of that culture. It is an ethic needed for capitalism in its struggle for infinite accumulation. ... But a capitalist social system is not only property relations; it is also a set of unspoken values common to the society. These values are stronger than any army and they are the main force maintaining capitalism today. My generation believed it was going to change the world by trying to nationalize the media and distribution, but we failed to understand that at the center of this battle must be the construction of a different culture.

What the working class is up against is a deeply entrenched cultural and ideological system that props up the political economy even if we can see its effects in the daily lives of most human beings and the planetary environment. What is happening, in other words, is the active ideological process of winning our consent to an oppressive system that shapes global human and social relations, affecting even the very nature of the planetary environment and the survival of all life on this planet—not just limited to human beings. It is about acquiring our consent to a system built on the shameless greed of a tiny minority of individuals and their families, on bending government to their wretched designs, on legitimising the power of elites, destroying the sovereignty of nations, propagating ideas of racism, patriarchy, and hate, and destroying all forms of accountability. It is about subverting all knowledge and learning (including science) towards these terrible purposes.

Regrettably, even workers' leaders have fallen prey to the terrible ideologies that mask these realities and cause even more suffering and division within working-class communities. They have fallen prey to the ideologies of ruling elites and their manipulative control. Some have consciously collaborated (as we can so clearly see from the histories of so many international unions in the most advanced capitalist states). The effect of this is not only the abandonment of the working class by its leaders. It turns working-class communities against political life—against the idea that their lives are deeply implicated in the politics of the day and that they have a role to play politically in society. For that they must construct, firstly, organisations as homes for democratic worker control and practice—not just the pseudo-populist politics of some or other demagogue and their militant rhetoric or the pragmatic and defeatist responses of some leaders. It is to assume the role and responsibility of leading the class—not just employed workers—through wider forms of social solidarity than the traditional forms of organisation in industrial unions and public employment.

Fourthly, the issues I have raised above require an approach to education and learning that can produce *radical social consciousness*. This is absolutely essential both to unmask the extraordinary power of anti-working-class ideas and to create the possibilities, platforms, forums, programmes, systems, and practices to advance working-class learning using radical curricula, their languages, and socially oriented

pedagogies. Workers' education is about the critical importance of the role played by the institutions of the working class in its learning processes. It demands a high level of organisation, dedicated resources, materials, academic and other collaborations, and carefully planned practices. And it requires, most of all, attention to democratic practice, which is built on the foundation of accountability and mandated processes, all of which have a strong precedent in our own history. Outside the development of democratic educational forms and systems, the working class will continue to rely on a small coterie of leaders with whom the membership does not engage except to receive decisions already made. Workers' education must support the renewal of the practices of collective and solidaristic accountability to democratise knowledge, learning, and radical social consciousness. Otherwise, the working class is simply left to rummage in the confusing array of lies, which the dominant social media produces by the terabyte, that is, the fantastic tonnage of deliberately misleading information used to subvert all our minds, making us active agents in our own oppression. As our comrades have already explained, a critical media is a fundamental requirement of workers' consciousness, and without it, working-class organisations and communities are left to the deliberate confusions that enable Kapital to colonise our minds and reproduce ideas that stand against the interests of the working classes.

As we heard, some organisations and movements of the working class are beginning to pay serious attention to the question of class consciousness. They are engaged in strategies to reinstate the solidaristic and collective forms of struggle, which have marked countless historical episodes of working-class struggles all over the world. To support what is happening, workers' education must develop the curriculum and pedagogical strategies to counteract the extraordinary power of the divisive strategies used against the working classes. There must be much more conscious educational interventions to deal with all this confusion-making, this reactionary obscurantism, which is an enemy of working-class communities and their consciousness when driven by capitalist production generating conflict within the class, fragmentation, confusion, and distrust.

Radical workers' education is essential if working-class communities are to withstand the assault by the dominant ideologies in society, which seek to undermine workers' struggles and enforce their consent to oppression and exploitation through the continuous subversion of working-class learning and consciousness.

