


# Workers' education under conditions of precariousness: Re-imagining workers' education

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## Abstract

The increase in precarious forms of work has been extensively investigated by scholars. However, the implications of precarity for workers' education have not been adequately explored. There is a great need for an approach to workers' education that will advance the social and economic interests of precarious workers and other marginalised communities who are becoming a major segment of the workforce. Based on in-depth interviews, this article identifies education regarding wages, women and work, working conditions, labour laws and practical skills like public speaking, reading and writing as core elements of a curriculum for the education of precarious workers. Given that precarious workers tend not to be organised in formal structures, non-governmental organisations and trade unions will have to reach out to them to make sure that they provide alternative structures able to craft educational programmes that can build the confidence of precarious workers so that they can challenge their precariousness.

**JEL Codes:** I29, J46, J51, J61, J83

## Keywords

Non-governmental organisations, precarious workers, trade unions, workers' education

## Introduction

During the last two decades, there has been a proliferation of the literature on precarious work and labour flexibility. The move away from standard employment with permanent positions accompanied by negotiated wages, pension funds and other benefits is described

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by Standing (2011) as the rise of the ‘precariat’ (p. 8). According to this author, the ‘precariat’ are those who lack labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security and representation security. Campbell and Price (2016) argue the need to distinguish between precarious work forms and precarious workers who individually may or may not suffer the long-term insecurity of belonging to the emerging ‘precariat’ class.

While some writers are critical of Standing’s (2011) identification of all forms of insecurity with the ‘precariat’ as a distinct class, there is consensus that the stratum of workers who occupy insecure jobs, earn low wages, work under precarious conditions and receive no benefits such as pension funds is becoming globally significant, both in social and numerical terms. Precarious work is accompanied by the feminisation of work and the feminisation of migration – phenomena characterised by the increase in precarious women workers and women migrant workers (Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, 2019; Munck, 2013; Standing, 2011). Wright (2013) and Grimshaw et al. (2016: 1) have analysed union responses to various forms of precarity and safety net gaps. The present article takes up one valuable aspect of Standing’s work – its focus on precarious education, and on the fracturing of access to established occupations. For example, Standing (2011) notes how young graduates work in menial jobs, with little prospect of career advancement – a concern exemplified in recent accounts of the exploitation of young jobless graduates and student interns in China’s Internet and electronics industry (Xia, 2018, 2019) Nevertheless, Standing’s (2011) observations focus on education and training in the context of the workplace and career advancement; and he has less to say about the education of those outside the formal labour market. One question that has not been posed in South Africa and that has global relevance is, what are the educational needs of the full range of precarious workers, from a workers’ education perspective?

In this article, I define workers’ education as ‘education that seeks to build the confidence of workers so that they can strengthen their social and economic position in society’. In other words, workers’ education is not just about advancing the interests of workers as a group; its function is also to make sure that all those who are not owners of corporations and who are part of the marginalised (precarious or vulnerable) sections of the workforce and society are empowered to improve their social and economic positions. For the purposes of this article, workers’ education can be seen as education that is intended to liberate workers and marginalised communities from social and economic oppression and exploitation. Unlike vocational education and training, which is intended to make workers improve on production in the workplace, workers’ education is based on the concept of the workplace as a site of struggle between employers and employees over production processes and the value produced in the labour. Workers learn about oppression and power relations in the labour process. As Fuller and Unwin (2002) elaborate,

We also need multiple definitions of what people learn at and through work. For example, people learn to perform competently but also to ‘beat the system’; they learn about personal relationships and about power; and they learn about their own potential and the extent to which the workplace can fulfil or restrict their aspirations. (pp. 95–96)

According to Vally and Treat (2013), ‘Worker education [has been] simultaneously a consequence, a platform, a site, and a weapon of struggle for the oppressed people of South Africa generally and the black working class in particular’ (p. 449). Vally and Treat (2013) question whether workers’ education, which includes structured interventions and the programmes of trade unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the context of the restructuring of work and the rise of precarious forms of work, has been sufficiently reconceptualised to respond to precarious work and the conditions of migrant workers.

