

Challenging the conventional wisdom

- strengthening global labour networks

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“The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist”²

Abstract

The first part of this article discusses the challenges labour is facing to adapt to the structural changes of globalisation and to oppose a pro-business, pro-market mainstream globalisation discourse; in the second part it introduces the Global Labour University project as an initiative to contribute to the need for global thinking and networking for a fairer globalisation.

The hegemony of neo liberal ideas is weakened by the practical failures of its policy recipes. More democratic and socially responsible rule making on international level is required to move towards fairer globalisation. Knowledge networks are efficient instrument for facilitating research, exchanges of ideas and building international to broaden global debate as a precondition for global policy initiatives. They need to be horizontal, decentralised and open for divergent opinions. Knowledge networks lose their dynamics if they are centrally controlled or confined to the smallest common denominator and they fail if they are misunderstood as policy-defining or policy-making institutions.

Trade unions are increasingly facing the need to develop ideas and concepts for a social dimension of globalisation far beyond the workplace and even the nation state. This requires among others a different type of information sharing, knowledge generation, and analytical capacity. The Global Labour University (GLU) initiative is a network of universities, trade unions, foundations and the ILO to address these needs by facilitating discourse, stimulate research, and providing university-level qualification programs on the political, economic and social dimensions of globalisation for labour and trade union experts.

1. In the long run - ideas do matter

Reversing the marginalisation of social justice and fairness in the public debate requires first and foremost liberation from an intellectual slavery that is unable to think beyond globalisation as an overwhelming tide of unregulated market forces. Debate leads not always and immediately to policy changes, but there are rarely policy changes without analytical groundwork, debate, and critical reflection. At any moment in time, the vested interest of big business and the logic of profit maximisation seem to be insurmountable, however, in most democratic societies the concepts and discretion of political organizations and decision makers are only possible within broadly shared values and ideas. Growing out of and inspiring broad social movements' powerful ideas of equal rights, social justice, feminism, and environmentalism, changed societies radically for the better.

² John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* 1936 Cambridge.
http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/keynes/john_maynard/k44g/chapter24.html

Today, only totally unreconstructed men dare to say the stupidities about women that were common male wisdom 40 years ago; in democratic societies today no one challenges equal voting rights for all citizens today, something unthinkable for property owning men of the 19th century; the racist notion of the 'burden of the white man', formal racial segregation and apartheid are matters of the past; and most politicians standing for elections choose not to challenge the principles of a welfare state or questions the need for universal access to adequate health, education, and decent employment. Even the most radical neo-liberal reforms are normally justified as the right tools to improve the well-being of the majority including the poor. No tax reform or deregulation is suggested for the sake of making the rich richer, even where the outcome suggests that was the intention in the first place.

1.1. The declining hegemony of the wrong answers

Globalisation is a multidimensional term describing a reality of a complex and interrelated global world, justifying the further empowerment of the powerful as a structural inevitability, and containing the hope of a fairer interdependent world. In the name of globalisation social, cultural, and political human rights, as well as social justice, are frequently questioned as incompatible or supposedly incompatible with the functional imperatives of market-led modernization.

The decade following the liberating collapse of the Berlin Wall saw a historically unparalleled pro-market hegemony. "My understanding of freedom and prosperity is founded upon a system of worldwide free trade, not man-made institutions"³ was the credo of the then Czechoslovakian Prime Minister, Vaclav Klaus. George Bush Sr. while visiting Moscow told the Russian people "No conclave of government experts, no matter how brilliant, can match the sheer ingenuity of the market....Some call it the American dream, but really it is the universal dream and it is the dream the Soviet people are striving to make real for themselves"⁴ Never in its 150 years of existence had capitalism prevailed so unchallenged. The *Zeitgeist* was well captured by the title of Fukuyama's best-selling book⁵ 'End of History'.

The neo-liberal interpretation of reality is still dominant today, but the dubious results of shock therapy in transition countries, the Asian financial crisis, the poor growth record of the world economy, rising inequality, and millions of victims of a dogmatic marketisation strategy have undermined public confidence in globalisation as we know it. Public protest against the current form of globalisation has become widespread and international. Elections in Latin America, India, and several European countries have shown the lack of support for the free market agenda. As a fallback position the global elite is presenting the current form of globalisation as the only rational choice and disagreement is discredited as irrational, naïve, or representative of narrow, sectional interests. The End of History triumphalism is replaced by the TINA (There Is No Alternative) mantra. The no-choice mantra is rather ideological than logical. Policy choices are made constantly at local, national, or global level. The

³ FT 26 March 1991

⁴ FT 1 August 1991

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992

reality of diverse patterns of success and failure contradicts the 'one size fits all' approach. While all countries feel the heat of globalisation, they find different responses.

