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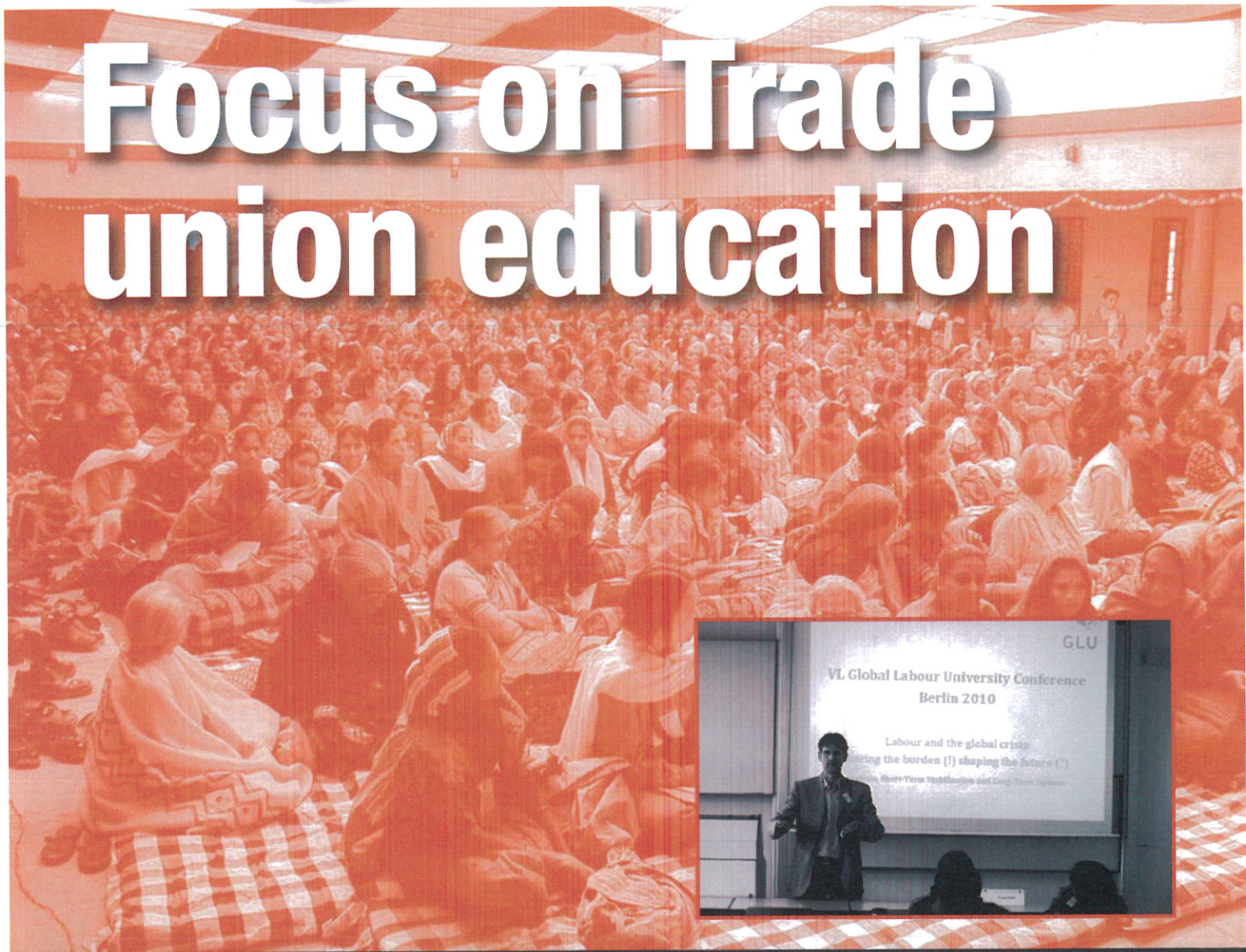
union rights

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Focus on Trade union education



**Diversity and convergence between education models,
the economic crisis, and the defence of workers' rights**

A one-world research and study opportunity

Understanding the driving forces of global capitalism, appreciating cultural diversity, and recognising the different priorities and interests of workers in different countries are necessary pre-conditions for policy alternatives based on unity, cross border solidarity, and cooperation



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Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, we have seen two waves of liberation. First, the people in Eastern Europe liberated themselves from oppressive, party-controlled command economies; then, transnational companies – making full use of the opportunities of global capital mobility – liberated themselves from the control of democratically elected national governments. While the former gave millions of workers the opportunity to organise themselves in independent trade unions for the first time, the latter has proved to be a deadly threat to trade union power.

