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Le pouvoir mis en pratique : la formation syndicale en Sierra Leone

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Article abstract

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POWER IN PRACTICE: TRADE UNION EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE

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ABSTRACT. This article presents an analysis of the development of a trade union education program in Sierra Leone in the geo-historical context of British colonialism. It places the argument in relation to the contradictory trends of trade unionism more generally and alongside their antagonistic cooperation with capitalism. It discusses the limits and potentialities of a radical pedagogy when trade unions are constrained to engage with existing power structures that use English as the dominant language. It places more theoretical arguments within the context of a country characterized by major inequalities and facing the neoliberal challenges of globalization and a trade union movement seeking to be representative of an informal workforce but rooted in the formal economy.

LE POUVOIR MIS EN PRATIQUE : LA FORMATION SYNDICALE EN SIERRA LEONE

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article propose une analyse de l'élaboration d'un programme de formation syndicale en Sierra Leone dans le contexte géohistorique du colonialisme britannique. Il situe le débat en abordant de manière générale les tendances contradictoires de la formation syndicale et, en parallèle, la coo-pération conflictuelle avec le capitalisme. Il aborde les limites et les perspectives d'une pédagogie radicale lorsque les organisations syndicales sont contraintes à collaborer avec des structures décisionnelles privilégiant l'anglais comme langue de travail. Il situe plusieurs questionnements théoriques dans le contexte d'un pays reconnu pour ses inégalités profondes et qui fait face aux défis néolibéraux de la mondialisation et d'un mouvement syndical désireux de représenter une main-d'œuvre informelle, mais qui est à la fois ancrée dans l'économie officielle.

Trade unions as organizations exist in what has long been described as a state of "antagonistic cooperation" with the capitalist states in which they have developed. They are engaged in protecting and improving their members' terms and conditions of employment and, in doing so, they challenge the distribution of power and rewards at work and in society more generally. It has been argued that this generates a particular "conundrum" for unions in that:

> all unions are in a "business" relationship with their employers and face the conundrum of how much time is spent on building the rank and file and the community on the one hand and how much on "defending" the worker on the other. (Bleakney & Morrill, 2010, p. 141)

"Defending" implies a focus on negotiating and the interaction with employers, but unions have become equally engaged in balancing what have generally been described as "servicing" and "organizing" strategies in relation to their members with the latter focussed on "social movement unionism" (for statement of the position see Moody, 1997) and Bleakney and Morrill's (2010) "rank and file" engagement and self activity.

While much of this argument is longstanding in different forms and has been developed particularly in Western/Eurocentric analyses, the issues raised confront trade unions globally and inevitably raise questions of power and resources. African trade unions are often confronted with these issues very directly and sharply and in relation to the state as well as to employers. The politics of African trade unionism and its relationship with national states has commonly been formed as a response to colonialism, and this response can include accommodation as well as resistance, antagonism as well as cooperation.

The development, practice, and delivery of trade union education is inevitably embedded within this set of relationships, that is, between unions, employers, and states and between leaders and members. Education programs are necessarily, therefore, engaged in questions of the content of what might be delivered and to whom, in the context of scarce resources. Alongside this are questions of "how" trade union education might be delivered, and this raises questions of pedagogy particularly related to adult education. Each of these issues has generated debates that are exacerbated in an African context with its colonial past, continuing dependencies and scarcity of resources.

These debates are explored here in relation to the development and delivery of a collaborative project between UK trade union tutors based at Northumbria University, the Sierra Leone Labour Congress, the University of Sierra Leone (Fourah Bay College) and funded by the British Council. The program comprised six modules, which were piloted with trade union leaders to be delivered as a Certificate in English in a Trade Union Context. The program would be validated through the University of Sierra Leone procedures and delivered by local tutors.

In this context the relationship between the UK tutors and their cultural association with the former colonial power become of some significance and requires articulating. As Choudry and Kapoor (2010) argued:

> Studies of knowledge production and mobilization in activist, trade union, and NGO networks must attend to their specific geohistorical context and the actual social forces in which they are implicated, going beyond objectifying kinds of analysis. (pp. 6-7)

Others have also argued that such "objectifying" is, in effect, replicating a Eurocentric socio-cultural viewpoint and reinforcing its dominance (Asante, 2007). "The dominant attitude that imposes on most of us may be called a Eurocentric world view that gives rise to the spread of a particular as if it were universal" (p. 8). This is a dominance that has been hotly contested by critics of colonialism from Fanon (2001) onwards and from those like Asante who, for example, advocates an alternative: "Where Africans assume more than a marginal role in their own discourses" (2007, p. 7).

