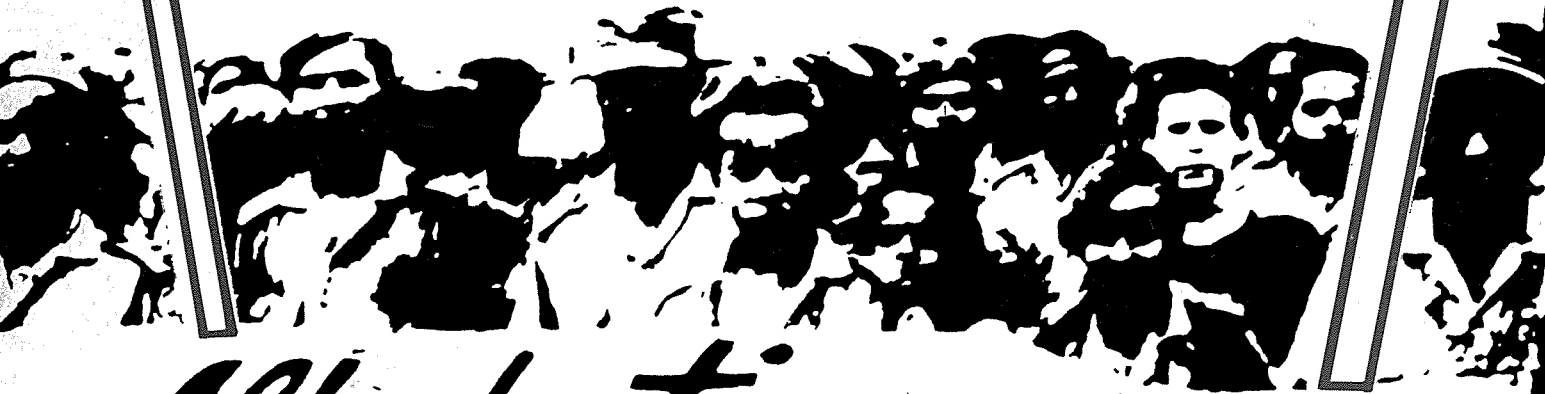


# EDUCATION

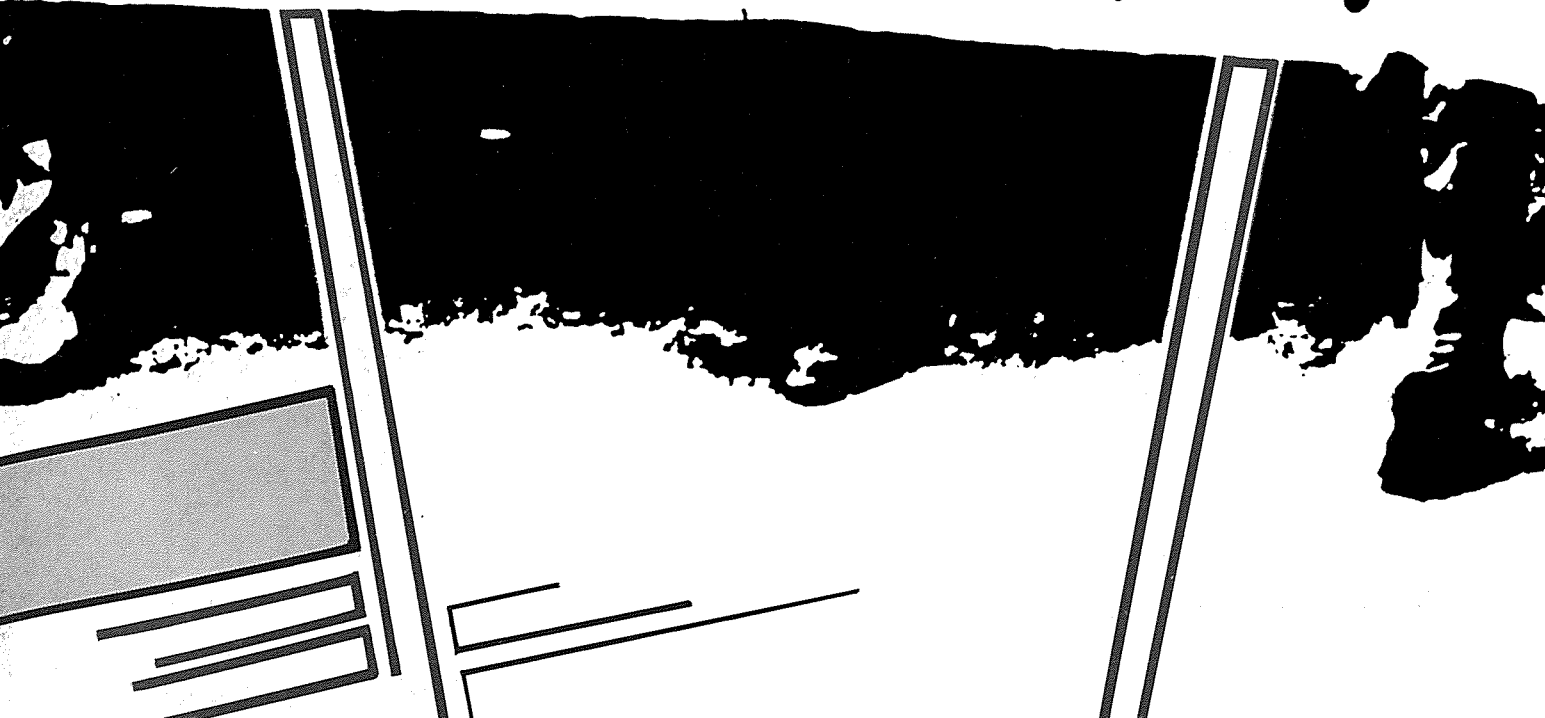
1991  
Volume 4  
No.1

The Journal of The Faculty of Education

The University of Malta



*Alfabetizadoras*  
GUAMA - COBRE - ORIENTE  
DTE **HEMOS VENCIDO!**



# Labour Education In The Information Age

Godfrey Baldacchino

*"Neither hands, nor minds alone suffice;  
The tools and devices they employ finally shape  
them".*

*Francis Bacon (1561-1626), The New Organum*

## Introduction

Many of those concerned with social change would agree that the role played by communications technology and informatics in contemporary society is becoming ever more important (1). An iron law of economic development appears to have gripped the world's nation states, drawing them inexorably closer to each other. Supposedly independent sovereign political units find it harder every day to carve out their own destiny given their integration in a transnational web of commodity (trade), human (migration, tourism) but particularly information flows (2).

Social institutions must struggle actively to transform themselves along with the times if they are to preserve (or better still enhance) their relevance in the dawning information society. Workers' organizations, particularly trade unions, must similarly prepare to join battle under such terms and conditions as are ascendant in the new information game; terms and conditions which these organizations are also called to shape.

Mainstream theory postulates that, in the transition to the ascendancy of cultural capital, the arena of labour conflict is shifting away from the industrial shop floor and heading for the office, the counter, the computer terminal. But pragmatically, such a destination is not clear at all. The idea that labour conflict is not shifting to new pastures but rather calling it a day and winding itself up is a pervasive and rampant belief. The battle between capital and labour may indeed be lost before it is joined, because the enemy has become a sophisticated master of disguise. The rout of labour may be so complete and finite that labour may even fail to perceive its own exploitation. A crucial determiner of such an outcome is the subordination of labour to capitalist hegemony via ideological cooptation and integration (3). One component of this subordination is the restructuring of labour education and its degeneration into human capital formation.

## The Argument

In the context of the managerial and economic restructuring currently underway, this article argues for a systematic policy of labour education meant to empower workers as active participants, critical members and knowledgeable negotiators at the workplace and in society at large. Such labour education is diagnosed firstly in terms of what it is not, by a critique of the dominant brand of "education for work" recently embarked upon by both state and private capital educational agencies. Secondly, in terms of what an effective labour education programme should include. The article concludes with some general ideas on how trade unions ought best to ensure that their interests are defended and advanced via the educational system.