The days of national corporatism and institutional power – when labour, capital, and government were sitting at the tripartite table, hammering out national solutions – are melting like snow under the sun. Nowadays, capitalists prefer to meet among themselves in Davos, lobbying governments unilaterally to raise shareholder value. Negotiations have been replaced by blackmail for ever-more favourable investment conditions and governments no longer seek to balance the interests of capital and labour, but rather execute the imperatives of the global market.

Meeting the global challenge

Against this backdrop, trade unions need to radically upscale and internationalise their work, a critical component of which must include scaling up their research and education activities. Granted, given resource limitations, diverging views among national trade unions, the constant need for immediate action, the total overstretch of the very few international trade union officials, the lack of technical expertise, the language barriers and cultural differences, declining and aging membership, and a growing stratification of the working class; this is easier said than done. Nonetheless, meeting the evolving global challenge will require additional tools and initiatives moving beyond departmental internationalism and traditional forms of workers' education.

Partnering with Universities

As transnational companies, complex global trade and capital markets, and over-arching macroeconomic, fiscal and monetary policies increasingly determine labour market conditions, so the need increases for technical and theoretical skills to internationalise trade union policies at local, national and global level. This is the reason that trade unions have increasingly recruited academically trained staff, and this is the reason why the Global Labour University (GLU) developed a global, university-based qualification programme for trade unionists. Effective responses to the challenge of globalisation cannot be found in an isolated national context. A national strategy tends to push trade unions into a national competitiveness

pact in order to outcompete and gain export markets. Never has there been a greater need to build international institutions and demand rules that will limit the global market power of the few and benefit the social well-being of the many.

Understanding the driving forces of global capitalism, appreciating cultural diversity, and recognising the different legitimate priorities and interests of workers in different countries are necessary pre-conditions for policy alternatives based on unity, cross-border solidarity, and cooperation. The GLU was set up as a network of universities, international and national trade unions, civil society organisations and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to contribute to this daunting task. To this end, it offers postgraduate programmes and research opportunities for trade unionists and labour activists, combining academic studies with practical work through close cooperation with trade unions and field based internships.

With campuses in Brazil, India, South Africa, and Germany, the GLU provides a "one world" research and learning environment for labour to research, analyse, and identify effective policy measures to meet the labour challenges of today. It is not only a unique global network, but has a strong focus on the global south, replacing the traditional north-south knowledge transfer with transversal global cooperation. At each campus, trade unionists from different parts of the world study together, and the faculty exchange programme between the universities ensures a diversity of progressive academic views. The curriculum was jointly developed by universities, trade unions, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, and the ILO, and was designed to focus on a labour perspective of key global labour issues such as trade, global governance, macroeconomics, wage policies, the informal economy, development economics, international labour standards, and international trade union policies.

Long-term needs and short-term pressure

In their daily work, most trade unionists are constantly caught up with fire-fighting, confronted with having to find instant responses to burning issues. Trade unions often need people now, and training – in their view – must be brief, targeted, and with immediate benefits for strengthening the organisation and representing members. This short-termism is understandable, but it is impossible to close the skills' gap without investing beyond short-term needs. Today, lacking internal capacity, trade unions often feel they must buy external expertise. However, while studies and research can always be commissioned, it is of long-term, strategic importance that trade unionists themselves build on their "on the ground" exper-

tise with advanced, theoretical and analytical capacities. There is an unfortunate discrepancy between knowledge on the shelf and its application in practice: much as an outside academic consultant would never be able to understand the realities of labour organising without ever having been a unionist, it is equally unlikely for a trade unionist to confront the global challenges of today without acquiring an adequate level of theoretical and analytical skills. A trade union with both types of expertise, however, will be best equipped to apply the knowledge to the realities of today.

Discourse versus discipline

Qualification programmes must not only cover new topical areas, they also have to deal with the fact that the composition, values, and culture of working people has changed dramatically in recent decades. Even at the national level, a homogeneous working-class identity has largely disappeared. Unity today must therefore be built on conviction and choice, as workplace experience, milieu and lifestyle by themselves no longer suffice to lead people towards a unified movement.

