

GLU Research Group: Worker's Education and it's role for a critical political consciousness

Project Outlines

I Objectives:

Documenting and analysing Workers' Education (WE) activities in unions, labour associations/groups/NGOs and assessing its impact on the critical political consciousness of the workers who participated in those education activities.

Gaining inspiration from best practices in order to improve further education activities.

II Context of the research:

The labour movement not only represents the interests of workers, struggles for workers rights or counsel workers, it also valued education as a mean to strengthen workers' capacities and empower them to transform society. As highlighted by ACTRAV “Unions' education has always been at the core of union action” (ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities 2007: 1). Most trade unions and labour associations/NGOs in the world are indeed involved in education activities. These educational work, is sometimes termed as Workers' Education¹ (WE).

Workers' Education is not a unified concept: it has many forms, contents, objectives and it's focus changes through time. It can cover basic literacy education, education for unions' representatives, education for changes in society (e.g. education on globalisation, education for social justice, gender education), education for action (empowerment, organising) and many more. Focusing on unions, Spencer identify 3 area of core union education:

- preparing and training lay members to play an active role in the union
- educating activists and member about union policy and changes in the union environment
- developing union consciousness, building common goals, sharing campaigning and organising experience. (Spencer 2007: 11)

He points out that „Labour education has a social purpose – to promote and develop the union presence and purposes, so as to advance the union collectively.“ (Spencer 2007: 11)

However, Workers' Education is not only about advancing the union collectively, it can also be about developing a critical political consciousness for fundamental changes in the lives of workers and in society at large. As stated by Benítez and Calderón :

„The Trade union movement needs upright people with strong critical faculties. Only then will practice have a liberating content. Trade union training must generate an attitude of ethical commitment, given the demanding task of achieving the common good. This also implies promoting political awareness among workers, so that they are in a position do judge and question

¹ Spooner for instance uses the term Workers' Education „to describe programmes of adult learning associated with, or originated from, trade unions, co-operative movements, political parties associated with organised labour or social movements“ (Spooner 2001)

historical contexts and shackling structures (Benítez; Calderón 2007: 79)“.

The Global Labour University (GLU) -which is one education project of the labour movement- is best rusted to conduct case studies on the role of Workers' Education in various countries: many alumni are involved in Workers' Education in many different places of the world and the GLU has links to organisation and researchers in education (e.g. WITS university/South Africa, Global Labour Institute) who are interested in cooperating in the research as well as in the research outputs.

III Research gap and research question

A previous research of the Global Labour University “The Quest for Alternatives beyond (neoliberal) Capitalism” have dealt on how workers develop their consciousness through their productive activities and struggles. This research project on Workers' Education will explore if and how far education can also contribute to change people awareness and consciousness. Bowles, Gintis and Meyer (1999) for example have shown that consciousness is not only reproduced through the individual's contact in the production sphere - work and it's membership in a particular class - but also through institutions of reproduction like the educational system or the family (see also Bourdieu reproduction of inequalities in education institutions though cultural capital). While they did not argue if and how, another kind of education, like Workers' Education, could at least partly break with the status quo in society, Cooper (2007) tried to show that “educators” influences the political consciousness of workers in some “pockets” of the labour movement in South Africa. Is the labour movement able to bring about a change in critical political consciousness through education? Which kind of education can fulfil this role? Which **practices** result from Workers' Education? This research will explore these questions.

International studies on Workers' Education is in short supply (The only comprehensive study has been undertaken by Hopkins in 1985) as well as Literature on if and how Workers' Education influences a critical political consciousness (e.g. Cooper 2007); this research group on education wants to contribute to fill this gap and to specifically answer the **research question**: What is the meaning, content and aim of WE and (how) does it impact on workers critical political consciousness?

IV Phases of the research

A research on Workers' Education and its role for critical political consciousness implies that in a first phase education concepts and activities are documented and analysed and that as a set of criteria for critical political consciousness is developed. In a second phase the impact of these education activities can then be analysed.

a) First phase (1. Year). Objectives:

- Identifying and assessing the meaning, aim, content and form of Workers' Education (WE)
- Identifying the function of WE – how does it complement the other activities (collective bargaining, strikes, organising, counselling etc.) of the labour movement.
- Reviewing literature on Workers' Education and political consciousness through education
- Identifying and assessing the short term (at the end of training/course, etc.) impact of WE

b) Second phase (2nd year). Objectives:

- Developing minimum criteria and a method for the analysis of critical political consciousness and Workers' Education
- Identifying and assessing the long term impact of WE on workers critical political consciousness and its link to practices
- Identifying the potential and limits of WE

Literature:

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