Teachers and Trade Unions

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Are teachers workers? And can they be organised in unions? With the recent signs of political radicalisation amongst black teachers, these have become important questions for the labour movement. This article seeks to stimulate some debate on these issues, and to shed some light on them through a brief exploration of the history of African teachers' organisations in this country.

The question of whether teachers are workers in the same sense as industrial workers is a difficult one. (1) On the one hand, they are reliant on wages for their subsistence and some would argue that therefore they are simply part of the working class. On the other hand, they have far more control over their work than do industrial or ordinary clerical workers, enjoy generally better wages and conditions, and are generally seen as professionals with some social status. On this basis, some contend that teachers should be seen as middle class or "petty bourgeois". Neither of these approaches seem totally satisfactory to me. I would suggest that the teachers are best understood as occupying a position in society which is between that of the working class and that of the petty bourgeoisie. Workers are defined by their dependency on wage labour and their lack of control over the conditions in which they work. (2) The petty bourgeoisie on the other hand, are defined by their own means of production - thus they do not need to work for a wage, and can control the circumstances in which they work. The position of teachers is such that like the small property owners they have a significant degree of control over their own work, and because they do not work for capitalist employers are not directly subordinated to the needs of capital in the way that workers in capitalist enterprises are. Thus they should be seen as occupying a contradictory class position, in which they stand between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie, and are subject to the political pressure of both groups.

What kind of organisation teachers develop therefore depends on whether, in a particular situation, the interests they share with workers come to the fore, or their aspirations to be part of the middle class predominate. Where teachers see that linking up with

popular and workers' movements can be a successful strategy for improving their economic position and addressing their grievances, that can lead to the development of a militant teachers trade unionism. On the other hand, where the pull of middle class aspirations is strong, the result is likely to be the strategy of "professional" organisation. (3) Here teachers will put forward claims to better conditions based on the argument that they ought to be rewarded for their special knowledge and qualifications. They will ignore political and social issues, and stress their claims to professional status: they emphasise what differentiates themselves from other workers. But, I would argue, professionalism is a doomed strategy. Gradually, teachers are losing control of their work as they are subject to tighter and tighter bureaucratic regulation, and are also losing some of the status they once enjoyed. The current political crisis, and the failure of exisiting "professional" teachers organisations to serve the needs of their members, is creating a major opportunity today for the emergence of a new form of militant teacher organisation.

A history of African teachers organisations

The history of African teachers organisations in South Africa is one of conflict between "militant" and "professional" perspectives. (4) In the 1940s and 1950s the more radical types of organisation predominated: with their defeat a conservative professionalism established an iron grip on teachers. It is only now that that grip is beginning to be broken. Although African teachers associations were founded in all four provinces during the early part of this century, until the Second World War they were not particularly significant. They sent delegations to government and arranged for legal representation of their members interests, but without very notable results.

This situation changed dramatically during the 1940s. Teachers had been subject to severe wage cuts during the depression of the 1930s, and when these were followed by the high inflation rates of the 1940s, a powerful sense of economic grievance developed. In 1941, the Transvaal African Teachers Association (TATA), launched a very active propaganda campaign, led by a committee that included significant figures such as David Bopape and AP Mda. The campaign culminated on May 6, 1944, when a mass demonstration of teachers, parents, and school children in support of the teachers wage demands was held in central Johannesburg. The march, which drew 12,000 people, swept aside police attempts to obstruct its

way, and culminated in a mass meeting addressed by Dr Xuma, President General of the ANC. However a combination of partial concessions by government on the wage issue, and a failure of TATA's leadership to follow through the campaign led to a rapid collapse of the new militancy.

But the rise of urban working class struggles began during the decade, and the new African nationalist political activism reflected in the rise of ANC Youth League (ANCYL), began to have an even more fundamental effect in changing teacher politics. During this period numbers of young teachers came into the profession who had been influenced by the ANCYL or the Unity Movement, and who sought to change the forms of teacher organisation.

In the Transvaal this was reflected in 1949, when the TATA leadership was captured by a group of urban radicals. The change became even more apparent in 1951, when a group of young Orlando teachers, including the future author Zeke Mphahlele, and the future PAC leader Zeph Mothopeng took over the leadership. When, during that year, the Eiselen Commission report, which laid down the blueprint for "Bantu Education" was published, the TATA leaders perceived its political implications and launched an energetic campaign of meetings across the province to denounce Eiselen's recommendations. In 1952, Mphahlele, Mothopeng and a third TATA leader, Mathlame, were sacked from their jobs at Orlando High School - a clear case of victimisation. This resulted in a well organised school boycott movement at Orlando High, strongly supported by parents and students and including the establishment of an "alternative" school. TATA mobilised broad support from teachers for the three. But eventually police action and exhaustion defeated the boycott, and in 1953 TATA dropped its young leaders.