The "alternative" views that might challenge existing power structures can also be seen to be potentially delivered through trade union education given the possibilities for "antagonism" as well as co-operation. Brookfield (2005) argued for the significance of "critical theory" and its application in adult learning. However, with Holst (2011), and following Marcuse, Brookfield also argued that alternative and radical views can be "tolerated" particularly where they are offered as a "choice" among other ideas and that this "always dilutes their radical qualities" (p. 4).

This article seeks to place a particular program in its "geo-historical" context and as the outcome of a complex set of relationships that can reinforce as well as challenge dominant conceptions and practices of local employment relations. After a brief discussion of the research approach taken, the emergence of the socio-economic and political structure of Sierra Leone is discussed and trade unions placed in this context. Trade union education in an African context is then reviewed and the particular certificate program analyzed and assessed.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis presented here derives from three key sources, each of which have particular strengths as well as weaknesses that, taken together, provide a basis for exploring the general issues of trade union education in Africa alongside the particularities of the program developed in Sierra Leone.

The first source is the author himself who has worked with African colleagues in developing and delivering trade union education programs in Sierra Leone since 1980 (although with a decade-long gap during the rebel war period). This has the strength of active engagement over a long period but the obvious weaknesses that need to be articulated in relation to my status as a white male from the previously colonizing country with no knowledge of indigenous languages. There is strength in an "outsider" view, but however close the "participant observer" gets, they remain an outsider even if working within a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998).

The second source is from working together with Sierra Leonean trade union leaders in developing and delivering their own education materials. Although influenced by what had been done elsewhere with its inevitable Eurocentric-

ity, all the materials used on programs were developed collaboratively and ultimately written and delivered by local activists and tutors. This process of "participatory research" was enhanced by regular ongoing debates and discussions in formal and informal sessions which were sometimes noted afterwards in personal diaries or a loose collection of field notes. As with the first source, the research strength is the day-to-day practical engagement but with the similar weakness of my outsider status.

The third source was a series of taped and transcribed interviews with experienced and influential trade union leaders who had been engaged with writing and delivering programs. A lawyer working without payment on labour law cases and an engaged academic from Sierra Leone's Democracy Commission were also interviewed and transcribed as was the local language course tutor. Finally twelve participants in the Certificate program were asked to comment collectively and that discussion was taped and transcribed. This approach had all the strengths of hearing the authentic voice and views of the local trade unionists but even semi-structured interviews and discussions are guided and remain open to respondents saying what they think the interviewer wants to hear.

Overall, these different approaches cannot completely shift the discussion from a Eurocentric to an Afrocentric one but they can go some way towards moving the African trade unionists from their "marginal role in their own discourse" towards the centre.

A FRAGILE STATE

Sierra Leone is a former British colony on the West African coast. Whilst it has the potential to develop abundant natural agricultural, fishery and mineral resources, it has remained one of the poorest countries in the world. Colonial exploitation of these natural resources saw the exportation of profits and infrastructure development focussed on the benefits to the colonizers. Following independence in 1962, Sierra Leone continued to be characterized by poverty and inequality, and it remains placed at 177 out of 186 countries on the UN Index of Human Development (2012). Whilst life expectancy has risen from 34 in 1970 to 48 in 2012 and the economy is expanding annually, there remain major problems in health and education, challenging social inequalities, and high levels of under-employment and unemployment.

Post-independence civil government developed through a short period of multi-party democracy, followed by single party government and then coup and counter-coup (see Kargbo, 2012). Corruption was widespread and focussed on the exploitation of natural resources, particularly diamonds. Moreover, the development that occurred was generally focussed on the capital city, Freetown, and its hinterland, while the largely agricultural communities beyond were neglected. The internal economic stagnation was exacerbated by rebel incur-

sions from neighbouring Liberia and a ten-year civil war that ended in 2002 (Kargbo, 2012). This has now been followed by more than a decade of relative stability that is seeing economic growth and peaceful multi-party elections. Rebel leaders have died or moved on, and Charles Taylor of neighbouring Liberia has been successfully prosecuted in the International Court in The Hague in 2012. However, substantial inequalities remain — economic policy is driven by the neoliberal agenda of privatization and deregulation and there remains a significant aid dependency.

