

## **The University and Workers Education: A Strategic Partnership.**

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It is a great honour to address you today as the first graduates of the ENGAGE programme at the University of the Witwatersrand. We are deeply grateful for this initiative by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the GIZ, the funder. ENGAGE forms part of the Global Labour University, a network of universities designed to strengthen the intellectual and strategic capacity of unions and to establish closer links between unions and the university.



It is clear from the presentations that you have made today that you have benefitted enormously from the five months that you have spent at this great university. The challenge now is for you to transfer the knowledge you have learnt and revitalise your organisations when you return home. What is especially gratifying is the range of participants in this pioneering course on the African continent. We have graduates here today from Argentine, Germany, United States

and our own Southern African region, Malawi, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Namibia and, of course, South Africa.

Globalisation has profoundly changed the nature of work. Although the new economy has created unprecedented opportunities for wealth creation, it is undermining the social fabric of many societies by giving capital the ability to bypass regulatory systems set in place by industrialised nations after the Second World War.

Capital can ignore labour standards by relocating to low wage areas. The expansion of the labour market in India, China, Russia, and Central Europe has doubled the size of the global labour market. It has also led to the re-emergence of un-free labour and a retreat, in some countries, to the working conditions of the nineteenth century.

ENGAGE was conceived as a response by universities to the challenge facing labour in the age of globalisation. What role can universities play in worker education? It is possible to identify three broad responses in the labour movement towards the role of universities in workers education.

There are those who dismiss the university as a bourgeois institution and believe that unions should not "outsource" working class education to an institution dominated by capital. Universities in capitalist society, it is argued, have been designed to produce and transmit knowledge to promote capitalist values and if workers hand over their education to the university they will turn unions into business organisations.

There are, on the other hand, those in the labour movement who believe the opposite. They aspire to be recognised by the university and are happy to hand over their education to university adult education departments or similarly designed labour studies programmes. Some unions are even willing to locate union education in schools of business.

There is, however, a third position that stands between those who reject the university as a site for worker education and those who uncritically accept the university. This third position accepts Karl Marx's proposition in *German Ideology* that the "ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" but believes that this proposition expresses itself in contradictory ways within a university. A genuine university encourages intellectual pluralism and is committed to academic

freedom. This freedom to explore ideas allows, for example, a department of economics to be dominated by neo-classical scholars but also allows colleagues to develop research projects and teach courses that promote heterodox economics. Indeed you benefitted by being taught by a leading Keynesian scholar as well as a leading economist from the heterodox school.

Of course there are limits as to how far a university is willing to permit intellectual pluralism. In 1980, colleagues in the social sciences at this university introduced a course on labour studies for the newly established trade union federation, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). The course was a great success as it drew the emerging leadership of FOSATU together for two weeks at a time where they were exposed to the leading scholars of the new labour relations paradigm emerging at that time. We had courses on labour history, social history, the labour process, labour law, political economy, even lectures on the informal economy by the late David Webster, assassinated by the security police on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1989.

Employers got to hear about the course and through their representative on the University Council, Errol Drummond, director of the employers association, SEIFSA, they were informed that “communists” were running courses for trade unionists on the campus. The University promptly cancelled the contract we had with the German foundation, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and kicked the course off the campus on the grounds that we were in breach of “academic freedom”.

It was a short sighted and hypocritical decision by the University. It was short-sighted because the women and men on these courses became leading figures in the new South Africa; Jay Naidoo, the Minister of Reconstruction and Development in Mandela’s Cabinet, Chris Dlamini, South Africa’s first ambassador to China, and so on. It was also hypocritical as the University was running a cadet course specifically designed for Anglo-American at the time. It also deprived the university of exciting innovations in its teaching programme and curricula. Universities do not only have a public duty to engage in outreach activities, they also have a great deal to learn from working people.

It is a great pleasure for me to see that we have now reintroduced a labour studies course on our campus for trade unionists run by our social scientists. Importantly it is truly international, runs for a much longer period of time, and consists of a larger

number of students than in the eighties! Indeed we now have a regular course for trade unions from the metal union run by the department of sociology.

So there is a third response by labour to the university, one that sees an advantage in a strategic relationship with the university, where courses are designed in partnership with sympathetic academics in certain departments. I believe the programme you have just completed, which I would call a strategic approach where you work with progressive academics and labour becomes an equal partner in a shared and interactive learning process, is an example of a new partnership between labour and the university.

However, the Wits Labour Studies course in the early eighties illustrates a central point, namely, that worker education is a terrain of contestation, it is part of the battle over ideas. For most employers, worker education is about making them more productive through improving their technical skills. It is, in other words, about workers as a commodity, a factor of production, a producer that needs their skills upgraded.

But, of course, worker education is not only about workers as producers, although workers clearly need the opportunity to develop their technical skills and it is gratifying that our government is beginning to take this seriously. Worker education is primarily about workers as an economic, social and political force. That is why workers need distinct courses where they can explore working class history and spend time, as the children of the middle class can, reflecting on the world around them and how a new labour-friendly world order can be created.

This is especially important at this phase of our history when the dominant economic paradigm of Keynesian economics has been displaced by neo-liberalism. Universities are the source of advanced thinking and labour needs to go beyond its own educational programmes, to tap into cutting edge ideas on how a new work order can be created that protects the vulnerable and the precarious and begins to narrow the dangerous gap between the winners and losers in this new global order.

An important part of the ENGAGE course is the transfer of the concepts and skills you have learned during the course back to your unions so that you can create a new group of “organic intellectuals” at the heart of the labour movement.

Fortunately our Department of Higher Education and Training is committed to developing a policy framework to support worker education in its new Human Resource Development strategy. Through discussions in the Human Resource Development Council of South Africa (HRDCSA) a Task Team on Worker Education has been set up and the idea of creating a dedicated section in the National Skills Fund is being explored. I hope, if such fund is established, that university run courses such as ENGAGE will be able to draw on this and become financially sustainable and not dependent on donor funding as this course is.

We may have to wait awhile for this to happen but when it does, and I know it will, then we can turn the ENGAGE programme into a Workers College at the heart of the University of the Witwatersrand.