## Nails in the Union Coffin

Sadly, trade unions today appear unable to undergo the metamorphosis necessary to remain influential in a post-industrial setting: "Goodbye to the working class"; "The forward march of Labour halted"; "Are unions an anachronism?" So have been some of the headlines of the latest decades (4). The catchy phrases are the ominous reverberations of four interlocking dimensions of change which have altered the context in which trade unions operate.

The first concerns the structure of company ownership. The ownership of property, and therefore the focus of labour protest, has become increasingly diffuse and obscure. Less employees know who "the bad guys" are. Practically absolute executive control has been vested into a salaried class of personnel and managers who however have little, if any, ownership in the firm. They report to a distant group of human or institutional shareholders, each of which may again have little control over the company's policy. In some countries today the number of employee-owners matches that of trade union members. Employees in the numerous public sector jobs cannot even put their finger on an identifiable shareholder or owner because there isn't any. And there are other worker categories: those to whom work is sub-contracted on a contract or piece-rate basis and who may be self-employed, working on their own premises or in their own homes. It becomes difficult for any of these expanding cadres to experience class consciousness, or even trade union consciousness, when their individualistic

work activity is characterised by high job discretion, self-discipline, self-responsibility and self-exploitation (5).

The second concerns the style of management. In large companies, where the nature and scale considerations of the task necessitates the bringing together of large numbers of workers under one roof, the nature of supervision and job differentiation is also changing. Taylorism/Fordism/ Scientific Management did prove successful in giving management control over the work process through the rationalization and fragmentation of skills. Work study techniques and assembly line ergonomics considerably expanded productivity and helped keep both consumer prices and labour bargaining power low (6).

Treating a worker as a machine may have had great productivity spin-offs but only as long as the worker resigned himself to his dehumanised predicament. The instrumentalisation of workers also brought about reactive worker solidarity, class identity and eventually even trade union militancy. A new wave of management practices was therefore ushered in, under the broad umbrella of the human relations movement (7). By educating managers in the techniques of leadership, employee motivation and cooperation building, the adversary us-and-them feeling is often stifled effectively. The job of management has widened to embrace not only the technical, commercial responsibilities of manufacturing commodities (goods or services) for the market but also the responsibility of manufacturing employee consent for the enterprise ethic (8). Employees concerned for the survival of their company and involved in schemes of worker participation may find it hard to understand not only who the enemy is but also that there is one at all. And if there is no enemy, what's the point of unionization? (9).

The third nail in the coffin of contemporary trade unionism is technological change. Computerization and automation have had effects both on the quantity and quality of manufacturing employment. Monotonous, routine and unskilled operations are generally being incorporated into ever more sophisticated machines, such that their former human operators are facing redundancy (10). And the quality of surviving and newly available jobs requires more skill both in a technical and in an abstract sense, thus defying not only technological incorporation but even rigorous supervision. These new professionals enjoying good working conditions and separately negotiated salaries would tend to be rather aloof

from the taunts of mass trade union membership and militancy (11).

The fourth and final dimension of change is the occupational shift from manufacturing to a services dominated economy. Advanced market economies have been deindustrializing rapidly and new jobs are increasingly found in the tertiary sector (12). The effects of this shift on trade unionism are multiple. The "dark satanic mills" which spawned reactive as well as revolutionary trade unionism and labour protest have well nigh been systematically eliminated. The hard core of trade unionism - shipbuilders, shiprepairers, railwaymen, port workers, miners, construction workers - have been hardest hit in the process of transition. In their place, new jobs have been created as personal services, petty administrative and clerical tasks, distributive and transport trades with a growing concentration of females among the workforce. Over and above this, the scale of the services sector enterprise is much smaller than its manufacturing counterpart. The industrial relations atmosphere in the former is therefore much more likely to be employer dominated and governed by paternalistic relations which enhance the corporate ethic among the employees. White collar workers, females and workers in small scale enterprises also have no tradition of trade union membership or activism. They are substantial niches where union mobilization drives have not been very successful (13).