In the Cape, the new radicalism was reflected in the 1948 decision of the Cape African Teachers Association (CATA), to affiliate to the All African Convention, a Unity Movement front. CATA members became particularly active in the rural Transkei, and conducted propaganda campaigns amongst the local peasantry on the effects of "Bantu Education", "Bantu Authorities" and "Land Rehabilitation". When the implementation of Bantu Education began in 1955, CATA participated actively in attempts to prevent the establishment of planned school boards and committees, helping to violently disrupt attempts to set them up in Cape Town, and in the Eastern Cape. While CATA's effectiveness was certainly limited by sectarian hostility between the Unity Movement and the ANC (CATA refusing for

example to support the ANC's 1955 school boycott campaign), CATA did at one stage organise half the African teachers in the Cape, and its activities represent a high point in teacher militancy.

Even in Natal, where teachers were generally quiescent, in the late '50s the Natal African Teachers Association (NATU) showed its hostility to Bantu Education, and began to express African nationalist sentiment.

"Radicals" versus "Professionals"

Thus during the '40s and '50s militant forms of teacher organisation, having some affinities with trade unionism, tended to be dominant. But at the same time there were groups of teachers who did not hold with such an orientation. These were people who felt that militant tactics and political radicalism imperilled teachers self interest. Consequently, during the 1950s they established conservative breakaways from the existing activist organisations. In the Transvaal, the more conservative, rural teachers split from TATA in 1950, creating the Transvaal African Teachers Union (TATU). With the defeat of the Mphahlele/Mothopeng leadership in TATA, some of the militants in TATA began arguing that a priority ought to be bringing TATA and TATU together, for the sake of black unity. The result of this however, was that a conservative leadership took control of TATA, and rejected any participation in political action. In 1958 TATA and TATU united in the Transvaal United African Teachers Association (TUATA).

In the Cape a similar process developed. Following splits from CATA in 1951 and 1952 the Cape African Teachers Association (CATU) was founded in 1953. Led by a Cape Town headmaster, ID Mkhize, CATU attacked CATA's political orientation, and advocated professional attitudes. It quickly received the blessing of the educational authorities. Then in the late '50s, under the pressure of systematic sackings of CATA activists by the "Native Affairs" Department, and damaged by a profound political split in the Unity Movement (in 1958-9) CATA collapsed. Thus by the end of the 1950s, organised teacher radical activism had been defeated. The way was now clear for professional types of organisation to dominate the field.

But political changes were required to allow bodies like CATU and TUATA to grow. During the '50s, teachers had suffered under the burden of the implementation of Bantu Education, which entailed double-session teaching, stagnant salaries, and loss of jobs. At

the same time they were living through enormous popular and workers' struggles, and were thus under great pressure to identify with worker aspirations. So it is not surprising that during this period, the more conservative organisations had little appeal.

During the '60s, however, things changed drastically. The state's smashing of the African nationalist and worker movements meant that there was little prospect of structural political change, and little popular pressure on teachers. In these circumstances, the aspirations of teachers toward a petty-bourgeois status began to resurface. Organisations which offered a "practical" relationship with the authorities, through which some concrete concessions could be gained, had a strong appeal. Thus the period from the mid-'60s to the mid-'70s saw a rapid growth of the existing teacher organisations. In the '50s the various provincial teacher organisations had been to some extent united in a federal council; but this unity had been disrupted by the factional conflicts of the time. By the '60s, however, CATU, TUATA, NATU and the OFS teachers body were united in an effective national body, ATASA (African Teachers Association of South Africa). The ATASA groups grew rapidly - TUATA for example from about 5,000 in 1963 to about 15,000 in 1974. They took the view that teachers unions had no business involving themselves in politics: RL Peteni, the President of CATU told its 1968 Conference: "The movement from one part of the country to another, from one form of administration to another - these are not the real ills that beset us." (5)

The ATASA unions sought to advance their members interests by polite lobbying of the Department of Bantu Education. Any criticisms that were voiced of Bantu Education were made on "professional" or "educational" grounds, not political ones. The benefits of membership of the ATASA unions were dubious. TUATA proved unable to take action to defend members who were dismissed. The unions developed a collaboration with Atlantic and Continental Assurance, who took the opportunity to sell their policies to union members by fair means or foul. A situation developed where the leadership cliques in the ATASA unions carried out a form of control by patronage over their members, using their influence on behalf of those who proved co-operative. There was virtually no attempt to mobilise the membership around issues of common concern. Rather the leadership concentrated on diverting members energies into social activities. The most important of these were the choir competitions run by the teachers organisations, which absorbed a tremendous amount of energy and resources.

1976-1980s: Radicalisation

In the 1970s, the ATASA establishment began to come under new pressures. It was criticised by the Black Consciousness Movement, and had trouble in dealing with the growing number of politicised young teachers. The massive upsurge of labour and youth action challenged the kind of self-seeking, apolitical outlook which ATASA represented. (In fact in 1976 the ATASA offices were destroyed during the Soweto upheavals). This challenge culminated in 1977 when a movement of teachers developed in Soweto. There was a mass resignation by teachers in protest against Bantu Education and the state's response to the 1976 crisis. The Soweto Teachers Action Committee (STAC) was founded in order to coordinate this movement.

