

# The Making of Post-Apartheid State Policies for Workers, Adult and Community Education and Training: Abandoned Possibilities

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## Abstract

State policies regarding workers' education and the education and training of adults and communities have been hugely influenced by the political and ideological perspectives and approaches that have informed such policies from the onset of the post-apartheid period. These approaches have had pervasively negative effects on especially workers' education. Yet, there is a powerful and instructive legacy of theorisation and practice that suggests other possibilities towards the development of a progressive, even radical, agenda for workers' education and its associated forms. These possibilities have been abandoned by the prevailing regime of policy and practice, which could have drawn on the work of trade unions, progressive social movements and organisations, including some of their negative practices. We consider these historical possibilities briefly with a view to opening up a discussion about the possibilities they represent for educational theory and practice.

**Keywords:** post-school education; policies; alternatives; adult education; community education; workers' education

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## Introduction

Over the past decade and more the South African government has promulgated a combination of laws, policies, regulatory frameworks and strategies to provide education and training for adults as individuals and in their communities in pursuing its constitutional imprimatur regarding a “better life for all”.<sup>1</sup> The tenor of the state’s approach to education and training in meeting this imprimatur is, however, focused on the central question of jobs. This is not surprising in any country that pursues a “developmental agenda” in which economic growth is a central pillar of the state’s strategy. In South Africa, this strategy is represented by the regularity and tone of the growth-related economic policies promulgated since 1994. Since then the government has passed the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR), the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (ASGISA), the National Development Plan (NDP) and their associated strategies, and each of these is supplemented by a battery of “development” related interventions.<sup>2</sup> One of the central elements of government’s approach has been a detailed human resource strategy<sup>3</sup> intended to stimulate the labour market through the creation of jobs or the potential for jobs. Indeed, the President’s State of the Nation address (Ramaphosa 2018) announced that the creation of jobs, especially for the youth, was at the centre of the national agenda.

In this article, we examine, firstly, the historical context in which the post-apartheid state evolved under the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) and especially the consequence of its negotiations with the apartheid state and its allies for the evolution of post-apartheid education and training policy. Secondly, we examine the historical possibilities for the development of workers’ education that were prefigured in the struggles for workers’ education and training and the radicalism in the principles and practices associated with workers’ education and training. Thirdly, we show that despite the radical possibilities and the legacies bequeathed by historical struggles for workers’ education, the post-apartheid state has capitulated to the agenda of neoliberal discourses, and their regimes of policy and practice. We examine, at the same time, the pervasive effects of the approaches to policy and practice adopted by the state. Fourthly, we briefly examine the impact of state policies on the intractability and continuation of rampant levels of unemployment in the country, and finally we look briefly at the

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<sup>1</sup> Section 29 of the Constitution enjoins the state to provide adult basic education and “further education which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible” (RSA 1996, 1257).

<sup>2</sup> Such as Jobs Summits, the Youth Employment Service, the Employment Tax Incentive, the Amavulandlela Funding Scheme, the Public-Private Growth Initiative, the Expanded Public Works Programme, and the Clothing and Textiles Master Plan and Poultry Master Plan (see <https://www.gov.za/issues/government-priority-creating-decent-jobs>).

<sup>3</sup> Called the “Human Resources Development Strategy for South Africa: A Nation at Work for a Better Life for All” (RSA 2001).

parallel effects on the related areas of adult basic education and training (ABET) and community education.

## Negotiations: The Contextual Background for the Evolution of Post-Apartheid State Policies

Although the South African Constitution refers to the broader humanistic goals of education, the narrower goals of economic development have all but trumped these aspirations. The policy path followed by the post-apartheid state and its effects on education and training for workers and communities could be attributed to factors relating to the wider global and national imperatives on the development of education and training policies to which they responded. We consider these before we turn to an examination of the wider possibilities abandoned by the post-apartheid state. Their abandonment is replete in the language of the post-apartheid state's macro-economic, fiscal, trade, "developmental" and other policies and programmes evidenced in its discourse about growth rates and the indices associated with them, its approach to fiscal discipline and austerity, inflation targeting and a raft of associated policies, all of which have had a profound impact on its approach to education and training generally (Bond 2000; Malikane 2017; Padayachee and Van Niekerk 2019).