## The Union Crisis Revisited

**T**he rout of trade unionism is therefore complete... or is it? Although definitely jolted by these diverse yet complementary forces, trade unions and other forms of labour organizations (including political parties, peasant movements and cooperative associations) remain very much alive in the contemporary world. They are however having teething problems in the transition to the information age. They are as if still trying to figure out the techniques to best defend and promote labour interests in the new scenario, within the four dimension straightjacket described above.

One of the major problems here is that labour unions have been slow at understanding the implications of a post-industrial society. The workers of the world today must still find viable answers to repression and exploitation. But perhaps the most important struggle now is to be waged, first and foremost, at the superstructural level, involving the search for viable answers to ideological incorporation. To do so, trade unions must recognise the politics of information and

ensure that they too share in the dissemination of knowledge and in influencing the socialization of their actual and potential members. Working men and women in general, and labour leaders in particular, must first become articulate in their objective condition, developing a "labour imagination" involving first a discourse of possibility and next a discourse of effective labour policy and action (14). The alleged extinction of trade unionism, similarly to the extinction of industrial conflict, has the trappings of a cultivated myth. But this is in itself an indication of how the control of information and of its dissemination goes a long way towards fashioning the real world.

### Education For Human Capital

Unfortunately for labour movements, the world's educational institutions are by and large already fully taken up to provide the skills and attitudes congenial to certain other interest groups for the transition to an information based post-industrial world. The first wave of transformation was the closing down of many University departments oriented towards social science research and education. The student protests of 1968 over most of Europe suggested to policy makers that degrees in political science, political economy and sociology were only producing potential revolutionaries (15). The emphasis shifted from liberal to vocational and functional education. Long serving professors in Social Science faculties had to switch over to service business-oriented courses, or bust. Tertiary education was thus preempted from becoming the catalyst of democratic change in its social environment (16).

Secondly, that dose of social science education which persevered in the formal curricula took on a more conservative guise. It became civics and life skills studies dealing with the better (*sic* uncritical) integration of the individual into the existing social structure. The diagnosis of society shifted invariably from a conflict riddled analysis emphasizing power inequality and class struggle to the systems approach emphasizing propriety, roles and mutual interdependence (17).

Thirdly the neo-classical liberal economic creed of Adam Smith was revived as the dominant social philosophy by the resurgence of political conservatism in the industrial world (18). In the perpetual preoccupation of social science with structure and agency, it is the latter which has assumed contemporary ascendancy in different guises: Entrepreneurial studies, human

resource management, organizational systems, game theory, econometrics. The methodology of social science has shifted to a micro perspective, giving major consideration to the individual as master of the game; the fallacy here being that men make their own history just as they please (19).

Fourthly, the internationalised character of capital has accentuated the process of making educational provision more freely subservient to industrial needs (which include both technical skills and uncritical attitudes to power). Inter-university cooperation is being lavishly financed by private (including multinational) organizations towards directions of technical and scientific research and development from which private industry is most likely to profit. The arrangement conveniently ropes in governments as co-sponsors in expensive projects (20).

In the meantime, the intellectual elite of different countries is socialized into the capitalist hegemony as it passes through tertiary education: Promising undergraduates are more likely to find private industry as an interested sponsorship agent. Private corporations provide funds and internship slots to students, while universities honour requests for credit awards for placement in private industry. Major private corporations today have developed their own universities and training centres. Often, the employees of such companies are expected to undergo training in such centres every set time period.

### Labour Education Today

The education of Labour - for long neglected by governments or business budgets and therefore the sole preserve of some trade unions - is now also undergoing encroachment. Given the increased flexibility being demanded by economic fluctuations and technological advancement, in-service labour training programmes have become a necessary way of life in many working establishments (21). Such labour education is carried out by a personnel management team which is, itself, regularly trained.

The scourge of long term structural unemployment and the vital need of upgrading labour skills to match industrial requirements has also meant that the State, often in alliance with industrial and business interests, embarks on long term training programmes for the unemployed. These often include placements in private companies and provide opportunities for the acquisition of new work skills and attitudes. In a parallel view, youth training schemes mop up

school leavers and teach them skills just as they enter the job market. And industrialising economies have similarly thought fit to introduce labour education intended invariably to improve labour productivity and therefore capital efficiency and economic viability.