These structural factors shape an economy in which the majority of people are disengaged from active engagement in civil society given their daily task of subsistence survival. Corrupt practices develop not just in the buying and selling of commodities for profit but in providing or denying access to resources such as education and employment. Sierra Leone is ranked 123 from 176 countries in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (2012). Each of these factors has shaped, formed, and re-formed Sierra Leone's trade unions both historically and contemporaneously (Stirling, 2011).

BUILDING TRADE UNIONS

Trade unions' historical development in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa is interwoven with colonialism both as a product of it and in resistance to it (Phelan, 2011, offers various West African examples). Initial developments in Sierra Leone were associated with small-scale artisanal organizations, but expansion began with the industrial exploitation of resources through the opening up of mines and the subsequent infrastructural developments in railways, docks and maritime transport (see Luke, 1984). In particular, the mineworkers' union became the dominant force and provided the President of the country from 1971 – 1985, Siaka Stevens, who dominated the period of the one party state. The early British colonial response was the harsh repression of strikes and industrial conflict and some limited attempts to establish procedures of mediation. Periods of militancy in the 1920s and in 1939 were led most notably by Wallace-Johnson (Denzer, 1982) and associated with political action, but this faded in a period of global recession and it was the Second World War that brought the next shift.

Returning soldiers and the election of a Labour government in the UK in 1945 saw a move towards trade union recognition and the establishment of institutions of collective bargaining along with legislation derived from UK practice (Roper, 1958). Whilst this became the dominant force, the Cold War and the burgeoning struggles for independence saw African trade unions divided as competing powers sought local alliances as part of their foreign policies. Disputes and imprisonments indicated the political significance of the trade unions and a 1981 strike directly confronted the government over economic conditions such as unemployment and food price rises. Over 200 trade un-

ionists were arrested and a state of emergency declared. The resolution of the dispute also led to the establishment of the single trade union confederation: the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC). Unions were decimated during the civil war period and struggled to maintain membership and organization, particularly beyond the capital Freetown. However, the leadership also became a focus for civil society activities and protest and effective strikes and marches were organized often at significant personal risks; as Jennings Wright of the Hotel Workers records in an interview:

Our office was vandalized. The main Sierra Leone Labour Congress building was bombed. There is an area of the main hall in which the Research Department was attached, which was blown up. There are signs, if you go to the building to show that the building was bombed. The office of the United Mineworkers Union was bombed out completely. All of our official vehicles, four, were bombed completely and all our offices were vandalized. That was very difficult.

> The Sierra Leone context has important consequences for trade unions and for trade union education. Firstly, there is a legacy of colonialism that leaves English as the official language of the country and a framework of legislation and institutions modelled on British practice. Effectively, the old social and cultural power remains embedded and available to an elite group defined by education and ability to communicate in English.

Secondly, economic changes led to the growth and decline of particular unions — the destruction of the railways led to the decline of the industry-based union and the United Mineworkers Union (UMU) might lose a quarter of its membership overnight if a mine closes or a major accident leads to lay-offs. Equally significantly, the labour market is characterized by overwhelming employment in the informal economy whilst unions organize in the formal economy (Stirling, 2011). In these circumstances it is no surprise that the Sierra Leone Teachers' Union dominates the central union confederation as its members have state jobs and pay subscriptions through direct deduction from salary (Amman & O'Donnell, 2011).

Thirdly, trade unions have responded to the changing terrain of governance by seeking to remain independent of political parties. Those parties draw their strengths from tribal loyalties and there is no single "party of labour." Most recently, civil society organizations have occupied the space that state institutions might once have done and this provides a challenge for trade unions in determining their relationship with them (see Eade and Leather, 2005, for a discussion).

Finally, trade unions have reflected the dominant patriarchal attitudes and few women have become involved, although there are clear strategies to seek to change this.

> People thought the trade unions were men's issue. I think the greatest factor in this bringing women's issues on board was the fact that all those who were deeply and strongly involved in unionising, especially within the teachers union, were men. All of them were men, right through they were men. In all of the positions, all of them were men. (Gladys Branch, Teachers' Union)

TRADE UNION EDUCATION IN AFRICA

In a Sub-Saharan African context it is difficult to trace a history of trade union education through recorded accounts. Local traditions in cultures lacking written records are strongly focussed on storytelling and, equally, on the importance of hierarchies and distinctions between men and women and the young and the old. For trade union education directly the influences are, again, the old colonial powers and, more recently, the International Labour Organization. Northern European countries such as Sweden and Denmark have also had a strong international focus in their education work and have delivered projects in Africa, including Sierra Leone.