These developments in post-apartheid state policies should be seen in the context of the negotiations with the apartheid state and the ideological, discursive and real shifts that these gave rise to in practice. The dramatic increase in worker-led resistance of the 1980s, combined with increasing international pressure, eventually compelled the apartheid government to agree to enter into talks with the ANC, the leading party in the post-apartheid government, aimed at negotiating an end to racist minority rule. The negotiations took place against the background of international developments at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, including the collapse of the Soviet Union, and proceeded despite what Neville Alexander refers to as "the overt and covert internal struggles of the oppressed people of South Africa against the economic and social deprivations of the system of racial capitalism coupled with international sanctions and diplomatic isolation" (Alexander 2002, 44). The fall of the Berlin Wall all but eliminated, for the ANC, militarised resistance as a viable tactic in pursuit of radical social transformation. This development required a fundamental reconsideration of its strategy and tactics given that the ANC now faced substantial additional pressure to adopt peaceful, "realistic" tactics from the various liberal and capitalist interests involved in the negotiations. As Alexander observes, the negotiations were propelled by the fact that, although the ANC had been a multi-class organisation, its

"dominant, indeed hegemonic, ethos" has always been that of "the upward-striving black middle class". ... The complete pragmatism of the ANC leaders in matters economic is now well attested. [Nelson] Mandela's notorious somersault on the question of "nationalization" (of mines, monopoly companies, banks, etc.) is one of the more dramatic examples of this phenomenon. The ditching of the social democratic Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) for the neo-liberal Growth,

Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy was the logical outcome of this trajectory within the global context of the transition. (Alexander 2002, 48–49)

Alexander summarises the net effect of these contextual factors, movement dynamics and exceptional personalities as follows:

To put the matter bluntly: the capitalist class can be said to have placed their property under new management and what we are seeing is the sometimes painful process of the new managers trying to come to terms with the fact that they are managers certainly but not by any means the owners, of capital. ... Ownership and control of the commanding heights of the economy, the repressive apparatuses of the state ... the judiciary, the top echelons of the civil service, of tertiary education and strategic research and development, have remained substantially in the same hands as during the heyday of apartheid. (Alexander 2002, 61–64)

The negotiated denouement can only be meaningfully comprehended with these broader political and economic developments firmly in view. The trade union movement itself was deeply divided, with powerful factions eager to cooperate with capital's interests in reaching a settlement that would prevent radical shifts in economic and social relations to serve the interests of the long-oppressed minority. As Cooper et al. (2002, 123) have observed:

By 1988, it was clear that the broad movement was being led into a course of negotiation with the apartheid state. The labour movement came under pressure to review its role, as well as its strategies for change and its vision of the future. In line with the newly dominant politics of a negotiated settlement in the late '80s and early '90s, the trade union leadership responded by shifting its declared vision from that of opponent and adversary towards a stated goal of "equal partner" with business and government. ... Increasingly, the leadership of the labour movement insisted on a partnership with the former "capitalist enemy" and a common commitment to international competitiveness and appeals for foreign investment.

Unsurprisingly, shifts in the conception and forms of worker education in post-apartheid South Africa largely parallel the wider shifts that have occurred globally with the rise of neoliberal macro-economic policy regimes and political imperatives. By the year 2000, the radical vision of worker education that had animated so much of its practice during the struggle against apartheid had dramatically dissipated, having lost ground with the rise of a dominant "consensus politics" led by the ANC, which "assumes the essential compatibility of all 'stakeholder' interests" (Cooper et al. 2002, 112).

### Historical Possibilities Based on a Legacy of Principles and Practices

These developments inspired by the class interests of the ANC and its allies led to the abandonment of the possibilities prefigured by the political struggles that took place in the period immediately before the negotiations in which the ANC played a hegemonic role. The trade union movement was among the leading players in the struggle against

apartheid, together with student and community organisations and, indeed, a raft of other political organisations now being written out of history (Vally and Alexander 2013; Vally, Bofelo, and Treat 2013). Worker education played a crucial role in the development of the trade union movement in South Africa and in the broader struggle for social transformation—especially in the two decades after the re-emergence of worker militancy in the early 1970s (Vally, Bofelo, and Treat 2013). Innovative programmes promoting working-class education (both in the trade union movement and for adults in communities) in the struggles against apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s are instructive for thinking about future possibilities.

The labour movement’s educational activities took a wide variety of structured and unstructured forms and were often marked by remarkable ingenuity and creativity. Formal worker education efforts took the form of highly structured seminars, workshops and training programmes. Informal efforts varied from treating mass transportation of workers as “rolling classrooms”<sup>4</sup> to a range of cultural and mass-media forms, including the writing and production of plays, poetry readings, songs and musical choirs, and dozens of community-based and trade union newsletters. These efforts aimed to provide everything from general literacy and technical work-related skills to running democratic and accountable union structures, organising, political consciousness and social mobilisation (Vally, Bofelo, and Treat 2013).

Trade unions in this period were referred to both as “schools of labour” and “laboratories for democracy” where workers could test out new ideas, arrive at new understandings, and develop and enrich collective practices (Vally 1994). Through their informal learning experience as well as the intensive education carried out in shop-steward councils and workshops, worker representatives gained confidence to engage with their unions’ officials on contested organisational and political issues (Vally 1994). It was a period in which “[w]orkers searched memory, each other, history, the world, political texts, for ideas and knowledge, bringing everything into their intellectual embrace” (Grossman quoted in Cooper et al. 2002, 120).

