

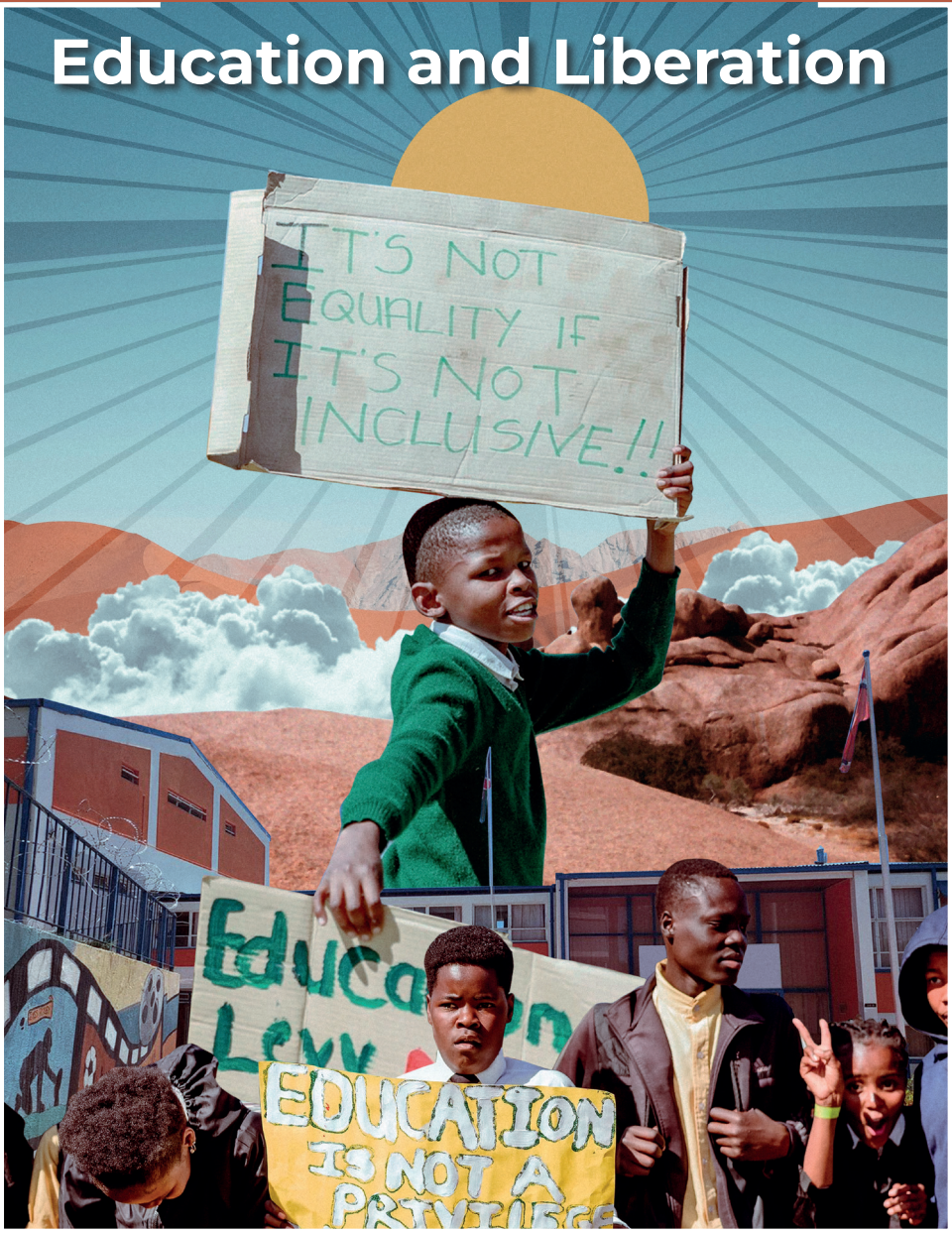
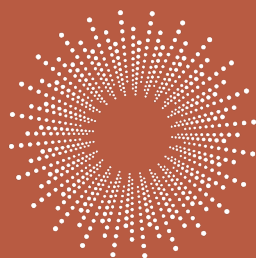


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Political Worker Education in Namibia: The Case of the Labour Diploma Course

Herbert Jauch

Background

The current world order is underpinned by vested business interests and the dominance of transnational corporations whose networks span the globe. They not only control the economic sphere but are also influential in the political arena, and thus maintain a highly exploitative social and economic order not only in Namibia, but virtually worldwide.

Against this background, this case study examines what role political worker education can play in preparing workers and their trade unions in their struggle to achieve a different and more just social and economic order. The focus is on experiences with the labour diploma for trade unionists which was introduced in 2002.¹



Labour diploma students during a group discussion. Source: Herbert Jauch

¹ This case study is largely based on the account presented in Jauch (2026).