Half a century after Piero Sraffa⁶ demolished the very foundation of the neoclassical idea by showing that numerous equilibriums of capital and labour utilisation are theoretically possible, mainstream economists are still arguing that there is an inverse relationship between the wage level and the level of employment - building their entire no-choice argument of wage reductions for employment creation on a simple but theoretically flawed assumption.

The currently dominant economic interpretation of reality is losing its grip on the public discourse as the negative consequences of its prescriptions become apparent, This opens a window of opportunity to broaden the space for productive debates about policy choices.

1.2. Unleashing the market – undermining democracy

The utopia of the free market⁷ is the conceptual basis for deliberate policy decisions of many national governments to adapt to globalisation by radicalizing and internationalizing the market. The illusion of its self-regulating ingenuity is the *raison d'être* for deregulation. Privatizing pensions, public housing, health care, education etc. reduces the scope for direct state policies and simultaneously creates the private vested interests that subsequently oppose state intervention and shape public regulation rather in accordance with private business interests than public needs. The transfer of an ever-bigger share of societal affairs from political regulation to market regulation deliberately limits the scope for policy interventions. Global capital mobility gives transnational companies the opportunity for legal tax evasion and the structural advantage to demand from national governments economic, fiscal and infrastructure policies in their favour. Power, once delegated by national governments to multilateral institutions like the WTO, reduces the future sovereignty of states and their citizens. The structural power of IMF and World Bank recommendations reduced the scope for financial and economic policies of many countries. As the public policy discourse is mainly national, these constraints are not really legitimized through a democratic process but de facto imposed on people as undisputable policy constraints. It is not merely the nation state, it is democracy that is at risk. The right to vote loses value, as can be seen in declining electoral turnout, if decisive decision making is outsourced towards only loosely accountable international or national institutions or the market.

Democracy is based firstly on the possibility for the people to decide upon substantive issues and secondly on the independence of citizens in decision making. Policy outsourcing is reducing the spaces for decisions and the current deconstruction of the welfare state is undermining the independence of many people. Meaningful democracy requires citizens who enjoy genuine freedom - based on political, legal, religious and economic independence. The prominence of property in the early documents of the French revolution and the American constitution has its roots in this concept. The authors of these documents did not give property its prominent role because they saw a particular need to protect the

⁶ P. Sraffa, *Warenproduktion mittels Waren*, Suhrkamp Frankfurt am Main 1976

⁷ see Polany, *The Great Transformation*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1997

Rockefellers, Rothschilds, Krupps, Gates, and Murdochs of this world from the millions of have-nots. In a society just liberating itself from feudalism they saw individual private property as the safeguard for democracy and independence. Labour legislation limiting the discretion of the entrepreneur and collective property in the form of social security provisions are the functional equivalents to private property in securing a degree of independence that allowed proletarians to become *citoyens*. Questioning today, in the name of globalisation, the collective property of employees, undermines their relative independence, and is ultimately challenging the very foundations of mass democracy.⁸ There is a trade off between freedom and free markets.

The former dichotomy between foreign and internal policies is replaced by a multi-level policy framework. International rules become key instruments to influence the balance of power at national level. Global institutions such as the WTO, IMF, and World Bank have limited power themselves. Their power derives mainly from the fact that powerful alliances of neo-liberal market dogmatism, vested interests of international companies and banks, and pro-liberalisation governments have shifted key decisions to the international level where public resistance against a neo-liberal agenda and the pressure for democratic accountability proves to be weaker. However, the dynamically growing global civil society and the increasing number of international institutions, rules, agreements, codes of conducts etc. are signs that counter action is possible.

Nation states are at the same time shapers and victims of globalisation. Political conflicts and compromises within nation states are modified through the additional levels of regional or global rule making. Depending on the specific national context, policy responses of societies are different but they move in similar directions. Even the Scandinavian countries as the most creative and successful defenders of the welfare state, see the scope for tax based inclusive social policies and fairness reduced by capital mobility and global market pressure. The character of the state in this context shifts from an inclusive welfare state to a competition state. Instead of embedding the market in a set of rules and regulations to ensure overall social inclusion, increasing competitiveness now becomes the overarching objective. Instead of complementing the market mechanism with measures aiming at equal opportunities, adequate social security and protective labour legislation for all, the focus is more on supply side measures to create a pro-business environment. Reinforcement of the structural power imbalance in the labour market by reducing welfare provisions and weakening labour legislation becomes a prominent part of a strategy to compete for investment.