In the light of such developments it might have been expected that ATASA would collapse. But far from this happening, it managed to retain its dominance over the teaching profession, and continued to put forward its line of professional lobbying of the authorities. How is this to be explained? Firstly, no effective organisational challenge developed until recently. STAC channelled its energies into providing tutoring services for students, and thus missed the chance to lead a movement to replace ATASA. Secondly, teachers during the '70s became a key group for recruitment by industry into clerical and junior managerial positions: many teachers therefore focussed their hopes on personal career advancement rather than better organisation. Thirdly, the ATASA leadership cliques found ways of retaining control of their organisations. They had been given quasi-official status by the Department, and could use this to pressure recalcitrant teachers into paying subscriptions. Gerrymandering tactics, such as holding meetings in out-of-the-way towns were used to ensure that no untoward decisions were made. The patronage system continued with leaders using it especially to control less well paid female members. Thus ATASA survived into the '80s.

Recent events, however, suggest that there is now a serious chance of displacing the professional type organisations from their dominant position. There is a new teacher militancy abroad. This can be explained by a combination of factors. Firstly, the current mass struggles have renewed working class pressure on teachers for an alliance. Secondly the collapse of the educational system confronts teachers with basic questions about their political role, and brings them into conflict with the state bureaucracy. Thirdly, the combination of the economic crisis and the fact that there is

a far larger pool of people with post-school qualifications has reduced the opportunities for teachers to adopt a personal strategy of advancement through getting a better paid career. Finally, current restructuring of the education system subjects teacher to ever tighter control over their work by officialdom.

These factors have resulted in a political crisis within the teaching profession. A number of signs are apparent of political questioning on the part of teachers. The ATASA unions, especially TUATA, have tried to meet the crisis by adopting far more forceful positions, and participating to some extent in community organisations. MH Dlamlenze, TUATA and ATASA's most important leader, has become a central figure on the Soweto Crisis Committee. The ATASA unions have, furthermore, withdrawn from Department of Education and Training structures early this year and supported the May 1 stay-away. But this shift has not been accompanied by any shift toward more participatory and democratic forms of organisation within these bodies. It seems reasonable, therefore, to doubt ATASA's ability to transform itself from within. More promising in terms of the possibility of an effective national mass union movement, are three developments outside the ATASA group. In 1980, the National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA) was founded, as a non-racial, campaigning education organisation. It subsequently became closely allied with the UDF. While until recently it remained a numerically small organisation, in 1985 it showed strong signs of growth, and could be an important nucleus for teacher organisation. Out of the education crisis in the Cape Town area, there arose during 1985, the Western Cape Teachers Union (WECTU), a mass, militant teachers organisation in the Western Cape. Finally there have been a number of smaller initiatives, at a local level by teachers seeking to found unions.

Conclusions

This historical experience points to a number of important conclusions. While teachers occupy a slightly different social position than that of workers as such, they can respond positively to militant forms of union organisation in the right circumstances. In fact it is only by going in that direction that teachers can gain effective representation of their interests. The aspiration to "professional" status is a blind alley which cuts off teachers from other sectors of the community and does not attain even its own narrow aims. The labour movement has an interest in encouraging teachers to view themselves as wage earners, having a common

interest with the working class. The more that the ideas and forms of organisation of the working class influence teachers, the better will they be able to participate in the struggle for social transformation. The logic of this position then is that teachers should see their organisations as trade unions (not professional bodies), and should seek affiliation to labour movement bodies. It is relevant to note that in Latin America a number of teachers bodies belong to union federations. The task of the present is to unite South African teachers in a single democratic and non-racial trade union, firmly linked to the labour movement.

Footnotes:

1. My treatment of this issue is derived from that of Erik Olin Wright, "Intellectuals and the class structure of capitalist society", in P Walker (ed), Between labour and capital, Harvester Press, Sussex, 1979, pp191-121, and Wright "Class boundaries in advanced capitalist societies", New Left Review 98, July-August 1976, pp3-41.
2. I am thus rejecting the position put forward by some theorists that only direct producers of surplus value embodied in material goods are part of the working class. (This view is argued by N Poulantas, "On social classes", New Left Review 78, March-April 1973, pp27-54.) The work of a service worker produces surplus value where it is sold to increase the capital of his or her employer; and in any case the distinction productive labour/unproductive labour is not one between social classes.
3. On "professionalism" see K Dougherty, "Professionalism as ideology", Socialist Review 49, vol 1, January-February 1980, pp160-175.
4. I haven't attempted to deal with the whole gamut of teachers organisations, as the ethnic segmentation of unions until the present makes this a horrendously complex task. Suffice it to say that the history of "Coloured" and "Indian" teachers organisations also shows a similar conflict of professional and militant union perspectives.
5. AAS 212 File 4.5 CATU Presidential Address 1968