

## THE FOSATU EDUCATION WORKSHOP AND WORKER EDUCATION

The SALB interviewed Alec Erwin, National Education Officer of FOSATU, 25.6.84.

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SALB: What is the Education Workshop about?

Alec: The idea of the "Education Workshop" emerged two years ago when we found that we were running a number of national courses at the same time - bringing a lot of people together. Then, last year this coincided with a new direction we were taking which involved a greater cultural dimension to our educational programme. So we experimented by combining courses, lectures and cultural events. This year we have slightly modified the programme: there will be national courses running over the two week period (7-20 July). Then on the Saturday, the 7th, there will be a meeting internal to FOSATU to discuss major policy issues which we feel should be looked at. At this there will also be lectures given by workers from different areas and regions within FOSATU. Then on the 14th, the main event will be "Open Day" which will be really a festival of events: plays, choirs, dance groups, story-telling, children's events and videos. As much as possible, workers from FOSATU are involved as creators and performers in this event. We brought in some musical groups who we feel give a worker view of the world and have some relationship to the working class. Overall, the Education Workshop is an event designed to look at the world through worker eyes. It will also be a family event with activities for children as well.

SALB: How did FOSATU's educational policy develop and what are the priorities?

Alec: I would say the major priority in FOSATU's education programme has always been to establish worker leadership as such. The basic leadership we

are talking about are shop-stewards and organisers. We want to equip these people with the sort of skills that would make them effective worker leaders within their union and within the wider society. Both in the short and long-term we are giving people skills to deal with grievances, negotiations, to deal that is with the internal workings of their trade union. At the same time we are conducting political education so they can develop a perspective on events around them from a working class position in society. We also see these people as spreading their knowledge through our factory-based organisational structures.

The bulk of FOSATU's educational work has taken place within its regions and within affiliated unions. From 1981 onwards we began building up national courses. Our thinking here has been that it was important to bring together leadership from different areas so they get a national perspective of their organisations and to build national linkages. The first course, which still runs, the "Labour Studies Course" has proved very successful. Around that we build other courses at a national level dealing with basic organiser training, political issues, international trade union issues and labour law. The thinking, the cosmic thinking behind it, is to give people a sense of belonging to a national worker organisation. I would say, that the cultural dimension has come into it because in FOSATU's eyes, education is class-based: it is designed to reinforce a sense of working class identity, to reinforce working class confidence and counter the kind of anti-worker propaganda that prevails in general education and the media.

SALB: Trade union federations in other countries can undertake education related to specific organisational goals, knowing that the society provides for a more or less competent general educational curriculum. Here, given the discriminatory educational system, does this force trade unions to

undertake wider educational programmes?

Alec: What we found is that to carry out the goals and objectives I have outlined a few minutes ago, we actually have to provide wide-ranging education anyway. For example when I mentioned political education, a lot of it has to be history, a lot of it has to be geography, a lot of it economics. It is the kind of subject-matter that another social system would have given people in schools, whereas here, they either didn't get it or got it in such a distorted way that it is totally unsuitable for the kind of worker leadership we need in our organisation. Certainly since I have been a full-time educational officer I have become fully preoccupied with the difficulties and challenges of educating worker leadership where you first have to break through all the bad habits and bad teaching methods inculcated by our educational system, where any critical faculty is stamped out, where learning is a matter of repetition or rote, and where the quality of teaching is poor. Workers in fact learn to separate entirely what they were taught at school and what was in front of their eyes. Their school experience is something separate and largely disregarded. To create that link-up again, to be able to integrate education and your real experience into one whole is a great challenge. The major method we use in FOSATU, we don't know whether it's a perfect one, but we know it is the most successful for us, is an interactive one: it involves discussion, asking, talking and working in group-type situations. This is what we loosely refer to as a seminar.

I think that education should be linked to the actual activities that worker organisations are carrying out. We tie our educational programmes to the concrete struggles our membership is involved with. For example, in the "national courses" we try and deal with actual issues that have arisen out of such concrete struggles of our membership. We feel that this kind of an educational approach is the

best way of doing things. We are less enthusiastic about courses conducted outside our actual working environment under the auspices of a service organisation. Our view is that there is a great danger of the unions' being swamped by a whole host of educational activities where the union has no real projects of integrating such education into their day-to-day organisation. A related danger is that particular individuals who participate in outside course-work develop skills that immediately distance them from organisational priorities.

Another area of such specialist courses involves basic health and safety. We believe that we must be careful: such issues have to be dealt with as an organisational problem. FOSATU has already had the experience of embarking in 1981 prematurely on a health and safety campaign when our unions were not ready to tackle these issues on an organisational basis. The example of such service courses are endless: one gets them from specialised accountancy training to literacy. Our approach is to rely less on outside "experts" and attempt to take up issues on an organisational basis, and use only such outside services when the organisation needs them over specific issues and here there is no doubt that well organised groups are very useful.

SALB: In terms of the overall educational policy of FOSATU what would the criteria of success be?

Alec: To measure success or failure in the task we set ourselves will prove very difficult. If people who participate in courses begin to play an effective role in the factory, in their union and in society than this would be a measure of success. But also the question of whether these leaders in their own right become teachers for workers at a general level would be another criterion.

SALB: What educational provision is there for the general membership?

-Interview-

Alec: Apart from the development of worker leadership, we have always been aware of the necessity for a general education process for members and even outside of that, for non-members. This we see as the task of the shop-stewards themselves. At every meeting, big or small, shop stewards should take initiatives to make it into a broader educational experience for the general membership. We then see our publications fulfilling this role too: booklets, books written by workers, arrangements like the joint Ravan Press labour book. In this we see FOSATU WORKER NEWS playing an absolutely crucial function: as far as possible it should provide more than news; it should include an educational dimension as well - for example, the series on the history of the working class. The newspaper is distributed widely to about 60000 workers throughout the organised factories of FOSATU. Finally we see plays and other cultural activities both nationally and regionally as a further dimension of this educational process.

SALB: What is FOSATU's approach to the educational priorities of the new trade union federation?

Alec: FOSATU has always seen education's role to bring people together, to mobilise them. So we will strongly favour some co-ordinated education programme to take place within the new federation. We also believe that the best educators are the people within the organisation themselves. This doesn't mean, as I mentioned, that we don't draw on "outsiders" but we draw on them for particular needs and requirements. We would also try and put across a view that we hold strongly: we are not in favour of joint management-labour education programmes. Management can do whatever education they want, but there should be independent educational activity within the trade unions. We find that people are in broad agreement that education should be given considerable priority in any future federation.