The argument of the article is that workers’ education has indeed not been reconceptualised to respond to recent developments in the economy and the generalised restructuring and fragmentation of the work force, which has resulted in the rise of precarious work. Advocates of workers’ education have not taken into account the fact that precarious workers tend not to belong to trade unions nor to work regular hours. They have no structured way of engaging adequately in workers’ education. Unlike organised workers, precarious workers seldom belong to organisations that liaise with management to facilitate leave for workers nor do they have leaders who negotiate for them to attend training sessions during working hours.

Miller (2007) argues that organising precarious workers must be carried out in such a way that they can reconstruct their own organisational forms to fight for their rights and interests. Thus the question explored in what follows is how workers’ education can be reconceived and restructured in the face of precarity. This is a relatively new area of research, both in South Africa and globally. The article aims to report on a study undertaken to gain knowledge and insights on the challenges faced by precarious workers insofar as workers’ education is concerned; also to identify themes and issues that should be covered in a curriculum for the education of precarious workers, as well as to examine possible platforms for the delivery of workers’ education. The study also involved scrutiny of the question of the language used in workers’ education programmes and a discussion of methods for facilitating education for precarious workers. It examines a possible role for NGOs in the provisioning of workers’ education, since trade unions are failing to provide educational support for precarious workers.

The article begins with a background section, containing a contextualised account of the dimensions of the rise of precarious work forms and numbers of precarious and vulnerable workers in South Africa. This account is followed by an overview of approaches to worker education, beginning with the very different context of a European country, in this case Switzerland, before describing the current state of play in South Africa. It then outlines the methodology used in collecting the empirical data from which proposals are drawn. The final section outlines a new approach to the education of marginalised workers in a climate of precarity.

## **Context: The rise of precarious forms of work and the case of South Africa**

### *A global perspective: Vulnerable and precarious work*

In discussing the access of precarious workers to education and training, conceptual clarity is important. The International Labour Organisation’s (ILO, 2018) report on employment trends, published in 2018 states,

In 2017, around 42 per cent of workers (or 1.4 billion) worldwide are estimated to be in vulnerable forms of employment, while this share is expected to remain particularly high in developing and emerging countries, at above 76 per cent and 46 per cent, respectively. Worryingly, the current projection suggests that the trend is [not] set to reverse, with the number of people in vulnerable employment projected to increase by 17 million per year in 2018 and 2019. (p. 1)

These statistics understate the overall level of precarious employment, because the ILO defines vulnerable workers as ‘the sum of own-account workers and contributing family workers’. In 2010, the then head of the ILO Employment Trends Unit noted that the 2008 financial crisis had reversed the previous decade’s decline in the global employment vulnerability rate, and that vulnerable workers are

. . . less likely to have formal work arrangements, and are therefore more likely to lack decent working conditions, adequate social security and ‘voice’ through effective representation by trade unions and similar organizations. Vulnerable employment is often characterized by inadequate earnings, low productivity and difficult conditions of work that undermine workers’ fundamental rights. (Johnson, cited in ILO, 2010)

The ILO recognises, however, that the definition of ‘employees’ also includes additional large numbers whose working conditions are insecure – for instance, they may be underemployed or have casual contracts and little protection against dismissal (ILOSTAT, n.d.). Lewchuk (2017) provides an Employment Precarity Index, covering both vulnerable and precarious workers, who may be subject to one or more of the following constraints: instability of employment, tenure, career, hours, or work schedules; cash-in-hand payment without access to benefits or leave, and lack of voice, for example in raising safety concerns. The focus of this article is on the education of workers in South Africa who are insecurely attached to formal sector jobs.

### *A possible model: An approach to vulnerable workers’ education Switzerland*

There is consensus among many scholars that, unlike other types of education, because workers’ education seeks to preserve and advance the interests of workers and of the marginalised, it has to be democratic and participatory (Dolgon and Roth, 2016; Jansson, 2016; Rose and Jeris, 2011). In the context of Switzerland, workers’ education and organising have been used to defend and advance the interests not only of Swiss workers but also those of vulnerable migrant workers working in that country. According to Pedrina (2015), ‘. . . Switzerland’s migrant density is the second highest in Europe: 24% of a total population of eight million . . . More than a third of hours worked in the country are performed by migrant workers’ (p. 129).

