

DEBATE

“For the Workers” – A Tribute to Prof. Edward Webster

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As a distinguished research professor, Edward (Eddie) Webster made a huge contribution to the field of labour sociology in South Africa and globally. Eddie Webster’s engagement as a political sociologist went beyond the careful analysis of political processes and changes in society, he also took a principled standpoint for social justice and in support of the democratic labour movement all throughout his career. With this commitment he inspired generations of students. It was motivated by his own biography and the eventful history of his country South Africa. This slightly revised personal tribute to Eddie Webster was held by the author at the 20th year anniversary event of the Global Labour University on 30th April in Berlin.

Eddie Webster’s unexpected passing on 5th March 2024 came as a big shock to everyone who had the chance to engage and work with him. Immediately, many friends, comrades and colleagues shared their stories with Eddie, and demonstrated the deep impact he had made on other people’s lives during his 81 years, of which he acted more than 45 years as a professor at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. It was also a very moving testimony when the Uber Eats riders Eddie had recently helped to organise paid their last respects to him at his funeral in Johannesburg, leading the funeral procession on their motorbikes.

Eddie Webster liked to break a topic down into three points, so I’ll share three lessons I learned from Eddie.

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The first lesson is: Engage and look out for the puzzles

Eddie was an incredible source of knowledge about global labour studies and the labour movement in South Africa that he was part of. Eddie always remained so excited about discussing the changing world of work and engaging on workers' power. In each discussion he would find something interesting, challenging or surprising. I remember him at meetings excitedly saying, this is a puzzle! And puzzles needed further exploration. Or he used to ask after meetings, 'what did surprise you?'

This was just the way Eddie was as a person and how he engaged. He was genuinely interested in his students and other people's thoughts and interacted on an equal footing. This also reflects one of Eddie's many strengths as an intellectual that he preferred to work collaboratively, and that he enjoyed the engagement and open discussions. "I believe that all knowledge is collectively produced", he wrote in the preface of his last book (Webster 2023: xiii). For this purpose, he always carried his notebook with him, in which he made notes during conversations.

The serious commitment is also what made Eddie a remarkable teacher. Eddie would take off his shoes in the classroom to explain to students the character of value chains. Also, he had that strong confidence in everyone he worked with that we could do better than we often thought ourselves. As Andries Bezuidenhout wrote, Eddie "build people, and this is maybe the most radical thing anyone can invest their time in."²

The second lesson: Stay true to your beliefs and get involved (or as Eddie might have said, get your hands dirty)

Eddie's curiosity, deep commitment and inviting way of engaging encouraged and inspired generations of students and trade unionists in South Africa and around the world not only to study labour but to also become involved as activists.

Eddie lived the concept of an 'engaged researcher' – someone who remained dedicated to support workers' struggles and to challenge oppression and exploitation.

2 Andries Bezuidenhout, Obituary: Eddie Webster's influence over generations of students extended to the country and beyond its borders, Mail & Guardian, 6th March, <https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/opinion/2024-03-06-obituary-eddie-websters-influence-over-generations-of-students-extended-to-the-country-and-beyond-its-borders/>

He supported the emergent black trade unions in South Africa, which brought him into conflict with the apartheid regime.³ Eddie and four members of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) were arrested by the Security Branch and put on trial in 1976. Eddie said: “1976 was a tough year. I was on bail after I had been arrested for calling for the release of Nelson Mandela. I had to report to the police station twice a week.”⁴ Although acquitted later, the personal risk remained. Some of Eddie’s friends and intellectuals like Rick Turner were assassinated by the apartheid regime.

The challenge for an engaged researcher is to choose sides by supporting democratic movements while maintaining independence. Eddie wrote: “I prefer the stance of critical engagement. Squaring the circle is never easy, as it involves a difficult combination of commitment to the goals of these movements while being faithful to evidence, data and your own judgment and conscience.” (Webster 2022: 53)

The idea of research that has a practical impact and benefits the labour movement is also reflected in the many institutions Eddie was instrumental in establishing, like the South African Labour Bulletin and the Global Labour Journal, the Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP) at Wits University and the Global Labour University.