1.3. Adapting to change – influencing the pattern of change

Rapid change is the only constant element in the permanent evolution of market economies. Market based production networks increasingly replace large vertically integrated factories. The individual entrepreneur has less discretion and is under tougher market competition. Decision makers at the workplace seem to be increasingly disempowered. Outsourcing, production networks, free trade, and capital mobility partly replace the visible power of the entrepreneur by the structural force of the market. There seems to be less scope within the company to compromise over the cost of restructuring and modernizing.

⁸ see R. Castell, *Die Stärkung des Sozialen*, Hamburg , 2005

The scope for successful workplace militancy decreases to the extent that producers lose price-setting power. This is particularly true for company-based collective bargaining systems with weak industry wide standards where workers' freedom and independence are not protected by labour law and welfare state provisions. At company level unions are increasingly marginalized, forced into concession bargaining, or engage pro-actively in co-managing companies to weather turbulent globalisation storms.

Capital mobility erodes the tax base and reduces monetary sovereignty, supra-national rules and regulation hollows out national legislative power. The downscaling and weakening of the state reduces its ability to guarantee through public services, welfare provisions, and protective legislation public space outside of market competition. Labour's main negotiating partner for an institutionally embedded market economy, the nation state, is withering away. Without an international regulatory framework, national options of reducing labour competition are replaced by options to adapt to global competition, and collective bargaining is pushed towards company level with the above-mentioned consequences.

The unleashed global market has to be civilized through global rules, global public debate, and solidarity to maintain and broaden the concept of people determining the rules of society.⁹ An international labour agenda cannot limit itself to core labour standards. The larger body of existing labour standards provides a more comprehensive body of regulations for labour markets and social security provisions. However, labour standards in themselves are too narrow. They need to be integrated into a broader context of global fairness and governance issues like exchange rate stability, international measures against tax evasion, fair trade rules, global taxes and redistribution of wealth.

1.4. Vision and rules beyond the nation state

The vision of social justice and meaningful democracy requires a social dimension of global governance as the retreat towards national isolation is no option even for powerful nations. The 'World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation' established by the ILO in 2002 deserves - despite its limitations - credit for putting this imperative of future global development on the international agenda.¹⁰

The debates for fairer solutions are located between fatalist surrender to market forces and distant dreams of system change. With a view to promoting mutually acceptable global rules and global solidarity, these debates have to be international by topic and composition. They need to be based on realistic pragmatism guided by utopian realism. Neither pro- nor contra-market fundamentalists waste much time on this. In orthodox Marxian thinking and in neo-liberal concepts, interference in the market logic is seen as either impossible or undesirable. For the neo-liberals, it is against the ingenuity and efficiency of the market to

⁹ see Habermas, Eine politische Verfassung für die pluralistische Weltgesellschaft; in Habermas, Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion, Frankfurt am Main 2005

¹⁰ <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/faithglobalization/index.htm>

interfere and for the Marxists the cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery which batter down all protective measures and cultural diversity:

“The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. ...

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilization. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.”¹¹

There is neither a neo-liberal end nor a materialist law of history¹². History is an open process, where answers are found through public debate and political struggle. The utopian visions of socialist thinking, or other humanitarian ideas and beliefs for that matter are expressing the moral convictions that ‘another world is possible’. They provide the motivating energy to mobilise against the unjustifiable realities of desperate poverty, growing insecurity and inequality, discrimination and outright exploitation. The vision of possible change is a necessary element to develop practical policies to achieve fairer outcomes of globalisation.

Labour grew in the 19th century as a visionary movement, became an established institution and recognized representative of labour in the aftermath of World-War I¹³ and consolidated itself after World War II as mass organizations that – at least in the industrialized ‘western’ world - improved employees’ living and working conditions by reducing the power imbalance in the labour market through labour legislation, the welfare state, and collective bargaining. With the vision of socialism discredited and with declining regulating influence the two pillars of labour's strength are eroding at the same time. Rejuvenating these two pillars requires a vision for more global justice and a policy for a regulatory framework and industrial relations extending beyond the nation state.

1.5. Shifting the public debate

Interests are inevitably becoming more diverse, complex, and competitive within internally more differentiated societies, and within a closely interlinked global economy marked by huge inequalities and imbalances of power. The trade union movement can rely less and less on a fairly homogeneous and loyal core working class with similar workplace conditions, similar social milieus, similar values, and political orientations. Nostalgic dreams about the

¹¹ K. Marx/F. Engels The Communist Manifesto 1848 <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html>

¹² The nineteenth century ascending labour movement had a nearly scientific-religious faith that the collapse of capitalism and the subsequent advent of socialism were a law of history. This somehow determinist modernisation dream started to die in November 1917 and was finally buried under the crumbling Berlin wall. At some stage in the future, capitalism as we know it will disappear. Nothing in history is forever. However, whether this will be for the better or for the worse is the secret of the future

¹³ This new reality was reflected internationally in chapter XIII of the Versailles Peace Treaty, in which the governments agreed upon the foundation of the International Labour Organisation as a tripartite body to set international labour standards.

good old days of a broad unified working class are firstly idealizing the past, secondly ignoring the socio-economic and cultural reasons behind these changes, and thirdly leads towards isolation, and declining influence.