Education was grounded in the structures of the unions and played a key role in linking the struggles of workers who were geographically dispersed and located in different industries. Union education also encouraged the development of a leadership which, despite limited formal education, went on to play a crucial role in the strengthening of the broader anti-apartheid movement. During this period, as Cooper et al. (2002, 112) write:

[T]he production and sharing of knowledge was consciously linked to cultural work such as the production of songs, plays, and poetry and mass media used to inform workers and build the basis for campaigns. Even more significant were the schools of

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<sup>4</sup> Workers developed the strategy of “moving meetings”, turning buses and trains into literal vehicles of mass education to popularise various campaigns. Train carriages where these discussions and rallying speeches occurred were referred to as *Zabalaza* or “struggle” compartments.

labour where workers developed important new insights and understandings through a wide range of experiences: everyday struggles on the shop-floor, experiences of meeting, organising, and taking part in collective decision-making, and the experience of mass action such as strikes or stay-aways.

The Urban Training Programme (UTP), an early initiative in this regard, was committed to a set of educational principles that recognised the importance of active learning based on the direct experience of workers and adults and was based on the needs of those receiving education by enhancing their ability to help themselves (UTP 1985). These principles also informed the approach used by the Young Christian Workers (YCW) organisation, calling it the “See, Judge and Act” method. It was similar to Freire’s method of *conscientização*, stressing solidarity and aimed at securing concrete change in the lives of working people through action.

The formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in 1979 focused on building a strong shop-floor organisation based on democratic worker participation. From 1982, FOSATU held national “Education Workshops” and introduced a stronger cultural dimension to its educational work by combining courses and lectures with cultural events on “Open Days”, which saw a festival of plays, choirs, dance groups, storytelling, children’s events, videos and other offerings.

At the high point of the struggles of the 1980s, major trade union structures had developed and entrenched an expansive and profoundly politicised vision of worker education (Lacom 1989, 191). This vision drew on Antonio Gramsci’s argument that the institutions of the workers’ movement “should effect a radical transformation of the workers’ mentality and should make the masses better equipped to exercise power” (Gramsci 1977, 68), while emphasising the importance of providing literacy and cognitive skills as well as technical education for workers. These developments held the promise of a vibrant, purposeful and transformative process of education and learning.

## Abandoned Possibilities: Discursive Shifts, the National Qualifications Framework and the Taming of Worker Education

### **Discursive Shifts and Their Practical Impacts**

Accompanying this conceptual and ideological shift, the dominant conception of “worker education” increasingly changed. A strong tradition of radical education programmes existed in the labour movement, growing from its militant forms of worker control, accountability, mandate, democratic decision-making, bureaucracy and power. Education programmes were developed on a wide range of historical and contemporary issues, which included learning about the histories of workers’ struggles, from the emergence of capitalism globally and in South Africa, and especially about revolutionary struggles, episodes and events in working-class life, understanding political philosophies, economic systems, the changing processes in history and the like (Motala 2017). From a tradition in which the dominant self-conception of workers’

engagement with their own learning involved images of worker-led choirs, plays and poetry—aimed at entrenching the self-consciousness of the working class as a force capable of demanding progressive change in the interests of the oppressed—new images came to dominate, of individual employees earning certificates and filling out paperwork in pursuit of their own advancement. This would have two main impacts on worker education activities:

Firstly, the priorities, form of delivery, and key target audience of trade union education were shifted; secondly, the labour movement was to become increasingly involved in workplace training issues guided by a new commitment to increased productivity and international competitiveness. (Cooper et al. 2002, 123)

In the years following the 1994 transition, the trend continued of a rapid move away from mass worker education towards the provision of more specialised, modular training programmes for sharply defined groups of workers. Dramatic changes to the country's economic, social, and political environment in the wake of the transition had profound implications for the trade union movement, and consequently for worker education. As Cooper (2005) observes, this led to a change in the role of the leading labour formations from being in an adversarial relationship with the state to attempting to negotiate as an “equal partner” with business and the state. Despite its stated commitment to socialism and worker control, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) has been key to the tripartite alliance's retention of unassailable political dominance. (The tripartite alliance is a formal partnership between the ruling party ([he ANC], the South African Communist Party and Cosatu.)

As Hamilton (2014), drawing on Cooper (2005), has argued, worker education has gone from having “a strong emancipatory objective, emphasising the value of experience in the collective struggle to build new knowledge and in developing democratic participation and decision-making for a socialist society” (Cooper 2005, 3), to one in which “a human capital approach to worker education, which emphasises individual access to vocational educational and training and upward educational and economic mobility” (Cooper 2005, 1), has become dominant within trade unions. Unions now “outsource” the training of shop stewards to accredited private providers in order to access training funds available through Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) (Cooper and Hamilton 2020).