This was also a way of bringing the experiences of the South back into the global debates on the sociology of labour – be it the experiences and struggles of workers in the informal economy or of trade unions challenging authoritarian regimes and changing society, which was captured by Eddie in the concept of ‘social movement unionism’.

In South Africa, the struggles of the black trade union movement simultaneously aimed at improving the wages and working conditions while engaging in a successful struggle for democracy against the apartheid regime. Eddie coined the term social movement unionism to describe a union orientation that sees “labour as a social and political force, not simply as a commodity to be bargained over” (Webster 1988: 195).

3 Following the tradition of critical scholars in South Africa, the term black is used to refer to all racially oppressed people during Apartheid, who were until 1979 not allowed to organise in trade unions.

4 Alexia Webster, Tracing lives: a visual response to coronavirus, The Guardian, 26th June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jun/26/tracing-lives-visual-response-to-coronavirus>

The third lesson is: Workers do have power!

Eddie was an optimist in that he believed in the ability of workers to act collectively. A key event for the labour movement in South Africa, and for Eddie as a younger researcher, was the Durban strikes 1973, when more than 100,000 black workers took part in the spontaneous strikes that started in Durban and spread around the country. The mass strikes took the apartheid state by surprise and triggered a new phase of worker militancy and trade union organising. It demonstrated that workers could wield significant power even under the most difficult conditions of racial oppression.

The question of how to build workers' power in a changing world of work is a recurring theme in many of Eddie's publications, which include several books and more than hundred articles. As Eddie examined in his book "Cast in a Racial Mould" (1985), the changing labour process in the foundries in apartheid South Africa laid the foundation for the rise of the democratic trade union movement during the 1970s. In his award-winning book "Grounding Globalisation" (2008), Eddie and his co-authors Rob Lambert and Andries Bezuidenhout analysed how workers in the white goods industries in South Korea, Australia and South Africa responded to the insecurities of globalisation.

In his last year published book "Recasting Workers Power: Work and Inequality in the Shadow of the Digital Age" (2023), Eddie and his team, including myself, reflected on the impact of digital capitalism on workplace restructuring and how workers in South Africa, Uganda and Kenya are experimenting with new forms of organisation and resistance in response. The book seeks to address the question whether the role of labour could be revived in post-colonial Africa in the context of dramatic changes in the world of work and a representational gap of traditional unions, by looking at different sectors including boda boda and food delivery riders in the platform economy. It concludes: "What emerges from our case studies is that we need to move away from the standard narrative of the end of labour. Our research highlights that precarious workers do have agency and power. New and hybrid forms of organisation are forming on the margins of the global economy. The question raised by these findings is whether these embryonic forms of worker organisation – what we are calling the Southern trend – are sustainable and could become the foundations for a new cycle of worker solidarity and union growth." (Webster 2023: 172)

The recent book also draws on a global project that we were part of: The Trade Unions in Transformation Project, initiated by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation with a focus on power resources (Schmalz et al. 2018). The 26 case studies around the world provided examples of trade unions' ability to make strategic choices and to revitalise.

On the side of the workers

Eddie liked to listen to Pete Seeger's song "Which side are you on?" For him that was never a question.

A story that Eddie told me illustrates this well: We were sitting at the office at the house of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in Braamfontein in Johannesburg and Eddie pointed to a building nearby, which is today the City Council. In 1977 Eddie participated in the hearing of the Wiehahn commission as an academic expert.⁵ The Commission investigated whether, following the strikes in Durban, the scope of legality should be extended by allowing the recognition of black trade unions. At the hearing, Eddie was asked the question whether he was against capitalism. During Apartheid and in light of the Suppression of Communism Act this was a dangerous question, which was intended to expose him as a communist. Eddie answered: "I am for the workers."

"For the workers" – that's what Eddie unwaveringly stood for in his many contributions to building the labour movement.

Generations of students and labour activists have a lot to thank Eddie Webster for, and it is now on us to follow in his footsteps. Amandla!

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5 See for a reflection on South Africa's contested industrial relations and the Wiehahn recommendations Webster 2013.