Labour is acting in an environment, where competing interests are constantly trying to influence and dominate public opinion. Power and reason are decisive factors in shaping debates and decisions. It is the exception that power can act totally beyond reason, and good arguments are rarely without any power. However, unfortunately daily experience shows that power often buys reason. This option does not exist for trade unions. They are financially easily outgunned by companies and the myriads of think tanks, foundations, academics, and media - sponsored and at least partly controlled - by the rich and powerful. Lacking the power of money, organisational power and the power of reason becomes the more important.

Engaging in debates and sometimes alliances with other civil society groups, think tanks, academic institutions etc. is part of any strategy to gain influence in public debate. It is unlikely that labour can achieve the required substantive policy changes on its own but it certainly cannot be done without organized labour. This pivotal role of labour in any serious alliance for change creates the space for a self-confident but open-minded approach to such dialogue processes. Historically, changes towards more democracy and social fairness, grew out of such 'new deal' coalitions.

The need for trade union reform and broader engagement with other civil society organisations is discussed under service trade unionism. Versus social movement trade unionism Service trade unionism is referred to as a trade union model where the organisation and its full time officials represent and provide services for a predominantly passive membership, which is rarely mobilised as most issues are solved by the experts at the negotiating table or by legal representation etc. Social movement trade unionism is in contrast seen rather as a lively mobilising movement than a service providing organisational machine. However, it is not entirely clear whether there is a common understanding on what is meant by social movement trade unionism. Is this mainly a different form of involving members and communities in trade union campaigns or does this also include political mobilisation beyond the established structures and areas of industrial relations. Is social movement trade unionism reborn radical syndicalism where direct political action of workers is seen as superior to electoral support for political parties, or does it boil down to innovative organising and mobilising campaigns and attempts to learn from successes of new social movements and NGOs to get public attention and influencing the public debate?¹⁴

In this context, the differences between NGOs and trade unions are not a mere cultural or generational phenomena but have deep roots in different ways of operating and different functionalities. For NGOs campaigning, public attention, and scandalising protest are the most important and often only instruments. Either they can get positive public attention and

14 For a brief introduction and extensive references about the debate see Conor Craden/ Peter Hall-Jones Trade union reform - change is the only constant, 2005 <http://www.world-si.org/Template.cfm?Section=Home&CONTENTID=7253&TEMPLATE=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm>

influence public opinion or they fail. They need to campaign constantly to remain in the business. NGOs need mass sympathy not necessarily mass membership. They are legitimized not by their organisational strength but the public support they mobilise. For trade unions, negotiations with employers and governments, backed by organisational strength, and the ultimate capability of strike action are traditionally the strongest weapons. Using the strike weapon is the most powerful peaceful weapon for conflict resolution and requires a membership-based organisation. It is hitting directly and hard instead of trying to change employers' behaviour through public campaigns, calls for boycott etc.. However., the relations between trade unions and employers are also a continuous process. Meaning that even after conflicts the social counterparts have to ensure a modus operandi and hence scandalising and public campaigning are more seen as adequate instruments in a crisis than as constantly applied modes of action. Trade union members in most instances do not want permanent conflict but durable conflict resolutions. They tend to prefer negotiated solutions, as a public scandal might hurt the company economically and ultimately endanger their own jobs. This might be a partial explanation why some of the recent most visible and from a PR point of view successful trade union campaigns that are to a considerable extent inspired by NGO-type tactics of public blaming and shaming are directed at companies with hardly any trade union membership like Wal Mart in the US or Lidl in Germany.

Regaining strength and membership requires, among others, attractive and innovative ideas to shape globalisation; productive international networking; efficient support for organized members; a welcoming organizational culture and an open-minded but confident dialogue internally among members, and externally with civil society organizations, academic institutions, political parties etc.