At the level of terminology, this has led to a rise to dominance within policy discourses of terms such as “adult education” and “lifelong learning”. Stated another way, implicit in this shift in conception is the notion that unemployment can and should be attributed to “deficits” among the un- or under-employed—to a “skills gap” (Mojab 2009, 5).

Regrettably, approaches to education linked to the dominant neoliberal discourse have seduced even unionists and “organisations that seek to represent the interests of the poor and working class, [and] are now hostage to a particular way of thinking about education and the economy and are largely paralysed by it” (Vally and Motala 2014, 2).

The effects of this have been to marginalise the principles that informed the education policies and practices of the union movement, and more especially their independence from the legislative and policy framework developed by the post-apartheid state for training the working class essentially for the job market. As a result, the education programmes developed historically by the union movement in the pursuance of its resolutions at its congresses and otherwise were sublimated to the interests of state policies. In this way, issues relating to worker struggles, consciousness, mobilisation, militancy and organisation fell increasingly by the wayside and were substituted by the demands of a training regime directed at meeting the requirements of the capitalist labour market with little or no orientation to the wider contextual and organisational issues facing trade unions and their membership, except in respect of the aspirations to upward mobility of those workers (mainly in leadership positions) who sought such mobility.

Increasingly, trade unions were drawn into the bureaucratic structures established by government in the arena of education and training such as the SETAs, qualification authorities and the web of human resource and other committees without any conscious preparation or critical orientation about their roles in such structures. The implications for accountability and mandates or, more widely, for democratic education and training practices in the pursuit of social transformation were not considered. Financial incentives, such as payment for meeting attendance, travel and *per diems* and especially the turn to business unionism and investment companies, were directly responsible for unravelling the strong mandate-driven forms of representation that existed previously and now presented intractable barriers to the principles of worker control and management.<sup>5</sup>

### **The National Qualifications Framework and Its Effects on Workers' Education**

Another key development affecting worker education in post-apartheid South Africa (deepening the difficulties referred to above) was the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in the mid-1990s. It imposed a standardised set of principles, guidelines and definitions for the creation of a national certification system for educational qualifications overseen by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Hamilton (2014, 239) cites Jones's (2013) observation that the NQF

looks both ways ... [to] social upliftment through enabling access to educational opportunities for people to improve their lives, but at the same time commodifies education, training and experience and ascribes it with a market value; a credit currency.

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<sup>5</sup> Roger Etkind, a long-time member of the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA)—the leading metal union in South Africa—provides an insight into the effects of such incentives on layers of the leadership of that union in writing about the turbulence and destructive developments around its recent congress and especially about the rise of “business unionism” and its excoriating effects on the role of unions and their ability to represent their members both in the workplace and more widely in society (Etkind 2022).

While some unions continue their own limited forms of shop stewards' training, whole departments within unions and federations have been established to engage with education and skills development structures, often at the expense of trade union education. In the skills terrain alone, trade unions are represented in 21 SETAs with representatives from government and business, and many require more than one representative from each stakeholder to serve on their sub-structures (Hamilton 2014, 284).

Ngcwangu (2014, 247), following Samson and Vally's (1996) critique of the NQF's "outcomes-based" qualifications framework for education and training, argues that: (1) the NQF system "would create an unwieldy bureaucracy with Standard Generation Bodies and similar structures resulting in an extensive 'paper chase'" (Ngcwangu 2014, 247); (2) international experience indicates that outcomes-based systems focus on "what people can do, to the exclusion of other knowledge which they may have" (247); (3) one of the underlying assumptions of human capital theory is that there is a direct link between education and economic growth (which obscures or underplays other, more important causes of unemployment); and, (4) post-Fordist production methods would influence the logic of the development of the NQF; as Samson and Vally have argued, "for post-Fordists, investment in education and training must be justified by proof that they are an efficient means of ensuring increased productivity" (Samson and Vally 1996, 12).

Vally (1997) also identified further challenges the NQF would pose to union education in South Africa: (1) the NQF's focus on clearly identifiable performance outcomes reinforced these trends and further marginalised more overtly political, class-based forms of mass worker education; (2) linking union education and training efforts to the NQF in order to satisfy training certification requirements would undermine the ability of unions to maintain control over their own education programmes; (3) disparities between level of training achieved and level of employment opportunities available—an unavoidable disparity over which unions have little if any control—would tend to result in "educational inflation"—that is, higher and higher credentials required for jobs that neither utilise nor remunerate workers according to the required skill level (Allais 2021); (4) learning moments such as strikes and experiences of building and controlling organisations collectively, which are important elements of worker education that cannot be certified through the NQF system, could become devalued and marginalised; (5) limitations on the number of days off to pursue training would translate into pressure on workers to emphasise industrial and skills-based training over other forms of union training aimed at organising and collective advancement of workers' struggles; and, (6) most outcomes-based training and education models define outcomes in terms of individual displays of competence despite the fact that most studies show that learning is a social as opposed to an individual event.