In this context Mwamadzingo and Ben Said Dia (2007) identified three stages of development in African trade union education: colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary, with the colonial period commencing in the 1950s and the contemporary in the 1990s. The absence of a "pre-colonial" category (or pre-1950s) in their account leaves out a period of active trade unionism in West Africa (Phelan, 2011) and might be explicable in terms of formal systems of trade union education but undervalues "informal learning" through day-to-day activities, industrial disputes and building cross border solidarities.

Nevertheless, the emergence of modern-day trade unionism is associated with the post-Second World War period and the significance of colonialism is evident in Sierra Leone as it is in other African countries. This is graphically illustrated through Roper's (1958) book on *Labour Problems in West Africa* and his own background as an adult education tutor before moving to a post as senior tutor for trade union studies at the University College of the Gold Coast (now Ghana). The Cold War period saw an extension of this strategy as trade union movements were politically divided and education programs delivered in and from Washington and Moscow.

The "contemporary period" identified by Mwamadzingo and Ben Said Dia (2007) coincides with the delivery of the Certificate program discussed here and which, they argued, sees the development of education focussed on trade unions as civil society actors. Given the period of warfare in Sierra Leone, the Labour Congress inevitably took on such a role and was instrumental in leading demonstrations and negotiations with government ministers. There was, then, as the authors suggest, a desire on the part of trade union leaders for education programs that increased their strengths as civil society actors. In this context, English language, the official language of the country, was and remains essential to building trade union capacity.

Mwamadzingo and Ben Said Dia (2007) also suggested this is a period in which African unions were and are developing education programs "to develop the services they provide to members and aim at involving the working people in the activities of their unions" (p. 51).

THE SIERRA LEONE CONTEXT

I now return to the tension identified at the outset between "defending" members and actively building the "rank and file." These are by no means necessarily conflicting strategies, and the programs developed in Sierra Leone sought to provide both a basis for organizing as well as developing skills in, for example, collective bargaining or health and safety.

Alongside these broader notions of development and the appropriateness of particular content in education were practical considerations of how a program could be sustainably delivered. In this respect, materials needed to be developed locally and a framework established for tutors to work in. This required financial, institutional, and human support. Finally, funding and resources remain a perennial problem in Sierra Leone and the Labour Congress has an extremely limited financial and human base.

In an interview, Abukabar Kargbo shared his view that the SLLC "lack resources to ensure their expansion and they do not have the resources to make them more national ... when you look at the headquarters you sense incapacity."

Funding for the program was, then, very important particularly if it was to be embedded in a University curriculum that would provide sustainability. An important "side effect" would also be the appearance of trade unionists as competent students at Fourah Bay College and push at a door for providing further mature student and adult access. In this respect, the recruitment process was signally important. Students were required to demonstrate five years of active trade union engagement (including the completion of short courses and day schools) and were interviewed by an academic member of staff and the Head of the SLLC Education Committee.

The implications for this were that the program focussed on leadership and leaders — whether these were paid full-time officials or otherwise. Both Max Conteh and Jennings Wright who were responsible for education at the SLLC believed that the course could and should be expanded in numbers and developed to a diploma level but noted the resource problems. Max Conteh in his interview suggests that employers "might sponsor some of their shop stewards to attend the courses" and there were further suggestions to seek government funding as well as from trade unions internationally.

The program itself had to be validated by the University's quality procedures. The British Council funded the preparatory project, which allowed trade unionists to visit the UK and, in particular, visit trade unionists from Europe

attending an English language program. Following this, the UK tutors and the SLLC leaders engaged directly with Fourah Bay College and through the local language tutor in piloting the Course through a validation program for which the selection procedure had become particularly important in two ways. Firstly, as a barrier to the potential for corruption that a more "open" recruitment procedure might make available and, secondly, to ensure that participants had both the trade union experience and the language knowledge to cope with the course.

The first year of the program took place in 2012 with 16 students and recognition that the number of female participants (6) remained too low but also reflected a significant demand. The course material development was a collaborative project between the local tutor, SLLC officials, and the UK-based project participants but, most importantly, the materials were first delivered through pilot programs with Sierra Leonean trade unionists. This enabled a strong level of feedback and the opportunity to re-assess materials both in terms of level and understanding.

THE CLASSROOM IN CONTEXT

The interaction between students and tutors in the field of labour education is particularly significant as it is a relationship between adults rather than teachers and children, and it takes place in a context where there is a commitment to ideas of justice and equality. Trade unions are organizations whose purpose is to pursue such issues on behalf of their members and this gives rise to expectations in relation to the human interaction in the classroom. Paulo Freire (2004) has been hugely influential in his ideas in relation to worker education and the relationships that exist in the classroom.