At least in the industrialised countries labour issues are far less prominent in the academic discourse than decades ago. At universities, many 'friends of labour' are retiring. Industrial relations are partly replaced by management and HRD research, the debate about labour law has shifted from securing dignity and respect for workers towards labour market rigidities. Income equality is often no longer treated as a desirable objective but as an obstacle to create dynamic and competitive markets. The late 1960s when 'sympathy with the proletariat' was en vogue among intellectuals have passed. Trade unions can no longer assume in the same way a commitment to the causes of the labour movement, they have to take a much more pro-active role in building partnerships and dialogue with the academic community and civil society groups. As in personal relationships, it is as much about being the right partner than finding the right partner.

The research and knowledge base for new and innovative ideas to promote the age-old visions of social justice, freedom, and solidarity in the 21st century will not be created without tapping into the intellectual capacity of universities and research institutions, where the bulk of research in today's world is undertaken. Within universities, there are potential allies who share the understanding that there is a need for better social global governance and that this requires genuine global discourses on these issues. Many people within academia are concerned about social, economic, environmental, and cultural consequences of the current form of globalisation and also with the intend to improve the quality of their research keen to discuss and cooperate with partners outside the academic ivory tower. However, they

cannot become partners on the basis of an instrumental understanding of research sometimes prevalent in the labour movement, where scientific 'evidence' is requested merely to support the already well-known truth.

2. Bringing expertise together – building a Global Labour University

Challenging the conventional wisdom, analysing the changing pattern of work and societies, building alliances and bridges between labour and academic institutions, and providing academic qualification programs for trade unions are the motivating forces to build a Global Labour University and global union research networks.

Trade unions need to have ideas and concepts for a social dimension of globalisation far beyond the workplace and even the nation state. This requires a different type of mobilizing power, information sharing, knowledge generation, and analytical capacity. For democratic movements, responses to global challenges cannot be found in an isolated national context, and cannot be delivered by a centralist international body. For a defensive company-based strategy, national alliances with management might in some cases be a workable solution to achieve an advantageous position in global competitive markets. However, for trade union efficiency within international companies, for influencing international rule making, knowing and understanding the international context and potential partners is crucial. Multidisciplinary and international research and debate is an important element of better understanding and cooperation. Pooling resources and knowledge is most easily possible in fairly open and horizontal network structures. This requires acceptance of dissenting views, but is clearly to be preferred to the conformity of authoritarian movements, or the emptiness of lowest common denominator statements.

Networks are efficient and valuable for knowledge sharing, discussions and debate they are far less suited for decision making. The best way to destroy a network is to try to control it from one point or to make it a decision-making institutions with inevitable dubious democratic legitimacy.

The possibilities, the potential, and the need for international networking, exchange, and cooperation increase. However, the barriers remain formidable. Business, academic, cultural, political, sport, or entertainment elites have created global communities. Labour is lagging behind. Lack of language skills, cultural differences, financial constraints, and competing interests make direct communication and cooperation difficult.

The needs to:

- a) Enhance the analytical capacity of trade unions to understand and challenge the existing common wisdom about globalisation;
- b) Build alliances with the broader civil society;
- c) Develop alternative ideas for a fair and inclusive globalisation;
- d) Build sustainable networks

put additional challenges on trade union research, labour studies, and workers' education in a broad sense. This concerns the content, the instruments, and the methodology of cooperation. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has a mandate to support international cooperation among its constituencies and the obligation to respond to their requests and needs and is the only UN specialised agency where organized labour has institutional representation. The ILO was created to achieve social justice and respect for workers' dignity globally. Its body of international labour standards is the most advanced set of international rules and recommendations to provide a framework for internationally compatible fair labour markets and decent work. Within this mandate, the ILO initiated in cooperation with Global Unions, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, universities and national trade union centers from Brazil (University of Campinas/Central Unica dos Trabalhadores), Canada (Universities of York and McMaster/ Canadian Labour Congress), Germany (Berlin School of Economics/University of Kassel/ Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund/Hans Böckler Foundation and DGB Bildungswerk), South Africa (University of Witwatersrand/ Congress of South African Trade Unions) and the UK (University of Cardiff, TUC) a Global Labour University project.

The Global Labour University (GLU) idea was launched in 2002 in order to facilitate discourse, stimulate research, and provide university-level qualification programs on the political, economic and social dimensions of globalisation for labour and trade union experts. The immediate objectives are to:

- a) engage with trade unions and universities to develop and implement new university curricula to broaden the debate and knowledge base on labour and equity issues in universities;
- b) qualify trade unionists and other interested labour experts, through internationally recognized university-based post graduate programs, on the political, economic and social dimensions of globalisation from a labour perspective;
- c) establish a network for joint research on global labour issues;
- d) facilitate discourse among trade unionists and researchers concerning the challenges of globalisation.