During the 1980s, when many of Namibia's current trade unions started to emerge, education was a kind of add-on to the broader task of mass mobilisation amongst workers. Struggles for better working conditions were linked to the broader political goal of achieving national independence. At the time, union education was driven by a small group of people who saw the need to develop workers' consciousness beyond the national liberation discourse towards working class struggles. These early education activities were an attempt to link education, class consciousness, organising, and mass mobilisation (Pakleppa, 1988).

Union meetings in the 1980s were usually held in public halls, often without chairs, with everybody sitting on the floor in a circle. This created a sense of comradeship and equality. Likewise, education activities took place in offices or public halls with the flipchart being the only tool, sometimes accompanied by a few pamphlets. The use of pictures, cartoons and different languages characterised this kind of basic worker education in the 1980s. It was a tentative beginning with the aim of ultimately building worker power and worker control (Pakleppa, 1988).

After independence, worker education became more institutionalised, with some unions establishing their own education departments. Various

support organisations such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung entered the field and sponsored union workshops. This era was characterised by a move away from the mass mobilisation of workers towards leadership negotiations in boardrooms. Key union leaders joined government structures, and the role of trade unions was increasingly confined to collective bargaining. Their role was narrowed to that of a "social partner" within a tripartite setting. Although some education programmes still focused on policy issues like the land question and a living wage, union education increasingly focused on "practical issues" like the Labour Act (6 of 1992) and collective bargaining. The aim was to equip workers and their unions with the knowledge needed to play their tripartite role more effectively. Union workshops were increasingly facilitated by "experts", sometimes flown in from South Africa. Some were drawn from Namibian organisations that had nothing to do with the labour movement.

This trend in workers' education only began to change with the establishment of the union-based Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) in 1998. Although its key focus was research into policy issues, LaRRI soon realised that the research work had to be complemented by an education programme to build the internal capacity of trade unions to engage

with organisational and broader policy challenges. Following discussions with the Workers' College in South Africa and with various Namibian unions, LaRRI decided in 2002 to follow in the footsteps of the College and to introduce a similar modular worker education programme, which became known as the labour diploma (Jauch, 2013).

Purpose

The labour diploma sought to broaden the scope and improve the quality of worker education programmes in terms of conscientisation capacity. This course aimed to combine knowledge acquisition and analytical skills, as well as political education and critical thinking amongst workers, union leaders, and officials. The course served to prepare workers and trade unionists for leadership positions at various levels, ranging from shop stewards to branch and national union structures. Most importantly, the course provided a platform for critical debate. Despite the adoption of a liberal form of democracy, a restrictive political climate continued to prevail in many organisations, including trade unions. Critical debate was frequently regarded as “subversive” in many of Namibia's political organisations, and the open contestation of ideas was not encouraged (Jauch, 2013).

The intention of the labour diploma was therefore to create a space for open

engagement. Instead of being bound by trade union positions and political directives, the worker-students were encouraged to debate freely and to substantiate their arguments, based on readings, research and their own experiences. They obtained their course marks not on the basis of the views they held, but on the basis of the quality of their arguments. This enabled them to explore issues and to express views on issues that were not openly discussed in their unions or in society in general.

Another important aspect was to break workers' fear of tertiary education. Older workers, in particular, suffered the effects of colonial apartheid education and were never afforded the opportunity to pursue further studies. The labour diploma thus provided the first opportunity for many of them to participate in a programme of higher learning. LaRRI tried to ensure equal gender representation by reserving up to 50% of all places available for women (Jauch, 2013). The course's overall aim was to strengthen the participants' ability to contribute to the building of a stronger, more conscious labour movement.

Target Group and Curriculum

After the consultations between the Workers College, LaRRI and some Namibian trade unions, internal discussions were intensified to identify the

target groups and the course contents. Agreement was reached that the course should be open to all trade union members and that preference should be given to active members who served in union structures, such as shop stewards (elected workers' representatives at the workplace) and workers serving in branch, regional or national leadership structures. In addition, union officials such as organisers and administrators were also welcome to apply. It was agreed that the course participation should be gender-balanced, and that participants should be drawn from a wide spread of trade unions.

In terms of the course curriculum, as the implementing organisation, LaRRI was able to draw on some of the experiences of the Workers College in South Africa. Various options were presented at meetings with Namibian trade union representatives, who identified some of the key issues which were critical for the labour movement and should therefore be covered in the course. These included the history of the labour movement in Namibia and globally; the relationship between unions and politics (locally, continentally and globally); the question of worker control; gender equality; health and safety at work; labour law; collective bargaining; and economic policy options.