## Unemployment Effects: Functionalist Approaches to Education and Training

The impact of globalisation and neoliberalism have been decisive in shaping the policies of the state towards the reductionist ends determined by economic regimes undermining the gestures towards social justice of states, including the intentions of the post-apartheid state (Kundnani 2021).

These policies and strategies relating education to a functionalist role in the economy and more specifically to the demands of the labour market have had serious negative effects on the availability of jobs, as the continuing and rampant levels of unemployment show (Vally and Motala 2014, 7). Recent employment data of March 2022 confirms this trend as the official unemployment rate has grown to 35.3% in the fourth quarter of 2021 (STATS SA 2022), while research confirms that the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the unemployment problem, which has reached the “alarming rate” of 74% for the cohort between the ages of 15–24 years “despite government investments” (BizNews 2021).

The problems of unemployment—even without the massive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic—are exacerbated by low levels of direct investment in job creation together with huge levels of capital flight (Ndikumana, Naidoo, and Aboobaker 2020), the impact of mechanisation and technological change as they affect particular categories of work,<sup>6</sup> and the growth of what has been referred to as the “knowledge economy”. These developments are likely to be accentuated by the uncritical acceptance of the purported benefits of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution (see the extensive debates concerning the latter, Baatjes 2020; Badat 2022; Moll 2021; Thompson 2020). Despite the skills and training interventions, the poor absorptive capacity of the labour market continues to affect millions of work-seekers, including academically qualified graduates, compounding inequality (Baldry 2016) and perpetuating a racialised labour market (Graham et al. 2019) while exacerbating the underlying socio-historical problems for most South Africans.

The expectation that somehow the training of adults for occupations that reflect the needs of the formal labour market *alone* would solve these problems takes little account of the vast and accumulating evidence of the character of labour markets not only in South Africa but even in the most developed capitalist economies of the world (Standing 2011). The most optimistic projections about the absorptive capacity of the formal labour market have been negated by developments in the global political economy as

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<sup>6</sup> See Whitehead et al.’s (2021) working paper, “The Potential Employment Implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution Technologies: The Case of the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector”. The paper shows the vulnerability of jobs in the metals and machinery sub-sector of the economy. It argues that jobs located in the production-orientated cluster that are more routine are at higher risk than those in the non-production cluster of occupations. The authors observe that “[r]outine occupations are most commonly found amongst low- and semiskilled occupations that focus on production processes, such as elementary workers, crafts workers, and machine operators” (2021, 30).

the growth of low-waged and precarious employment in all its forms takes hold (Stiglitz 2013; Wilson 1997). Precariously employed workers can be substituted or made redundant and have little alternative but to labour under conditions that compromise the rights established over years of struggle for humane work (Hlatshwayo 2018). The processes of globalisation and “modernisation” are driving more and more workers into poverty and insecure lives even while the present economic system increases the degradation of the population as a whole through its pursuit of more profit by stimulating consumerism, greed and planetary destruction. It is a process in which not only are human beings driven into debt, but the planet is also being tortured in the unceasing quest for more profit for a tiny global elite, regardless of its consequences (Muzio 2015).

The state’s inability to deal with these issues is not fortuitous or accidental because it arises from an ideological commitment to policies that extend the reach and power of global neoliberalism. Human capital theory, as Klees (2016) argues, has together with the “rate of return methodology” been accepted, despite its many criticisms, uncritically and ubiquitously by policymakers for educational planning and for its evaluation, in spite of the incoherence and indefensibility of its “internal logic”. He provides a detailed account of the development of human capital theory and its relation to issues of economic growth, the measurement of its ostensible effects on the gross national product, productivity, earnings, income and other variables, and he concludes that human capital theory

turns education into a commodity as if it were like any other, to be examined in terms of its supply and demand, mostly as an investment that makes one more productive.<sup>7</sup> While this supply-side focus is sometimes true, it is very partial, at best. That is, abilities like literacy, numeracy, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, etc., can have a payoff in the job market, but *only* in a context where such skills are valued. The more useful and important question is the demand-side one, usually ignored by human capital theorists, regarding how we can create good jobs that require valuable skills. The human capital discourse also generally ignores the value of education outside of work. (Klees, 2016, 659)

He argues further that the sea change wrought by neoliberal ideology on education policy since the 1970s has resulted in abandoning concerns about inequality and social marginalisation and the urgency of providing more resources to all levels of education. This ideological commitment, together with the wider economic and social policies, favours a market-dominated approach to “development” and has had the effect of strengthening the unrestrained activities of the market and the regimes of global