At the heart of Freire's educational arguments is a more general conception of the relationship between social structures and human agency and the notion that people will not be "freed" unless they participate in the making of their own freedom (Freire, 2004). Thus, the pedagogy of the oppressed "must be forged *with* not *for* the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity" (p. 48, emphasis in original).

In the classroom:

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn, while being taught also teach. (p. 80)

This raises the discussion of the relationship between tutor and student in a trade union classroom very directly and the focus on dialogue and learning together is unequivocal. Following on from Freire, debates continue as to the

significance of the "how" in delivering education programs. Focussing specifically on worker education, Bleakney and Morrill (2010) argued that:

> Worker education, then, does not presume a straight transfer of facts and information from a higher authority. People can and will act based on a deeper fulfilling personal and collective way when given the chance. It requires flexibility and qualitative methods. It is a place where facilitators become keen observers and listeners, intervening to maintain a learning space in innovative and challenging ways. (p. 146)

It is also important in developing a relationship of trust between the class participants for there to be recognition of the power relationships both inside and outside the classroom for, as Nesbit (2005) argued, "education has always represented a site of struggle between those with the power to define what constitutes legitimate knowledge and those excluded from such decision making" (p. 1).

This point is particularly appropriate here as the knowledge that has acquired "legitimacy" has been established through a colonial relationship. Thus the necessary understanding required by an active trade unionist in Sierra Leone is often of laws, systems of bargaining, and institutions that are the legacy of British rule. Furthermore, and crucially, the language for understanding these, English, has equally been established by colonial dominance (as discussed further below).

Given this structural colonial relationship and legacy, the biographies of class facilitators and discussion leaders assume significance beyond a simple exchange of information. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) made this point precisely when noting how "teachers and students [need to] probe their own taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions to uncover the ways they serve dominant interests" (p. 8). Thus education in the classroom remains a contested terrain and one in which the African context is strongly shaped by a colonial past reflected in teachers and students alike.

Trade union education has also been preoccupied with "the method" as much as the subject "matter" that is to be delivered. This at first might appear odd and it is not something that appeared to trouble early pioneers seeking to bring enlightenment to workers: they had knowledge to transmit. For example, looking back on one of the joint authors' own experience Brookfield and Holst (2011) noted that "for him [Brookfield] the connection of adult education to democratic socialism was quite clear and not very daring or remarkable" (p. 4).

In effect, the content and direction of adult and worker education was self-evident in Europe, although, there have been significant differences in approach to delivery based on different organizational structures. In the USA, similar points are made by Wong (2002) who saw different traditions in North and South America and argued that the more active popular education methods were adopted later in the USA:

> The U.S. labor movement has not always embraced a philosophy of teaching for social change and transformation. Unlike labor movements in Canada and Brazil that have viewed education as an integral part of organizing and union building, the approach to labor education in the United States has historically been narrow and conservative. (p. 1)

Thus, whilst traditions may be different in different countries, activity-based and discussion-led learning deriving from adult education has now become the "norm" in trade union education in Eurocentric delivery styles, and this is summed up succinctly by Bridgford and Stirling (2000) when they argued that in Europe:

> There has been a long-term shift in national patterns of trade union training away from teacher-centred, expert-based delivery towards participative, co-operative and student-centred learning. (p. 22)

ONE BEST WAY?

This "long-term shift" in Europe is the product of opportunism and funding as well as a commitment to the popular education strategies of Freire. For Sierra Leone, with its links to the UK for funding and support, the shift is a significant one given that trade union education can also be seen as originating in a colonial "export."

The dominant pluralist ideology in the UK recognized the legitimacy of trade unions and the inevitability of conflict but argued that it might be institutionalized. Whilst there were strong Marxist critiques (Hyman, 1975) they were unlikely to be reinforced by delivery in state-funded training programs even if individual tutors might support that view.

In effect, trade union education became focussed on skills-based training to which active learning methods that inherently valued student input became the dominant approach. Independent "knowledge-based" and "expert-centred" learning was marginalized in a context where the focus of education had shifted to skills learning. Thus, it is at least arguable that Freire's radicalism was removed as the method of delivery became a shibboleth but the political content of such delivery was removed.