The inexorable outcome of this “human capital theory” is that individuals find a place in the shifting, murky waters of labour demand by cultivating the requisite technical skills, flexibility and deferential attitudes to authority which make them “good workers”; what Paolo Freire has called “education for domestication” (22).

### **Labour Education: Why At All?**

**B**ut why should one at all rediscover labour education? There is a deluge of justifications for the educational enrichment and empowerment of labour representatives: How would worker leaders otherwise match the educational and psychological preparation of seasoned and sophisticated negotiators on the management side from whom they are supposed to clinch advantageous deals? How would they remain competent and up to date on matters economic, financial and organizational? How would they avoid being mesmerized and subdued by the *fait accompli* of balance sheet analysis, statistical manipulations and computer-assisted financial projections? How would they communicate, effectively and selectively, news of their activities and policies to the mass public, thus marketing their services among citizens at large already heavily saturated by other information stimuli? How would they otherwise understand and master information technology such that they can exploit it in the production of their own educational and promotional material? How would they rectify and make up for the dearth of basic trade union literacy and work-related educational exposure from which students are starved during their formal schooling? How are they to utilize effectively the means of communication available for the facilitation of information exchanges within the trade union or worker organization proper, this defending and promoting its valuable democratic character? How would they develop the skills and critical methodology to carry out objective and scientific action research into relevant social developments? How would they see through and effectively react against cooptative worker participation schemes, and at the same time recognise and competently handle the potential of workplace democratization when the opportunity arises? And how would they otherwise inculcate and cultivate a pedagogy

which avoids being didactic, based on a dogmatic relationship between the teacher and the taught? The student therein would be thus reinforced in the role of a mere consumer of knowledge. This would fit in nicely with expectations of “good behaviour” from the individual at the workplace (as a tacit consumer of corporate authority) and in society at large (as a tacit consumer of commodities including goods, services, political decisions and information flows) (23).

There is a second, more overtly political, dimension to this argument. The loss of much of the vigour and vitality of workers’ organizations would also cripple further the notion of countervailing power which forms one of the fundamental tenets of pluralist democratic society. A decline of effective union power may signify the rise of unfettered industrial power and an inevitable transition to a neo-corporatist state (24). The liberal philosophy which infuses all contemporary western democracies exalts the virtues of the free market as an optimal mechanism for resource allocation (25). The directive also applies to the political context where the presence of multiple autonomous and independent organizations guarantees self-regulation of power distribution. What is however not said is that it is in the interest of all parties within the freely competitive environment to distort the market mechanism to their positional advantage, promoting not only economic monopolies but subtle cultural hegemonies as well. Information technology in the modern world has never made it easier for those who control access and distribution to carve an information-cum-ideological monopoly on the large, amorphous, human market (26).

### **Roping In The Universities**

**E**ffective strategies for labour education as worker empowerment must be developed in the context of the information age. Linchpin of this campaign is the marshalling of state resources - be they funds, personnel, facilities or technology - for labour education. In particular, solid bridges must be built between state supported centres of adult and worker education as well as universities on one hand and worker organizations on the other. Just as the resources of the former are already directed towards meeting some of the needs of the world of work as seen and determined by particular interest groups, they should similarly address themselves to the other needs of the world of work, the needs as workers and trade unions perceive them to be.

Academic programmes oriented towards labour research, teaching and consultation in liaison with trade union bodies are either insignificant or non-existent in many countries. No doubt, partly to blame for this is that trade unions generally keep a safe distance away from academia. They may be put off by the sophisticated poses and discourse. Or they may downplay the sheer irrelevance of academic endeavors which may appear very much aloof from the real world. They may also fail to see how supposedly value-free and scientific pursuits can ever be harnessed to provide the more explicitly political and ideological grounding required by trade unions for their members. However, while most professorial staff may prefer not to concern itself with low-status, politically compromising (and low paid) union business, other academics may be waiting in the wings for overtures of research support, educational courses and consultancy projects forthcoming from labour organizations. If anything, such a linkage would help stave off the development of an "ivory tower" and "armchair" orientation into which even action-oriented academics may fall into.