Fifthly, against this gloomy picture, we can now see all over the world new and emerging collective forms of organisation, social movements, political, cooperative, cultural, and other forms of solidarity being developed. These initiatives include land occupation, the rescue of factories by taking them over, the formation of brigades for social protection in the context of war and occupation, the development of tens of thousands of producer, consumer, service, and finance cooperatives globally, massive organisation of gig and platform workers, community food gardens, urban farming collectives, care and service organisations, a vast array of organisations involved in

environmental and climate related issues, community health and safety collectives, wealth trusts, stokvels, mutual aid societies, and a host of other “social” economies and related initiatives. The global cooperative association alone counts as many as three million cooperatives with as many as 800 million people involved in them despite all the difficult problems they face under capitalism.¹ And these developments have also stimulated debates about democratising and decommodifying work and its meaning for decarbonising the environment.²

Nearly all these activities above are self-initiated by communities at a local or regional level and some are internationally connected. The reasons why these developments are taking place are obvious. They have to do with the multi-dimensional polycrisis that faces not only the great majority of the world’s human population but also the ecological and natural environment being destroyed by capitalist greed. There are movements and organisations, big and small, in nearly every place in the world, and each of these represents the seeds and mainsprings of new possibility. There are examples of these in our own country. From these we can learn and are learning to understand, analyse, and draw on the material conditions around which organisation must take place, where and who should be organised, and against what regimes of power at the local regional or national level. In other words, there is already a strong body of radical learning about these issues available to support the democratisation and organisation of education and its practical requirements.

Democratic organisation must be based on a strong set of principles that can give effect to a series of transitional steps, a set of achievable alternative organisational forms and practices towards a post-capitalist and democratic socialist future. Even if that cannot be achieved tomorrow, its cumulative and carefully planned steps can be envisaged and implemented through these cumulative steps: planting the seeds of alternative approaches through democratic and accountable organisation, mobilisation on specific local and national issues, such as food sovereignty, health care, energy use, and environmental protection, through cooperative forms of work, and the development of international networks of alternative practice and knowledge. We must do more to engage from a socialist perspective—not nationalist or populist—with the contradictory spaces that capitalism itself produces to plant the seeds of opposition, which will grow into a forest of resistance to capitalist social relations and its polycrisis. The activities of such collective and solidaristic knowledge will also produce the strategies and tactics around the inevitable blockages that will come from capitalist systems. Concrete practice is a spur to imaginative innovation to face seemingly intractable barriers. The very act of doing is a process of learning about alternative possibilities—alternatives that may not be envisaged from the beginning, but which unfold in the process of active

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- 1 It was established in 1895 to promote the cooperative model. Today, cooperative members represent at least 12% of humanity. As businesses driven by values and not by the remuneration of capital, the three million cooperatives on earth act together to build a better world. See <https://ica.coop/en>.
 - 2 See Ferreras, Battilana, and Meda’s *Democratize Work: The Case for Reorganizing the Economy* (2022).

learning and education, solidarity, and collective action. Especially the leadership of these organisations and movements need to pay attention and commit to the mobilisation and organisation of learning, knowledge, research, action seeking, and finding the collaborative arrangements that are necessary for a democratic socialist society. If that cannot be done, we will continue to fall prey to the reformist approaches to worker and community education, to talk uncritically about skills transfer and diffusion, high productivity, and skills mismatch. The alternatives to these can and must be premised on radical working-class education and socially useful understanding, and must not rely mainly on academic knowledge, which is largely socially regressive. Working-class learning can build useful knowledge and its theories without waiting for academics to do so, based on collective, solidaristic, and experiential knowledge, and the struggles from which that is derived.

Finally, international collaborations must be forged in educational and other processes building on networks of action that already exist. It requires a dedicated approach to such networking for acting jointly in campaigns and other activities that are already possible. Without an internationalist orientation, it would be impossible to counteract the enormous global influence of transnational capital and the states that do its work. I think that the struggles in Palestine, Sudan, and the working classes everywhere have made internationalism both more obvious and possible. Vast networks of activists involved in these struggles have appeared on the scene and they are pointing directly to the complicity of corporate and imperial interests in fashioning a world of genocide. And for those who stand outside the working classes and who want to act in solidarity with their struggles, I can only refer to what Comrade Ngwane (2025) has said about supporting the organic development of a militant working-class movement “driven and led by the workers themselves”.

These, for me, are the conditions for shaping a radical approach to education, its forms, and strategies for working-class communities.

There is much work to do now, and workers’ education has a critical role to play in strengthening the reach, power, and collective capacity of the social movements and organisations of the working class and its communities. There is, as suggested, a need for collective action around radical education and we need to think seriously of the concrete suggestions we heard today about the way forward. Let me conclude by reiterating the view that there is an alternative to this destructive world and the war against working-class communities, but it requires dedication, clarity of ideas and purposes, comradely solidarity, hard work, and great commitment.

Thank you, comrades.

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