This is to put the argument polemically, as if there is a necessary dichotomy between education and training, and one is delivered one way and the other another. Classes focussing on negotiating, for example, raise questions about power and the distribution of rewards and inequality in society as well as the workplace. Similarly, workplace representation skills raise issues about the "right to manage" as well as power and authority in society. Questions of labour law are ultimately political questions and so on. Nevertheless the tensions about the delivery method being an adjunct to skills development rather than worker liberation remain in debates particularly as labour movements struggle with the difficulties of offering coherent alternatives to dominant neo-liberal policies.

It is this tension that remains in delivering programs in Sierra Leone where the dominant pedagogy is the inherited one of student-centred learning that enhances skills but, nevertheless, neglects the explanations and alternatives for the position of the country in the world economy or its internal social problems. In effect, the content of programs is predicated on an assumed pluralist ideology despite the difficulties unions have in gaining institutional legitimacy as in, for example, gaining a reform of labour laws to reflect their position (Stirling, 2011). As in the UK, issues of collective bargaining can and do raise more radical questions of power and authority. In this context, the questions are of legitimacy, recognition, status, and access to existing power structures rather than challenges to them.

Engagement with the global economy raises further questions about the content of programs. Successive Sierra Leone governments are faced with implementing global neo-liberal policies with the most recent (2012) proposals envisaging the establishment of Export Processing Zones (EPZs). As Max Conteh noted

> We have a lot of new challenges as we have a lot of international investors coming in and they are coming with new ideas ... those ideas [are] about operating without trade unions and [there are] even intention on the part of government to create EPZs.

While one trade union strategy might be to resist EPZs altogether, Muluku Tarawaly, the Secretary General of the Civil Service Union, argues that "instead of looking at it from the point of view that it's going to be a threat it can be a strength if the Labour Congress is proactive."

The "international investors" mentioned by Conteh are, as elsewhere in Africa, often Chinese and, according to Abubakar Kargbo:

> The Chinese tend not to work in accordance with international rules and standards ... [and the unions] have not succeeded in changing the ideas of the Chinese on the organisation of workers.

Education programs in Sierra Leone need to be placed in this global context in which discussion methods need to lead towards exploring alternative strategies to neo-liberalism and the new Chinese economic interventions. At the same time and as we have seen, the danger remains of locating that discussion within a framework in which more radical views become marginalized and a UK-rooted pluralism dominates debate.

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Trade union education might occur in many ways and places and the focus on the method of delivery has kept the focus so far inside the classroom. However, the intention of trade union education programs is that they have an impact outside of that classroom. Such an impact may occur in different ways; it may be intensely personal and change the individual themselves, mak-

ing them more confident or less homophobic for example; it may improve the organization of the union through developing recruitment strategies; it may provide the basis for challenging management and, consequently improve life at the workplace or it may lead to broader political engagement. In each case it is designed to encourage and support activism and engagement and develop ideas of solidaristic working both within the union and with other groups with similar values.

The activism that is encouraged and supported requires a space or spaces in which to be expressed and this is, most commonly, the workplace but it could also be in the family, the community or in a wider social engagement. However, spaces can also close down and, for example, the opportunity to negotiate and engage in collective bargaining may shift its location or be limited to a few "professionals." These issues of engagement beyond the classroom are particularly significant in Sierra Leone as is an analysis of the spaces for that engagement, and an understanding of this requires further discussion of the context for trade unions and education in the country.

The labour market is dominated by informal sector work: within families and communities for agricultural labour, and in small-scale workshops, petty trading, and casual labour in urban centres. Formal centre employment is confined to the state sector, mining, and some financial services and this division of work has implications for the trade unions. Historically, organization has focussed on the small but stable formal economy, which has also provided a view of unions as "elitist" organisations. It has also been particularly exclusionary to women workers. Current policies in the central Labour Congress encourage strategies that seek engagement with informal sector organization and the organization and involvement of women workers. However, neither strategy is without difficulties and implications for the trade union movement itself.

In relation to the informal sector, the SLLC is revising its constitution to draw in already existing representative organizations. The advantages of increasing overall representativeness and, hence, influence has to be set against the cost to resources and the potential for shifting internal power between unions:

Muluku Tawalary regarded the integration of informal sector organizations as a strength: "the strength is in numbers when taking industrial action" and, when asked if they might not come to dominate the Labour Congress he replied, "I don't know whether it is anything to be afraid of when it comes about ... because ... if they are doing well in their organisation then that is more than those who claim to be regular unions."