The first activity of the GLU network in the pilot phase from 2002-2005 was the development and implementation of a pilot Masters course on "Labour Policies and Globalisation" at the universities in Kassel and Berlin. An international group of academics and trade unionists developed the curriculum for this course over the last three years at a series of workshops. International experts joined the staff from the two universities to teach at the pilot course. International and national trade unions actively engaged by offering internship opportunities to the students. In September 2005 23 students from 18 countries successfully graduated from the pilot course and a second group started their studies in September 2005.

Curriculum of Master Program on Labour Policies and Globalisation¹⁵

Regular Courses

R 1 Trade Union Strategies in a Global Economy
R 2 Governance of Globalisation

Elective Courses

E 1 Workers' Rights in the Informal Economy
E 2 Theories of Social Justice

¹⁵ For details see www.ilo.org/lpg

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| R 3 Strategies of Multinational Companies and Labour | E 3 International Trade Union Politics |
| R 4 Economic Policy & Union Strategy | E 4 Gender & Globalisation |
| R 5 Labour rights and Sustainable Development | E 5 Migration and Global Labour Markets |
| R 6 Organisational Development of Trade Unions | E 6 Legal Framework of International Trade Union Influence |
| One World Seminar | E 7 Globalisation and the Welfare State |
| Colloquium on current Trade Union Policies | E 8 Privatisation, Deregulation, and Liberalisation of Services |
| | E 9 History of Trade Unions |
| | E 10 Work and Society |
| | E 11 Development Economics |
| Six weeks' internship with national or international trade union organisation | |

International teams are working on textbook developments concerning global governance, macro economic regimes and development, trade unions and globalisation. The annual GLU Conference is a platform for researchers, trade unionists, and GLU students to debate the global challenges labour is facing. The conferences are also opportunities to develop new joint research initiatives. The findings of the annual conference are published in regular GLU yearbooks.

In 2007, the Universities of Witwatersrand (South Africa) and Campinas (Brazil) will offer additional Master Programs on labour policies and globalisation within the Global Labour University framework. This will further strengthen the north/south cooperation within the GLU and allow students to pursue their studies partly in the north and partly in the south.

An international graduate school on the social dimension of globalisation for PhD students will be launched in 2007 at the University of Kassel.

The first phase of the Global Labour University project¹⁶ has been successful in:

- agreeing, among very diverse project partners, the structure and content of the curriculum;
- selecting a highly motivated, diverse and gender balanced group of trade unionists/students for the course;
- establishing a certified and internationally recognized Masters course on 'Labour Policies and Globalisation';
- initiating new forms of international cooperation between trade unionists and academics;
- initiating joint research and textbook development;
- contributing to the international debate on global labour issues;
- qualifying trade union experts on global labour issues.

However, many issues remain for further debate. Some of the constantly debated questions will be discussed in more detail below:

¹⁶ For an extensive review see <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/actrav/glp/progr05.htm>

- A. Managing of and benefiting from cultural diversity and language barriers
- B. Gender mainstreaming beyond numerical balance
- C. Integrating participants into broader networks
- D. Recognized masters program versus labour education and adult learning versus university teaching

A. Managing of and benefiting from cultural diversity and language barriers

Bringing people from different cultural backgrounds together is a precondition for experiencing and understanding cultural diversity. It offers unique opportunities to learn from each other, to look at globalisation processes from different perspectives and to debate globally acceptable visions and strategies. However, putting people from around the world in one group by no means automatically creates multicultural understanding. Being in a foreign country, facing dual language barriers, (re)starting university studies and working within a group of 18 nationalities creates insecurity, stress, and sometimes an initial reaction of retreat. The fact that all participants share some common trade union values is helpful, but sharing the same political values does by no means imply necessarily personal sympathy or practical solidarity. People become more aware about their cultural differences. Not everybody becomes friends and a need for genuine tolerance remains because differences remain after overcoming initial ignorance, insecurity, or prejudices. Pro-active facilitation is required to kick-start the common study process.

Language is a central problem. Those who have to communicate in a foreign language face an additional barrier in discussions and monolingual Anglophones do not always reflect sufficiently on their 'language advantage', and quite 'naturally' dominate discussions. The more limited ability of non-native English speakers to express themselves in writing and speaking creates high levels of stress. The fact that most natives in Kassel and Berlin prefer to speak *deutsch* is an additional cultural and language challenge for the participants in the pilot course. On the other hand, it also puts at least native English speakers under the need to operate outside the classroom in a foreign language. However, 'broken' English is the lingua franca of our time and whoever wants to participate in a global debate has to master this language, and labour needs more people from the non-English speaking world to broaden the global discourse about labour policies and globalisation. The understanding of globalisation processes and the search for policy responses will greatly benefit from more trade unionists outside the English speaking world bringing their knowledge into the debate. The only good thing with the language problem is that while other problems might grow during a course, this is bound to diminish over time.