Based on these key issues, LaRRI then developed six modules which

formed the curriculum of the labour diploma:

1. Trade Union History and Theory;
2. Namibia's Political Economy;
3. Occupational Health and Safety, and HIV/AIDS;
4. Gender and Affirmative Action;
5. Labour Law and Collective Bargaining; and
6. Globalisation.

Local resource persons and lecturers were identified for each module, drawn from the ranks of LaRRI, the trade unions, and the University of Namibia. They were chosen based on their specific subject knowledge and were tasked with developing a course reader and topics for course assignments, as well as examination questions. In addition, LaRRI offered the course participants supplementary courses to enhance very practical skills, such as English writing skills and computer skills (Jauch, 2013). Participants were also asked to formally evaluate each module to enable continuous adjustments and improvements.

The Workers' College provided support with course materials and advice on the structure of the course, as well as accreditation. The University of KwaZulu-Natal conducted the external moderation of the examinations. In 2007, the labour diploma was officially

accredited by the Namibia Qualification Authority as the Certificate in Labour Studies.

Financial support for the labour diploma was provided by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung in Germany, the Finish Trade Union Solidarity Centre, and the Netherlands Trade Union Federation. This support enabled LaRRI to offer the course for a nominal fee.

Pedagogic and Methodological Approach

A central and cross-cutting issue was social and economic justice as a global challenge in the face of a crisis-ridden global capitalist system that continuously widens inequality and results in mass unemployment and poverty. Understanding this phenomenon and what possible remedies and alternatives existed was a critical part of the course. Thus, case studies on Venezuela's "Socialism of the 21st Century" and the proposals contained in the regional trade union project "Alternatives to Neoliberalism in Southern Africa" formed part of the course (Jauch, 2013).

Each module was presented for one week of direct interaction between the resource persons and about 25–35 participants. In the mornings, formal lectures and interactive discussions took place, while the afternoons were

used for reading the course materials to deepen the participants understanding. The resource persons had identified relevant articles and book chapters or had developed such reading materials themselves as part of the course readers.

Emphasis was placed on participatory methods to enable participants to play an active role and share their own experiences. After the module week of direct interaction, each participant had to choose one of the assignment topics on offer, write the assignment, and then hand it in at the beginning of the next module. Participants also had to write an examination on each module which counted for half the course marks.

Results

In 2007, LaRRI convened a formal evaluation of the labour diploma course with graduates who had completed it in the preceding five years. They identified several benefits from the course, such as an improved understanding of Namibia political economy, more effective bargaining practices, the ability to design union campaigns against labour hire practices, greater appreciation of gender equality issues, improved trade union response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and improved understanding of labour laws and the importance of health and safety at work. The graduates also pointed out that the course provided them with new skills and insights, and the confidence to

debate policy issues and effect changes in workplaces (LaRRI, 2007).

The graduates mentioned some of the challenges they experienced. These included disappointment that some of the unions did not fully utilise and recognise their skills. In some cases, they were even seen as a threat by union leaders (LaRRI, 2007). Overall, the course was valued by workers not only because of its contents and relevance for the labour movement, but also because the accreditation offered possibilities for further studies and promotions at work as well as possible key leadership positions in the unions (Moodley & Jauch, 2020).

The labour diploma attempted to counter the shift within trade unions towards more hierarchical forms of organisation and the narrow focus of union leaders on tripartite engagement. The course's impact can therefore not simply be measured by the number of graduates or by the evaluation of the course undertaken by the participants themselves. These evaluations may attest to the popularity of the course, but they do capture the course's wider impact, namely how has it contributed to a strengthening of the labour movement and its capacity to articulate and promote the interests of the working classes and the poor. In what ways has the course enabled the participants to make a difference

in terms of social progress and transformation?

There are no definitive answers. While the course has been described as an “eye-opener” by many of the worker-students, it has not been able to prevent the further decline of Namibia's labour movement, which is deeply divided and struggles to address socioeconomic injustices. Furthermore, worker-students who tried to implement ideas about workers' control and accountability in their respective unions often found themselves confronted by national union leaders who regarded such ideas as a threat to their control over unions. As a result, some of the worker-students were sidelined within their own unions (Moodley & Jauch, 2020).

The specific aim of creating a type of worker education programme that focuses on critical thinking, questioning existing hierarchies and vested interests, and envisaging a fundamentally different future society invariably clashes with the general political and economic trends in Namibia. If trade unions want to be agents for social change and transformation, then union education must be political and radical in order to contribute towards improving workers' lives, and to transforming society in general, including its consciousness and values. The envisaged role that

unions are willing and able to play has a direct impact on the kind of workers' education that will be offered and the impact that it can have. Social change and substantive transformation will only be achieved if political worker education programmes are linked with new practices of organising and mobilisation based on the principles of workers' control and participatory union democracy. After all, political worker education is merely one site of the broader political and economic struggle (Moodley & Jauch, 2020).

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