

The Roles of Global Workers' Education in the Transnational Movement

Jaeung Kim¹

¹The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract

This study analyzes the role of workers' education at the global level in building a transnational labor movement through the case of the Global Labour University.

Keywords: Workers' Education, Globalization, Transnational Movement, Praxis

As multinational corporations have relocated their production lines to countries where the labor is cheaper, known as the "race to the bottom", labor organizations and unions worldwide have fought to create transnational countervailing power (Luce, 2014). Workers' education is one of the most important strategies for the labor movement to respond to the globalization of capital. At the organizational, national, and transnational levels, various forms of workers' education can be designed to increase labor leaders' capacities to deal with global labor issues, teach workers about globalization, and shape working-class consciousness globally. Scholarly works on workers' education are increasingly focusing on how labor organizations educate labor activists and workers about globalization. Generally, two types of research on workers' education about globalization have been conducted in the fields of educational research and labor studies. Firstly, some research compares education programs in different countries and examines how labor unions educate members about globalization (Hannah & Fischer, 1998; Salt et al., 2000). The second type of studies explores how labor unions can intervene in educational policies and respond to globalization (Holford, 2009; Payne, 2001). These two types of studies shed light on how labor unions can play an important role in workers' education in the face of globalization. However, their analysis is limited to the national level. Labor movements have attempted to cultivate labor leaders and activists at the global level through the International Labour Organization (ILO), International Trade Union Confederation (ICTU), and cooperation with higher education institutions. Nonetheless, it is difficult to find studies on workers' education at the global level. Mathur (1961) studied workers' education programs at the global level by analyzing the Asian Trade Union College, but this study was conducted in the 1950s which is different from today with respect to the educational goals, resources, contents, methods, and pedagogies parallel to the change of labor movement. With the awareness of this gap in the literature, this research will study specific roles of workers' education at the global level, distinguished from those of the national level.

Method and Case

My research uses the case study method to examine a master's degree program affiliated with Global Labour University (GLU) that is designed to provide workers' education for labor activists over the world. The GLU is a network of trade unions, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and the International Labour Organization, and the degree programs are currently run by universities in five countries: Brazil, Germany, India, South Africa, and the United States. My research case examines a master's program offered in the United States. This one-year program founded in 2014 has recruited labor activists from around the world and provided them with courses on labor relations related to globalization. Its educational activities encompass eight courses, internships, conferences, and experiences of social activism. Data collection is currently being carried out through interviews with students, alumni, and professors in the program and through the acquisition of various educational materials. For this paper, I analyzed both a sampling of the program's educational materials and five transcripts of interviews with students and alumni.

Roles of Workers' Education at the Global Level

Workers' education at the global level has three roles for a transnational labor movement. Firstly, the education program is a knowledge hub where students can construct, share, and disseminate knowledge on global labor issues. In the GLU program, most students and alumni are international students who were dedicated to the labor movement. The students stated that it is hard to find systematic labor studies programs to provide theoretical knowledge in their countries due to the lack of infrastructure in trade unions, authoritarian politics, or the commercialization of higher education. For the students from less privileged countries, the education program at the global level is a significant opportunity to understand how the global capitalist system functions and impacts their labor conditions. The knowledge is not unilaterally transmitted from lectures to students but shared and developed through students' discussions among them.

Secondly, the Global Labor University workers' education program builds transnational networks among labor activists from different areas and countries. In various educational activities, the students interact emotionally and intellectually and form solidarity from a global perspective. Their connection is not limited to the coursework of one year. As professors invite alumni to classes through video conferences, students and alumni can communicate and share their experiences, which become a transnational network of labor activists to counteract globalized strategies of capital. Even after graduation, the labor activists interact with each other, exchange information, and introduce this network to other colleagues for expanding labor activism to the global level.

Lastly, the Global Labor University workers' education program contributes to labor activists' praxis at the global level. The labor activists had experiences of actions at the organizational, local, and national levels, but they can reflect on their previous activism from a global perspective in education. Then, they see the world from a global perspective through education and it makes their activism different from that of the past. This praxis at the global level is not constructed only by education about how the global capitalist system works but formed through their rearranging activism on the global dimension.

Workers' education at the global level functions as a knowledge hub, builds transnational networks, and forms activists' global praxis in the transnational movement. Rather than the unitary labor movement and massive mobilization based on solid organization, the GLU program has sowed seeds across the world by linking transnational and local activism. By analyzing more documents and interviews with professors and alumni, I will further investigate the interaction between educators and students and the specific linkage of education and alumni's activism after graduation for a deeper understanding of the roles of workers' education at the global level.

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