B. Gender mainstreaming beyond numerical balance

The program has been successful in ensuring a high participation of women (more than 50 per cent). This was achieved through strong encouragement for qualified women to apply, and safeguarded by a compulsory quota of a minimum of 40 per cent participation by women. Ensuring a gender balance among the teaching staff and the international network proved to be more challenging, but is improving over time.

In designing the program, gender mainstreaming was defined as a key feature of the curriculum. In addition to a special (elective) course on gender, all courses should be gender mainstreamed i.e. they should systematically analyse the different impact of policies on men and women. In a diverse network, this can best be done in a medium-term process through a continuous process of debate and reflection.

C. Integrating participants into broader networks

One of the great challenges and risks of a qualification program of this type is that people lose the contact to their trade union and use the newly acquired qualification to look for better paid jobs outside the labour movement. Commitments cannot be imposed on people and free and confident trade unionists will always make individual choices about their own future. Even if people take up other jobs it is not necessarily bad for the labour movement. Nevertheless, the program built in several safeguards to target the right people.. Participants have to be recommended by their trade union, the trade union has to make a financial contribution and a six weeks internship with a trade union during the course provides for a 'grounding in reality' in between.

The positive experience of the program is also a motivating factor to stay in the labour movement. The experience from the first course is that most participants returned to trade union or labour activities at home. In addition, the GLU is building an alumni network to encourage students to maintain contact over the years and to continue to work together.

Beyond internal networking the GLU needs to be embedded in broader information networks of trade union and labour research activities. The ILO is supporting an initiative of the international trade union movement to build a Global Union Research Network (GURN).¹⁷ The GURN (www.gurn.info) facilitates debate, research and information exchange on global labour issues. It organises workshops, on-line debates, supports research and maintains a number of web-sites to provide up to date information on important global labour issues. The students are encouraged to join this network that offers the opportunity to link up with a wider group of labour researchers. It is too early to assess the success of the strategy of network integration but pro-active stimulation of further cooperation is seen as vital for strengthening the international debate and for supporting 'retention' of the GLU participants in the wider labour orbit.

D. Recognized masters program versus labour education and adult learning versus university teaching

Since the beginning of the program, the question whether the course should be a formal university course or a trade union course has been hotly debated.

¹⁷ For a detailed description see Verena Schmidt, The Global Union Research Network: a potential for incremental innovation?, in Just Labour, a Canadian Journal of Work and Society, 6&7 2005 <http://www.justlabour.yorku.ca/volume67/pdfs/06%20Schmidt%20Press.pdf>

Entry barriers to formal education for many workers, and the lack of recognition of experiences and informal learning, were important factors to reject formal entry requirements and exams in workers' education. The underlying assumption is that for trade union qualification programs formal qualification is not a very valuable criterion and is an inherent element of exclusion. It was also not seen as a necessary disciplining and motivating instrument as committed trade unionists derive their learning motivation not from marks but from vision. Finally labour – for good and bad reasons - wants to keep full political control over the learning process.

However, the fact that formal qualification standards might require undesirable modifications for the curriculum and the methodology of a course is probably the most important reason against formally recognised courses. It gives more agenda-setting and control power to the teacher and is hence less participatory and democratic. This also individualizes the learning process as people are individually assessed. Learning in closed groups of likeminded trade unionists creates an environment allowing a focus on problems from a labour perspective and creates a less competitive learning environment.

These are valid arguments to maintain traditional forms of labour education. However, there are also a number of arguments to supplement 'in-house qualification' with formally recognized high-level qualification programs. The expertise and knowledge of universities can be used, and universities are best equipped to provide knowledge and academic analytical skills that enable people to back up their political views with well-reasoned arguments and underlying theoretical concepts. Universities are motivated through joint programs to develop a stronger focus on labour issues. Being in a like-minded trade union community in an open university environment also reduces the risk of reinforcing the politically correct truth instead of debating the challenging questions.

Learning is not always fun and is often hard work. Participants want their hard work recognized. Certification and formal recognition provide additional confirmation of the value and quality of a given course. Recognized courses can also be an important stepping-stone for further learning and qualification. Integration into broader academic institutions can be intellectually more stimulating. The increased need for building alliances requires an open-minded environment for discussions and debate in qualification programs.