The implication for this is a need for widespread education programs that draw in informal sector workers and which have yet to be established on a large scale. They will depend on active non-professional tutors and on being delivered at minimal costs. Such a program would also open up further opportunities for

unrepresented women who overwhelmingly work in the informal sector. Thus, the challenges of globalization at the macro-level and organizing at the micro-level each put pressures on trade union education but also offer opportunities to rethink it beyond the program delivered at Fourah Bay College.

CERTIFICATES, ENGLISH AND THE COLLEGE

The Certificate program in English for trade unionists comes, then, within a complex set of theoretical debates, structural conditions, and inter-personal relationships. It reflects an old colonialism in both content and method as well as a new globalization and changing conditions in civil society presenting opportunities to influence government and new investors. However, ideas do not simply emerge from structural conditions, even if they arise at particular geo-historical moments. Personal relationships are equally the agencies of change.

At an anecdotal level, the certificate program that emerged began with a casual conversation towards the end of a capacity-building project and looking to the future. In seeking something that could be built and sustained locally, and which could have an impact, it might have been expected that there would be a focus on typical trade union areas such as organizing and bargaining. However, the local demand was for a program rooted in English language provision which takes us very directly to the heart of a power relationship. Trade union leaders may well have had some education, particularly at the senior, full-time officer level but can still be lacking in the skill of writing and communicating in the country's official language. This perceived lack may matter little when dealing with their own members who will often be less literate and use Krio (a local dialect version of English) or an indigenous language.

However, the acquisition and use of English also equates with the exercise of power, particularly by elite political groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that often control access to resources and finally, employers, particularly where they come from foreign multinational companies that use English as their working language. International links with other trade union bodies or the ILO, for example, also require good English language skills in order to make a voice heard. Moreover, there is an expectation from members that leaders will be able to deal, at least competently, with these groups. Collective agreements, legislation, safety standards, and so on are written in English, and if they are to be drafted and used, then a sophisticated use of language is required. Knowledge of language is, then, not simply a technical skill but an engagement with the power structures of a society which can exclude or disempower those that cannot match the standard of English used daily.

At a more general level, the ongoing significance of language in this context has long been regarded as of central importance, as was summarized by Brookfield (2005):

> As Gramsci, and later Freire point out, a precondition for working-class empowerment (short of violent revolution) is a critical appropriation of dominant language, so that one can use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (to use Audre Lorde's ... phrase). (p. 89)

A SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION?

There are three areas for reflection in relation to the Certificate program that was developed and delivered: the impact on the trade unions; the impact on the University; and, most importantly, the impact on the participants. There can be little doubt that there was a strong positive response from the leadership of the SLLC given that the genesis of the course stemmed from their particular interests:

> Well I will say that I see a positive impact. The president of the union has been there and he has been very active in the course and as of now he has been elevated at his place of work to a supervisor. He is still the president of the union ... I believe that by the end of the course it will have created a lot of impact among the students that are there. (Jennings Wright, Secretary General of the Hotel Workers Union)

The impact on the University was equally significant. Firstly, by opening up the institution to a trade union program and trade unionists — it was not surprising to see the trade unionists standing for positions in the student union. Secondly, by opening up the University procedures to adult education access without it being regarded as somehow "unacademic" or a back door (or even potentially corrupt) entrance to higher education. Thirdly, there is the impact on the program leader who was a language tutor: his engagement with materials writing and delivery was crucial to the development of the program. Equally, he became engrossed in the language of trade unionism and the world that his students occupied, a world that was in the classroom each time a session took place.

For Max Conteh, Head of Education at SLLC, it was clear that developments and improvements could be made:

> If we have our way we want all general secretaries and all senior officials and leaders of the Labour movement to attend the course. Not because of the qualification that it has but because of the benefits it will have in terms of teaching skills and the benefits of speaking. I think that the course on the whole is very good and we see this as a test case to look at how we can further improve it. We want to bring more modules in terms of what we do. We have to bring issues such as industrial relations which is very key now.

For the participants themselves, there is an important impact in simply attending a University which was "not for them." However, the impact was well beyond that in terms of personal development and trade union engagement. It was also clear that they see the Certificate as a starting point for further

education with some already planning for diplomas and even degrees if they are approved by the University procedures.

> For my own personal development as far as this course is concerned, I can say that now, I can communicate more confidently both verbally and in writing to bring out the issues that affect workers, as well as my administrative skills. Also, the course has helped me identify some of the challenges and how to overcome them and, also it is a first step to future academic pursuits in trade union development in Sierra Leone. (Abu Bakarr Kamara, SL Seamen's Union)

Alpha A. Bah (Motor Drivers Union) made an important point beyond his personal development in terms of extending what he has learnt to his union members:

> It has helped improve my personal skill in communications and trade union issues. What I'm learning here I am taking to my organization and teaching my fellow members in the provinces. I tell them what exactly is a trade union and what are the rules and responsibilities of each position. That's what I'm doing now.