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<sup>7</sup> Human capital theory turns human beings into commodities and offers a mechanistic understanding of work. As Brown (2001, 16) elaborates: “The disembodied nature of skill inherent in human capital theory inhibits our understanding of skill formation and the social relations of production.”

corporate control; it has resulted in a victory for the ideas of Thatcherism and Reaganomics, which simply

turbocharged the neoliberal dynamic and even inspired Russian political liberals to adopt the “shock therapy” advocated by the west: rapid privatisation and massive deregulation. Combined with gargantuan corruption, the dramatic collapse of the Soviet single market and lack of much-needed external financial support had a shattering effect on industry and the living conditions of ordinary Russians. (Fortunato 2022)

As we have argued in detail elsewhere (Vally and Motala 2014), the post-apartheid state’s inability to resolve the problems of employment is a direct consequence of the adoption of human capital theory, which has the effect of reducing the role of all education to the objective of work preparation for the formal labour market and its narrowly defined economic and productivity goals. This approach has been adopted despite the deleterious consequences for a society in which the phenomena of unemployment and poverty are egregious and despite the many strategies intended to address these phenomena. The effects of the policy regime to which the state is wedded have thus had profoundly negative effects on education and training.

These developments related to the discursive shifts, the drift towards certification, the sublimation of workers’ education to the functional demands of capitalist labour markets and the ideological acceptance of human capital theory have together had pervasive effects on worker education. They have vitiated the radical approaches that were envisaged in the struggles against apartheid capitalism, causing a shift from a tradition in which workers’ engagement with their own learning involved entrenching the self-consciousness of the working class as a force capable of demanding progressive change in the interests of the oppressed to one of individual employees earning certificates to support careerist aspirations, especially among the leadership of the union movement. From a wider remit of social, political and workplace consciousness in the quest for changing a racist capitalist society, the emphasis changed to the provision of individual mobility, altering the forms and purposes of workers’ education together with its target audience. While previously the target audience for educational programmes was the rank-and-file membership, now the focus was on a narrow layer of leaders increasingly detached from their constituency. Through this, trade unions were increasingly seduced into workplace training regimes guided by a new commitment to increased productivity and international competitiveness (Cooper et al. 2002, 123).

These approaches to workers’ education have had the effect of luring individual workers to the tenuous promise of automatic career mobility through vocational training without addressing the structural and political nature of their exclusion. This serves to undermine the collective strength of workers and reinforces their status as precariously employed workers. Many in the trade union leadership are also implicated in the diminution of worker education through a combination of business unionism, bureaucratisation, malfeasance and the sacrificing of internal trade union democracy.

These developments have hastened the de-politicisation of worker education where it exists, promoting a narrow, “human capital” approach to education based “on management terms”, and favour the outsourcing of workers’ education to private providers.

Perhaps most significantly for the trade union movement, these developments in education policy and practice promote the conversion of shop stewards—arguably the single most important representatives within unions—into “trainers”. The relatively developed systems of education for organised proletarians—workers directly engaged in the system of capitalist production—have regressed considerably from their radical origins in the period of their emergence and the rise of the democratic trade union and workers’ movement in the two decades just prior the democratic elections of 1994 in South Africa (Buhlungu and Tshoaedi 2012; Cooper 2020; Cooper and Hamilton 2020).

### Parallel Processes regarding ABET and Community Education in Post-Apartheid Policy and Practice

The effects we refer to above, concerning developments in workers’ education and training, find their parallels in the field of adult and community education and training. Here too the path chosen by the state was not inevitable, since there were many possibilities for developing an innovative, progressive and transformative education system for adult, community and worker education and learning demonstrated by the struggles of communities and workers prior to 1994. That groundwork had commenced with the night-school movement of the early 20th century and was followed by literacy initiatives influenced by Paulo Freire’s work and liberation theology adopted by many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the area of adult and community education and in the trade union movement (Kallaway 2002).

Baatjes and Mathe (2004) discuss the widely practised tradition of “radical learning” and “political struggle” associated with movements for social change, which have also had a notable history and presence in South Africa. Much provision of non-formal adult basic education (ABE) in South Africa by NGOs—especially in the 1970s and 1980s—was influenced by it. The basic tenet of this tradition is that the socio-economic and political system that produces and perpetuates conditions of inequality is unjust and must be changed. The victims of oppression, inequality and injustice are called upon to unite, to challenge the system and to recreate the social world in which they live. Within this tradition influenced by Paulo Freire, non-formal ABE instruction, for instance, is not just the imparting and acquiring of knowledge by teachers and learners, respectively, but is a political process of raising critical awareness of injustice, and a joint investigation and creation of measures to change oppressive and undemocratic systems. In the South African context, illiteracy among adults is viewed by this tradition as not only a deeply rooted social problem, but a result of a determinate structure and dynamic consequence of the apartheid capitalist organisation of production. Non-formal ABE is viewed as authentic, revolutionary and inclusive, and as a vehicle that incorporates the

illiterate and undereducated into a new form of democratic citizenship that opposes the perpetuation of asymmetrical power relations. Yet, as Aitchison has argued, apropos developments in the field of adult education,