For trade union education, this means less “preaching of the truth” and more emphasis on deliberative processes, discussing alternative views, and strengthening analytical capacity. Now more than ever, people join the movement based on informed, individual choices. People do not want to be talked into joining a trade union; they need to be persuaded with convincing arguments. Anger and moral outrage – indispensable for successful social movements – must nevertheless be complemented by arguments that explain the deficiencies of the current regime and offer credible alternatives. The jury is still open as to whether a strong movement can be built on such a rational approach, but given the predominant individualistic lifestyle of the majority of employees, it is difficult to imagine that it can be built and held together otherwise.

Finding, and being, the right partner

Building an alliance between the ILO, formal institutions of higher education, and the labour movement was a strategic choice to bring the complementary strength of the different institutions together. The ILO has led the discussion on social justice in the UN System, and its international labour standards are, despite their well-known deficiencies the most advanced instruments to protect workers' rights internationally. Universities are often the laboratories of new thinking and can provide the distant, critical view on policies that those actually involved in the daily struggles seldom have. Finally, the power of argument is often limited without the argument of power. Trade unions know better, and experience more than anyone, the constraints, resistance and threats against those who try to put ideas and visions into practice.

The GLU combines access to rigorous academic education and research with the need for collective identity and joint deliberation processes that are essential for any lively social movement. It offers the opportunity for individual advancement as well as collective study in an international community with shared values. Each course brings together trade unionists from around the world with very different trade union traditions and political views. Moreover, trade unionists enter the GLU not merely as individual trade unionists, but as part of a broader labour movement. In gaining access to this new experience of

trade union internationalism while going to university, trade unionists maintain a strong motivation to stay engaged with labour and to return to the labour movement after finishing the course.

Beyond opening new avenues into universities for labour, the GLU also seeks to motivate universities to do research on issues relevant for labour. Building strong links with universities stimulates academic work in support of a progressive agenda. However, partnerships always imply sharing control, while offering the opportunity to gain wider influence. It is impossible to unilaterally impose a decision on a network where everybody has an exit option. The curriculum cannot be imposed on universities and it is impossible to demand that they teach the “political line.” Universities need to focus on issues relevant to labour to ensure continuous trade unions engagement. Shared control creates an openness to new ideas and debate that is essential to motivate a new generation to take interest in labour as a force of change. Top-down institutions may be functional, but they are seldom creative. The best safeguard against overwhelming control is not a liberal conviction at the top, but an institutional set-up that replaces the power of vertical control by the necessity of cooperation. This is sometimes tiring, time-consuming and cumbersome, but so is democracy.

Expectations and reality

Ten years after starting the GLU programme, it is a good time to ask whether it met expectations. More than 200 trade unionists received Master's degrees and 80 percent are active in the labour movement or labour research. GLU alumni today work for Global Union Federations or political foundations, are general secretaries of trade unions, work as full-time officials on economics, education, gender or international affairs in their trade union, as advisors to works councils, as freelance as labour consultants and journalists, or continued on with their PhD on comparing trade union revitalisation strategies. A lively alumni network has been established, through which alumni not only stay in contact, but also cooperate in comparative research projects. A weekly online Global Labour Column created a forum for debate on global labour issues. The annual GLU research conferences (the next will be in Campinas, Brazil 26-28 September 2012) bring together a global network of labour researchers and provide a platform for exchange and cooperation. The GLU is a partner of the International Center for Development and Decent Work (ICDD), and has initiated comparative research work on labour issues such as minimum wages, trade union trade policies, international framework agreements, and labour orientated macroeconomic policies. In sum, the GLU network has generated trained trade unionists and stimulated a wide range of research and critical debate on global labour issues. Generous financial support from a number of governments, foundations, trade unions and the ILO was important, but more important was the great commitment and enthusiasm of universities to engage in this unique cooperation project with organised labour. But it would all amount to nothing without the right students.

The GLU wants to attract highly motivated trade unionists and provide a strategic opportunity for the trade union movement to build systematic capacity. While we have succeeded in the former, and year after year we are impressed by the highly motivated and committed groups of students, trade unions as organisations only

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<http://www.global-labour-university.org>

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11 made use of the GLU in exceptional cases for strategic capacity building or recruitment. Seeing as most of the GLU alumni are nevertheless working for labour, the latter remains desirable, but it seems not to be as necessary for success, as we had thought in the beginning.

What next?

Looking ahead ten years, we hope to maintain the enthusiasm (and the funding) within this relatively young network. We want to develop more web-based tools for teaching, debate, networking and outreach; invite more universities, thinktanks and trade unions to participate in network events such as the GLU conferences, comparative research projects and further curriculum development and, in all modesty, we would like to be part of a broader movement that works on policy alternatives to a globalisation regime that failed so utterly.