For Mohamed Gbondo (Construction Workers Union) the program had added to his confidence and skills as a negotiator:

> This program is very helpful to me because it tells me how to negotiate with employers, to see what employers want [and] to negotiate with them. It helps me to attend meetings with the stakeholders of construction companies [and] to negotiate with them about salary increase or whatsoever.

However, as Jamella Doherty (Post & Telecommunications Union) argued, there is still a need for further movement towards gender equality:

> I want to thank you all [the course participants] for seeing us through even though we are aware that we wanted more women on this program but it is rather unfortunate that we are very few. But we believe that we the women who are here will be on top. We are at the bottom but we want to challenge the men.

As is often the case with adult education programs, it is often the unintended or unforeseen outcomes that are as important as anything included in University validation documents.

The long-term impact waits to be assessed, as does the continuance of the program. There is no doubt as to the demand, and a "roadshow" took students and tutors to provincial centres, where packed halls indicated the need for the program beyond the capital. However, education is not free and trade unions have little money to sponsor students. Most students have funded themselves, which will, again, restrict access particularly to those with stable employment in the formal sector. Apart from one representative of the Traders' Union there was a lack of engagement with an informal sector that dominates employment and provides the future for trade union development. At the other end of the

spectrum, the Sierra Leone Teachers' Union (the largest formal sector union in the country) did not provide participants. This is perhaps understandable given their internal provision of courses and, perhaps, a view that their members have a mastery of English. But their engagement would add to the course for other participants and the "trade union" side of the program would develop different areas of skills and knowledge.

We have discussed the longer-term implications for the University and the unions but it should be emphasized that trade union education programs challenge both institutional power but also the informal power expressed in the daily life of the employment relationship. In this respect it is the confidence to use the official language of the country so that it serves the interests of working people and is not simply the prerogative of an elite that is crucial. There are lessons to be learnt on cross-cultural engagement, program delivery and personal relationships inside and outside the classroom that go well beyond the Certificate in English Language for Trade Unionists at Fourah Bay College.

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion in this article reflects a complex set of inter-relationships that confront issues of power and cultural hegemony alongside the tensions embedded in the relationship between trade unions and the capitalist societies that they inhabit. Expectations of trade unions as agents of radical change are tempered by their need to be representatives of workers in the day-to-day reality of their lives and working relationships. Inevitably, trade union education programs reflect such tensions and are pulled in different directions both in terms of content and delivery. These tensions are pushed into particularly stark relief in Africa where countries such as Sierra Leone continue to cope with the legacy of colonialism, the struggles of development, and a severely under-resourced trade union movement.

The colonial legacy does not remain simply in terms of a continuing hegemonic capitalist power relationship but, as has been suggested through the broader contextual analysis here, is also embedded in the local (Sierra Leonean) development of trade union education. Content remains rooted in a pluralistic ideology deriving from UK industrial relations theory that neglects the major inequalities in power and the dominance of the informal sector workforce in Africa. There is a need to shift content to relate to locality but also to utilise teaching pedagogies that focus on overcoming issues of illiteracy and English language dominance and engage particularly with women. Whilst the UK tradition of co-operative classroom working has the potential strengths of being engaging and democratic, it must also be fashioned by indigenous cultures and local traditions to make it work effectively.

The development of the course also illustrates the arguments of those quoted at the outset fearing a dominant Eurocentricity and a de-radicalization of

"popular education." The dominant colonial setting and its embodiment in the use of English as the official language reinforce these fears and set a significant challenge for education. Alternative discourses become marginalized as union education becomes a vehicle for accessing existing power structures from which unions themselves are struggling for recognition. Wider, global, debates about the content and delivery of programs become crystallized and pointed in a resource-poor environment in which "everything" needs to be done and everybody included.

The Certificate course program provides an articulation of these issues but, inevitably, not their resolution. Learning to communicate more effectively in English both empowers individuals and opens access to dominant hierarchies but leaves aside the more radical questions raised by Afrocentic approaches which might ask why collective bargaining, for example, might not be done in Krio or an indigenous language? That would certainly respond to Asante's (2007) comments about the marginalization of Africans and, in return, marginalize English language speakers, but it would still leave the dominant colonial structures and cultures firmly in place.

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