In the 1990s, Unia, the biggest union in Switzerland, initiated campaigns to establish migrant workers’ rights, better wages, documentation and improved living conditions. To survive, Unia realised it had to educate and organise migrant workers, a strong force in the country, if it was to remain relevant. Education of migrant workers took the form of workshops, meetings, fliers and protests. The union hired Polish educators and organisers who

spoke the language of many migrant workers (Pedrina, 2015). The rest of this article explores how this model can be adopted and extended in South Africa.

### *The case of South Africa*

In South Africa, precarious work is currently becoming a dominant mode of work in both the public and the private sectors, suggesting that it is the possible future of all work. The decline of the labour movement and the intensification of exploitation by employers have made matters worse for precarious workers and their families, as these workers earn low wages and have no employment security (Barchiesi, 2011).

It was the discovery of gold in 1886 that accelerated South African capitalism, which came to be characterised by racial segregation, with black workers working under precarious conditions and living under slave-like conditions in overcrowded dormitories near the mines, and later, the factories. In the 1970s, black workers began to organise seriously, building a strong labour movement which challenged apartheid and racism in the workplace and places of residence (Barchiesi, 2011). With the exception of retail, farming, seasonal work and domestic work, in the 1970s and 1980s, trade unions managed to entrench a labour regime based on permanent work, with better wages and some benefits. However, economic restructuring, which took the form of privatisation of state assets and services, deregulation of the economy and trade liberalisation, dismantled many of these gains. Precarious work, which was regarded as atypical in the 1980s, became typical in the 1990s and 2000s (Kenny, 2018).

In comparison with other African countries, South Africa has a relatively large formal economy, which relies heavily on precarious forms of work. The country's informal economy is relatively small in comparison with that of other developing countries (Fourie, 2018), yet it has grown in post-apartheid South Africa and caters for one out of six workers, who fall into the ILO's vulnerable worker category. Jobs in the informal sector also tend to be precarious, and there is poor representation of informal sector workers. This study, however, focuses on precarious workers employed in the formal economy (public and private sectors) because of its continued dominance in the South African context.

In a study that observed trends in the formal South African labour market, Mabasa (2017) argues,

The end result [of economic restructuring] has been the creation of a two-tiered labour force in contemporary South Africa comprised of the following: (a) small group of workers who are in standard employment; and (b) a large number of vulnerable labourers who are in precarious atypical employment with minimal rights. (p. 5)

Bhorat and Khan (2018) conclude that non-unionised precarious workers in the private sector 'have lost the most' from the restructuring of the formal labour market (p. 30).

There have been isolated attempts to organise precarious workers, led by precarious workers at South African universities, retail workers, postal service workers, health-care workers and workers in manufacturing industries. Supported by NGOs, academics, student activists and some small unions, these initiatives are nascent but signal that precarious workers are beginning, in small ways, to challenge precariousness. In 2014,

precarious workers employed by the state-owned postal service company registered a trade union, the Democratic Postal Workers Union (Depacu), with the Department of Labour, after the failure of a COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions)-affiliated union to organise them (Dickinson, 2017).

### *Traditions of workers' education in South Africa*

Writing about workers' education in South Africa, Cooper (2005) develops an explicitly political definition, relating directly to the struggle of workers and communities against racially based capitalism, which sought to divide people who lived in South Africa along 'colour' lines. The labour movement, which re-emerged strongly in the early 1970s, had as its core industrial workers employed in the mines and factories. It used workers' education as an organising principle, confronting both racism and capitalism, in workplace and in places of residence. Cooper (2005) indicates that the principles which underpinned workers' education were

. . . that workers have knowledge of value that emerges out of their collective experience and is rooted in organisation and action; that workers' education is partisan and political and should adopt a working-class view of the world; that workers should control their own education programmes; and that the purpose of such education is to empower the oppressed and transform society. (p. 5)

In the 1970s and 1980s, workers in South Africa were involved in a number of educational actions such as strikes, meetings, planned and unplanned cultural activities, workshops, debates, discussions in trains and buses and study groups. All these activities strengthened the labour movement and inspired trade unions and labour activists in other countries (Sitas, 1986). The strategy that was employed was based on popular education, which centred around the lived experiences of workers and encouraged them speak out, naming their problems with a view to developing organisational and collective solutions. A dialogue thus developed between workers and educators (Cooper, 2005; Vally and Treat, 2013).