## Conclusion

Participative Education ought to be a means which leads people to acquire the orientations and tools required to live autonomously, to develop themselves within the environment within which they need to survive, and eventually to influence and master that same environment. In short, to usurp consumer status in all its forms. The task now at hand is to elbow out enough curriculum space, resources and interest (and this must be forthcoming also from trade unions and worker organizations) for such a form of educational activity.

Human evolution is altered by man-made tools whose use then creates a technical-social way of life. Machine technology has already infused contemporary society with scientific discipline, routinised and fragmented work organization, a proper "logic of industrialism". In this process of change, "natural" selection becomes dominated by cultural criteria and favours those able to adapt best to the tool-using way of life. Tools, initially external, effect their users and become first internalised aspects of behaviour and, next, priceless mechanisms for social survival.

The lesson is simple: What has applied for machine technology in the industrial age is being now taken up by information technology in the

post-industrial era. A vigorous and correct labour education policy, which recognises its political character in the context of the upcoming Information Age, may be the determining factor, tipping the scales in favour of a metamorphosis rather than an extinction of active and relevant trade unionism.

Correspondence: Godfrey Baldacchino, Research Officer, Workers' Participation Development Centre, University of Malta, Msida, Malta.

## Notes

1. See for example Bell (1973), Galbraith (1971), Kahn (1967) and Toffler (1981).
2. The argument of a new international division of labour is discussed by Bush (1987) and Southall (1988).
3. This article acknowledges the theoretical contribution of the Frankfurt School of radical sociologists who place their focus of social analysis on elements of the superstructure (art, education, language, information, ideology...) as the moulders, reproducers and legitimators of social order and inequality.
4. These titles, and others, are not, as some would imagine, drawn exclusively from such sources as *Fortune* or the *Harvard Business Review*. Radical social scientists share in the disillusionment.
5. See Dahrendorf (1959) and Offe (1985) for arguments contending the disorganisation of contemporary capitalism and the triumph of economic liberalism.
6. The classic text here is Taylor (1911).
7. Originally inspired by Elton Mayo, this school of thought has today many exponents of repute including Argyris (1964), Likert (1961) and McGregor (1960). An excellent summary is found in "The New Industrial Relations", *Business Week*, Special Report, 11th May 1981.
8. As poignantly argued by Burawoy (1979).
9. Such a critique of economic democracy is suggested by King & Van der Vall (1978, Chapter 1).
10. See, for example, Gill (1985).
11. On professionalisation see Rus (1984). Such new professionals are likely to shun general trade unionism and opt for establishing separate unions or staff associations whose interests may be contradictory to rank-and-file unionism.
12. See Bluestone & Harrison (1982) on deindustrialisation in the USA and the UK respectively.
13. See Goldthorpe *et al.* (1969) and Lockwood (1966).
14. The phrase is adapted from C. Wright Mills' "sociological imagination". See Mills (1959).
15. See Cauter (1988, *passim*).
16. See Lovett (1988, *passim*).
17. See Cox (1977).
18. See, for example, Girvin (1988) and Green (1987).
19. See Capelli (1985) and Rainnie (1985).
20. Witness, for example, the EUREKA, ESPRIT, COMETT and ERASMUS projects funded by the European Community.
21. See Richardson & Henning (1984).
22. See Freire (1972).
23. Different authors expound different arguments for justifying labour empowerment as argued in this section. An assorted selection includes Baldacchino (1985); Haubert (1986);

Kessler-Harris & Silverman (1979); Kester & Schiphorst (1983); Levin (1980); Rizzo (1985).  
 24. See Blum (1987, p.10).  
 25. See, for example, Friedman & Friedman (1980) and the rediscovered Hayek (1944).  
 26. See De Sola Pool (1983) and Schiller (1981).

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