Education has always been a central element of trade union work to develop, discuss, and disseminate new ideas. Labour pioneered many concepts of adult learning. It was one of the first to discover and value the importance of learners' experiences as important sources of knowledge. There is no given set of knowledge that needs to be transferred from the teacher to the taught but all participants involved in the learning process bring their knowledge, experience and opinion to the table. The shift from bringing enlightenment to the workers towards facilitating learning together, and from each other, led to a language shifted from the partly paternalistic notion of workers' education to labour education, trade union training, life long learning etc.

While discussion and sharing experience are important, they are certainly not everything and sometimes seem overvalued in labour education. Sharing practical experience is not a

substitute for studying theoretical concepts and paradigms. Indeed, practical experience can also be misleading. Daily experience at enterprise level makes the employers' argument that wage cuts increase competitiveness and create employment quite compelling. The negative effects on productivity growth, aggregate demand, or the upward pressure on the exchange rate, are beyond daily experience and require a different level of abstract thinking.

Humankind has accumulated knowledge and theoretical understanding over many generations and there is no need (and most people do not have the ingenuity of the few great thinkers each century produces) to reinvent the wheel. While sharing experience is important, and reflection indispensable, there is knowledge that needs to be learned from books and teachers, as you cannot assume that it is instantly derived from practical experience. The more distant the causes affecting personal lives, the more difficult it is to derive understanding and responses from personal experience, or from sharing personal experience.¹⁸ This needs to be taken into account in addressing globalisation issues. There is a need to broaden the experience brought together. Global problems require global sharing of experience and knowledge. But there is not only a horizontal but also a vertical problem. Complex issues cannot be understood without acquiring the accumulated wisdom of humankind. This is normally not found in classrooms but in libraries. Despite new technology and new methodology there is no real short cut to avoid long hours of reading, and meaningful debate can often only start after that.

Universities traditionally have a more vertical or hierarchical tradition of learning and they are probably overestimating the knowledge transfer, and underestimating the need for critical reflection and debate. While professors enjoy the discourse with other professors this does not necessarily apply to the same extent to students. Professors might not always see the value of students questioning their wisdom and methodology.

Adults are prepared to learn - they do not want to be taught. People do not learn what they are taught but what they want to understand. Adult people have their own interpretation of the world and they respond on the basis of that view to any new information. It is an illusion (let alone its undesirability) that knowledge can be transferred without reflection, debate, and discussion. Sending and receiving a message are only two loosely connected activities, where common understanding can only be ensured through discussion and reflection. In some lectures, students clearly felt a lack of participatory exchange with the professors and in several discussions, the two different learning cultures, and expectations were debated. Finding better solutions is a joint, and not always easy, discussion process.

The GLU already successfully facilitated a 'clash of learning cultures' and maintains the Hegelian optimism that thesis and antithesis will be *aufgehoben* in a qualitatively higher synthesis.

¹⁸ This is probably more obvious in natural science than in social science. We can neither see, smell nor touch radiation but it kills us. Over generations and after numerous deaths human kind would probably learn from mere experience to avoid radioactively polluted places. The theoretical understanding of the risk of radiation, the ability to measure it does not make it less dangerous but allows for better protective measures.

3 Conclusion

The speed of globalisation is not slowing down and the need for a global solution is growing by the day. The neo-liberal ideology is running out of steam. People vote against it, a vibrant global civil society is emerging, and even the latest World Bank Development report sounds more of Porto Alegre than Washington consensus.

“For many if not most people, equity is of intrinsic importance as a development goal in its own right. But this report goes further, by presenting persuasive evidence that a broad sharing of economic and political opportunities is also instrumental for economic growth and development. This is for economic reasons, because greater equity can lead to a fuller and more efficient use of a nation’s resources. It is also for political and institutional reasons: excessive inequalities in power and influence can lead to political, social, and economic institutions that are less conducive to long-term growth. Few of today’s prosperous societies, if any, developed by excluding the majority of their people from economic and political opportunities. The implication of this message for the work of the World Bank, and others in the development community, is that a focus on equity should be a central concern in the design and implementation of policy for development and growth.”¹⁹

The apparent ‘Washington Disarray’ offers a window of opportunity to broaden the debate about alternative forms of globalisation. To seize this opportunity requires sustainable global networks and international movements as prototypes of a global civil society. The Global Labour University is trying to make a contribution to this process by focusing on the social and labour dimension of globalisation, building international links between academia and the labour movement and qualifying trade unionists on global labour issues.

Labour has a key role to play to make globalisation fair. Then at the end of the day the broad involvement of working people will make the difference, whether ideas remain just ideas or whether they will change reality.

¹⁹ World Bank, World Development Report 2006, Washington
http://wdsbeta.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/IW3P/IB/2005/09/20/000112742_20050920110826/Rendered/PDF/322040World0Development0Report02006.pdf