[t]he nineties saw the victory of democracy and the (so-far) lacklustre attempt to institutionalise a state system of adult basic education and training as South Africa made ethical, political and economic compromises with the new world order. (Aitchison 2003, 125)

The discourse of “adult basic education” (ABE)—and later “adult basic education and training” (ABET)—had replaced the previous, informal discourse in which the term “literacy” was dominant. Literacy was understood to encompass more than the ability to read and write, but familiarity with the structures and forces that shape lived opportunities, and a sense of self-driven agency to engage with them. Soliar (2000) argues that this was more than a mere change in terminology, but rather an indicator of the rise to dominance of a conception of education for economic skills, with the discourse and practice of ABET focusing mainly on the “T” for training. This excluded notions of education that would encompass the full range of skills, values, capabilities and competencies that equip one to participate in the transformation of power and social relations.

Thus ABET, “lifelong learning” and the focus on certification for workers’ education together promote a widespread “flexibilisation” of the workforce through a state-led training regime to maximise economically exploitable skills for the production of value within the (private) formal economy, expanding a “reserve army” of skilled labour in advance of market demand. Even as it adopted the struggle language of empowerment, participation and a people-centred approach, ABET discourse and practice remain firmly within, and in service of, a political economy of vocationalism, market values and individualism actively promoted by private providers of vocational education and “skills development” and their echo chambers (see Vally and Motala 2014, 30–31).

The prevailing situation shows that state-led adult and community education initiatives are inappropriate for the education and training of adults, including workers in relatively stable employment, those who are precariously employed, unemployed women, men and younger members of these communities and for all those engaged in the reproductive economy. What now exists in adult education, for example, does not even match the limited requirements of global covenants such as those signalled in the *UNESCO Report on Adult Learning and Education* (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2013).

## Conclusion

Despite the foundational developments, which point to what might have been possible in the fields of worker education and in respect of adult and community education, the post-apartheid state soon mollified these radical initiatives. Events leading to the

democratic elections of 1994 were characterised by a number of negotiated compromises in the discussions about the post-1994 dispensation. These discussions were themselves premised on the relative “demobilisation” of the popular struggles of the pre-apartheid period and most importantly on the acceptance of a policy framework that assumed the global dominance of neoliberalism, and within it, as Sampie Terreblanche (2012) suggests, the dominance of United States’ interests was inviolable.<sup>8</sup> A great deal has been written about these compromises, their underlying rationale and their effects (Alexander 2002; Bond 2000; Marais 2001), which in respect of education are writ large on the orientation of education and training policies since 1994, continuing and even deepening the social-economic, political, cultural, racialised, gendered, spacial and other fragmentations and inequalities in South Africa.

We have argued elsewhere that it is important for policymakers, academics, social commentators and social movements to understand the relationship between learning, livelihoods, socio-economic rights and citizenship more fully. This understanding is essential for exploring the relationship between the lives of socially marginalised communities to

the learning that takes place in the alternative activities of such communities. Such an exploration would provide a stronger theoretical, practical and organisational basis for an alternative, more robust and meaningful curriculum—not determined by the requirements of capitalist labour markets but by the requirements of a democratizing society, seeking support for the self-generative activities of such communities towards the development of a conscious and engaged citizenry. (Vally and Motala 2016, 35)

These possibilities, we have argued, were prefigured in the struggles against apartheid capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s, which are associated with envisioning a truly democratic and humane society. Such education and learning must be useful for a wide range of areas of knowledge and practice affecting the life, aspirations and hopes of especially the most structurally discriminated members of society. It must provide a new social imagination and the relationships within it *together with* the practical activities relating to sustainable livelihoods based on collective and individual aspirations, socially useful forms of work, environmental awareness, knowledge, and learning that build harmonious communities.

In countries such as South Africa, ridden with conflictual social interests and especially the hegemony of capital’s insatiable appetite for profit-making and a corruptible and pliant state, learning becomes inseparable from the struggles for basic political, socio-economic, environmental and other human rights. Education and learning have a critical role in turning back the tide of neoliberal globalisation, which seeks to privatise all

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<sup>8</sup> See in this regard the interview Fazila Farouk had with Sampie Terreblanche in August 2013 in which Terreblanche recounts the developments that were critical in shaping the thinking of Nelson Mandela and the leadership of the ANC to accommodate a global neoliberal framework (Terreblanche and Farouk 2013). Terreblanche was privy to the negotiations because of his history as an advisor to the National Party government.

public goods regardless of the effects on the general citizenry. The present struggles around land, housing, water and sanitation, public transport, health, education and other social services exemplify the very process of privatisation now taking hold. It is not surprising that the moves towards privatisation are being justified on the grounds of the rampant corruption that has characterised state activities over the past decade and more. This is not the place to engage with the sophistry of the arguments in favour of privatisation except to point to its frightening effects, as argued earlier, on the lives of the poor and marginalised (Mama and Martel 2022). In such circumstances, learning should facilitate contesting the priorities of public policy, which are now increasingly subject to the power of private interest against the public good.