What is not often explicitly stated in the literature on workers' education in South Africa, however, is that the vibrant workers' education movement of the 1970s and the 1980s was appropriate for a permanent workforce with relatively stable employment, which had a national infrastructure in the form of trade unions and NGOs that supported the labour movement (Cooper, 2007; Hamilton, 2014). In the 1980s, trade unions signed recognition agreements with employers, which, among other things, provided for paid training leave for shop stewards, enabling union leaders to attend workshops and other training events organised or sanctioned by the trade unions. In the 1980s and 1990s, many unions had their own education departments with budgets, making it possible for unions to train their own shop stewards, organisers and staff members on educational topics that went beyond immediate union issues such as wages and working conditions (Vally and Treat, 2013).

The dawn of democracy in 1994 was accompanied by union education, which leaned towards individual skills development, university and other forms of education and facilitated upward social mobility among shop stewards, union leaders and union employees.

In addition, many skilled trade unionists left the union movement and became human resource managers, government officials and managers of state and private companies (Vally and Treat, 2013). With the exception of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the biggest union in South Africa, trade unions experienced a drastic decline in their education programmes. NUMSA's policy is to spend 10% of union income on union education. The union has a functional education unit at its head office, which produces education-related publications. NUMSA also employs a head of education and nine regional educators. The union has trained approximately 100 member educators (administrators, organisers and shop stewards) to assist with the shop steward training programme. Besides political education, NUMSA's education programme has four main areas of concern: induction, the Labour Relations Act, the provision of advice and skills training and industrial agreements (Hlatshwayo, 2013).

Elsewhere, however, worker education has declined. Many NGOs that provided workers' education in the 1990s collapsed, contributing to a broader decline in the provisioning of workers' education. Funding of workers' education tended to be sourced from Europe and other developed countries, but in the 1990s it dried up, as South Africa was no longer seen as a country that needed much support or solidarity. Government funding for NGOs tended to be very low and irregular and therefore unreliable (Social Law Project, 2013).

With few exceptions (Francisco, 2016; Hamilton, 2017; Patel, 2017), scholars who have written on workers' education in South Africa and in other parts of the world have not reflected on the role of workers' education under changing conditions of employment (Cooper, 2007; Dolgon and Roth, 2016; Jansson, 2016). Literature on precarious workers' education is limited, but there are new contributions that are beginning to show that educators are using study circles, online sessions and workshops to educate workers dialogically about their rights (Patel, 2017). Activists and precarious workers have used strikes, meetings, songs and other popular forms of communication to learn collectively in struggles that aim to push back precariousness and outsourcing in Gauteng – a province that is regarded as the main economic hub in South Africa (Hamilton, 2017). The purpose of the present study is to outline research exploring options for extending these initiatives through forms of worker education that will reach and organise precarious workers.

## **Research methodology**

A qualitative approach was suitable for this research, which was intended to explore views and opinions on what should constitute workers' education for precarious workers, and platforms and spaces for facilitating structured workers' education. In-depth interviews that were guided by five questions were the main source of data collected. Interviewees were asked about the current state of workers' education, the needs of precarious workers from a workers' education perspective, suggested content for workers' education for precarious workers, possible platforms of delivering workers' education, and language to be used in such education (Bailey, 2008; Yeo et al., 2014).