There are indeed, as Cooper and Hamilton (2020) have argued, real possibilities for challenging the hegemonic capitalist ethos and arresting the decline of workers' education and its associated forms of learning for adults and communities. Such possibilities could, for instance, pursue education that fosters debate, not dogma, learning through praxis—through democratic participation and control by workers of their own organisations, the development of organic intellectuals to sustain educational work, study circles, and grassroots cultural action. Most importantly, they identify the key tasks for renewing workers' education today as consisting of building solidarity between organised and unorganised labour, between formal and informal workers, and between workers with more secure employment and vulnerable workers in precarious employment. Essential to revitalising the union movement is to link up with those beyond the workplace involved in the struggle for quality public education and healthcare, those involved in environmental justice and climate change, women's right, LGBT+ struggles, and access to land. Hlatshwayo also points to the importance of an approach to workers' education that takes account of precarious workers and communities that continue to be marginalised (Hlatshwayo 2019). He refers to the important work being done by advice bureaux and other organisations providing education and support for workers who are not highly organised. The work being done by these support organisations is instructive for broadening the curriculum of workers' education, which traditionally served only those in relatively secure formal employment (Hlatshwayo 2018).

Such possibilities are increasingly prevalent in the practices of communities, social movements and organisations not only in South Africa but also globally and constitute the foundations for an alternative system of education that is socially responsive, based on the lessons derived from active struggles taking place in working-class communities around issues of social rights, livelihoods and socially useful forms of work, cooperatives and solidarity economies, all of which would extend democratic forms of socio-economic and political life and citizenship. Some of the best expressions of education in and for working-class communities now exist in the practical experiments and developments in informal/nonformal learning and learning in social movements (Baatjes 2018; Choudry 2015; Choudry, Hanley, and Shragge 2012). These practices have shown that education and learning must be based on a curriculum and pedagogies,

research, materials development, language and other elements of the learning process derived from the contextual realities that prevail in such communities. Experimental practices and their applications have taken a multiplicity of forms, including solidaristic and cooperative labour, which is described in detail elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

The learning taking place in social movements is a key element of the development of alternative approaches to the present regimes of policy and practice based on the foundations in social consciousness, politics and critique that characterised workers' education and its associated forms in the struggles against apartheid capitalism. Social movement practices explicate some of the core principles of activist learning, showing the value of what can be learnt by engaging with the knowledges produced outside academic settings and augmenting academic scholarship with its own criteria, strengths and weaknesses. Such knowledge can be rendered in a range of social and historical contexts and in a multiplicity of forms of writing, ethnographies, communication and presentation—not limited to what is conventionally required of academic writing, nor acknowledged by it. The process of learning in these circumstances itself is varied, based on elements of both formal and informal/nonformal processes of learning in context (Baatjes 2018; Choudry and Vally 2017).

Social movements that have an interest in education seek to advance practices that recognise the value of integrating a wide range of languages, cultures, traditions and value systems (local and more widely) and to engender higher levels of social consciousness through rebutting racist, patriarchal and stereotypical ideas and beliefs (Choudry and Vally 2017). The educational work of social movements too should be examined critically, especially its claims in respect of the relations of power, its forms of mediation, the assumptions that inform the activities of such movements, their biases and prejudices, values and claims, and in some cases, its explicit orientation to the kinds of socialism referred to by Brundenius:

We agreed on characteristics such as universal access to welfare (including free education and health services) and liberal values such as freedom of speech, press, and assembly. We also agreed on the importance of social justice, fair income distribution, and solidarity (both domestic and international). Solidarity, in contrast to greed, should serve as an incentive for human beings for the future. There was also unanimity on the principle that the learning-based society should be based on an environmentally sustainable economy. (Brundenius 2020, 10)

The possibilities for imagining and practising socially useful approaches to education practice in South Africa can, as we have shown, rely on the considerable historical experience and formative ideas that characterised the development of education and

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<sup>9</sup> See the detailed explanation of such a cooperative approach in CIPSET's *Owning Our Power: Understanding Cooperatives and How to Form Them* (2019).

learning in South Africa and elsewhere in the wide-ranging struggles against oppressive and exploitative social systems.

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