A purposive sampling technique was used to select interviewees who had an in-depth understanding of the meaning of precarious work and the challenges facing precarious



workers (Yeo et al., 2014). In total, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2018. The sample consisted of five community health-care workers, five EPWP (Expanded Public Works Programme) workers, five university cleaners, four security guards and three migrant workers employed in the retail sector. Women were predominant in the sample, constituting 15 of these 22 interviewees; this was appropriate as women tend to be the majority in the category of precarious workers, both globally and nationally (ILO, 2018). Additional interviews were conducted with two activists and educators employed by advice offices, who work with precarious workers, and a community activist involved in community and worker activism. A coordinator in the advice office was another of the informants, as was an educator who was employed by the International Federation of Workers' Education Association (IFWEA), an international workers' education organisation with headquarters in Cape Town.

As well as conducting the interviews, the author observed two workshops organised by NGOs and academics in campaigns to support the precarious workers. A workshop on challenging outsourcing was organised at the Workers Museum in Johannesburg on 07 and 08 November 2016 by the Persistent Solidarity Forum (PSF, 2016), comprising outsourced cleaning service workers and academics at the PSF. It was attended by 30 precarious workers employed by a university in Johannesburg. Another workshop for precarious workers was convened by a research centre at a university in central Johannesburg from 25 to 26 February 2017. The purpose was to discuss and debate struggles by precarious workers, with a view to building solidarity among precarious workers at a national level. It was attended by 57 precarious workers from universities, the manufacturing sector, public health, transport, retail and hospitality. The workshop was driven largely by individual and sectoral inputs from precarious workers. At both workshops, participants agreed to be observed by the author, after the purpose of the observations was explained to them. Observations of both workshops entailed taking note on the issues discussed by the participants, the types of contributions made by participants and the quality of contributions made by participants (Corbin and Strauss, 2014).

Bishop's (2017) advice on translating and transcribing is that high-quality audio recording by professionals who understand the research context may unearth new knowledge and information. In this case, however, interviews were largely conducted in African languages, because precarious workers preferred to express themselves in their first language. To deal with the challenge that this presented, professionals who were proficient in English and other South African languages were hired to transcribe and translate the interviews. To minimise loss of meaning and the essence of what was being shared, translators were informed about the purpose of the research and the need to make sure that the translations were as accurate as possible. The equipment used to audio-record the interviews was of high quality, which also facilitated the translation and transcribing process.

Written data in the form of transcribed interviews, field notes based on observations and documents based on workshops on precarious work and Internet sources were analysed by the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of issues and complexities pertaining to workers' education under conditions of precarious work, and the educational needs of precarious workers. Field notes based on the workshops held in



Johannesburg in November 2016 and February 2017 captured impressions of educational methodologies used to educate precarious workers.

Thematic analysis based on steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) was then followed, enabling systematic coding and the development of themes. The study was exploratory, with an emphasis on deliberating with precarious workers and those who support them, on possible form and content of precarious workers' education. In the qualitative analysis (Gibbs, 2018) for this research, coding entailed reading all 26 interview transcripts with a view to isolating words and phrases that related to the main research question, namely 'workers' education in the context of precarious work'.

Precarious workers and activists who worked with precarious workers were asked to state issues that should form part of a curriculum for workers' education, platforms that could be used to educate precarious workers, and challenges faced by precarious workers in accessing workers' education. Codes like 'rights', 'wages', 'reading and literacy', 'radio' and 'workshops' were highlighted because they related to the research question which entailed understanding workers' education under conditions of precarious work. Subsequently, the words and phrases were grouped into the themes upon which this research article is based.

All the interviewees who participated in the study gave their informed consent to the use of the data they provided. Because of the fear of possible victimisation by employers (Flory and Emanuel, 2004), the anonymity of the interviewees was guaranteed and maintained, and pseudonyms were used for the workers when reporting the findings of the study. However, the activists and educators insisted on being referred to by their actual names, as their work is public in nature.

What follows is a presentation of the findings, based on a thematic analysis of the data. The first part examines issues that participants in the study felt should be included in an education curriculum for precarious workers; it is followed by a discussion of the platforms to be used for facilitating workers education.

## **Issues that should constitute a workers' education curriculum**

Merrill and Schurman (2016) contend that a curriculum for workers' education should be based on the needs and the concerns of the workers, as they deal with recurrent problems in the workplace. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their problems and on other concerns they wanted workers' education to address. It appeared from the interviews that there is a widespread violation of workers' rights; to a considerable extent, this is because precarious workers are not aware of their rights, or because they are scared to challenge what they intuitively feel are violations of those rights. The South African Constitution has been hailed as one of the most progressive in the world, but the rights of precarious workers and migrant workers from other African countries continue to be violated, largely because the organisations that are supposed to defend and advance workers' rights and issues have themselves been weakened (Buhlungu, 2010; Casual Workers Advice Office (CWAO), 2017).

Besides educating workers about labour laws, rights pertaining to maternity leave and the right to form and belong to a trade union or other workers' organisation, some workers

also wanted to understand the role of the state institutions through which these rights could be accessed. Za, a 25-year-old precarious worker who cleans and maintains a school in a working-class area in the south of Johannesburg, said, 'We also want to know more about the role of the CCMA [Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration] in handling disputes between employees and employers'.

However, an interviewee who had interacted with state institutions empowered by the law to resolve labour disputes reported that the institutions were toothless and lacked capacity to resolve disputes within reasonable timeframes. Thaba, a 55-year-old male cleaner at a university in Johannesburg, recalled the difficulties he had encountered with state institutions when it came to raising labour law violations: 'We wrote letters to the Department of Labour, complaining about . . . issues. . . . We also went to the Department of Labour. . . . The Department of Labour did nothing about that' (Thaba, interview, Johannesburg, 27 January 2017). It is evident that knowing about workers' rights should be accompanied by campaigns to ensure that the state institutions that enforce labour laws are also held accountable and strengthened. CWAO, an NGO that educates and advises vulnerable workers on their rights, called for the hiring of additional labour inspectors to investigate compliances with labour laws and identify instances of the violation of workers' rights. In addition, CWAO (2017) proposed that workers and their organisations should be involved in the inspection process carried out by the Department of Labour, emphasising the need for precarious workers to understand the labour laws.

The decline of industries in many countries, the massive retrenchments of men who were breadwinners in the 1980s, and the widespread unemployment that is currently experienced have given rise to the increasing role of women as precarious workers in the private and the public sector. This trend highlights the need for workers' education that specifically addresses issues and problems that directly affect women (Vosko, 2000).

Matha is a female community health-care worker employed by an NGO. She delivers health-care services like caring for HIV-positive patients at public clinics and homes in Orange Farm, in the south of Johannesburg. Matha indicated that sexual violence against women, women's rights, sexual harassment in the workplace and health and safety issues for women in the workplace are significant topics for workers' education. Matha elaborated 'How do we access benefits like maternity leave?' (Matha, interview, Johannesburg, 10 October 2017). Ayanda Nabe is involved in organising and educating precarious workers and works for the Workers World Media Productions (WWMP), an organisation that uses the media to support struggles of workers in South Africa. Speaking about the nexus between precarious work, workers' education and women, she said, 'We try and make sure that gender issues become part of our educational and organising initiatives' (Nabe, interview, Cape Town, 28 September 2017).

In South Africa, some of the women employed in hospitality and catering sectors are women migrant workers from Zimbabwe whose human and workers' rights are violated without any form of protection, in spite of the protection granted by the South African Constitution and international bodies like the ILO (Hlatshwayo, 2017). Ndovu is a 22-year-old woman from Zimbabwe who worked in Johannesburg as a shop assistant. Ndovu worked 2 weeks at a time, doing 12-hour shifts without rest; this constituted a violation of her rights as a worker. Ndovu indicated that she would like to be educated

about her rights as a woman migrant worker: 'I would like to know more about my rights' (Ndovu, interview, Johannesburg, 22 January 2017).

Literacy is an issue that should also be part of a curriculum for precarious workers, according to Nto, a 35-year-old female community health worker based at a clinic in Soweto. She argued that precarious workers need to write their own stories and share their own interpretations of the laws and other socio-economic issues. Nto said, 'Maybe . . . writing their own stories . . . might also encourage and enforce the culture of reading among the workers. The challenge of reading – we don't read, we don't have time to read' (Nto, interview, Johannesburg, 24 October 2017).

Five interviewees (three health-care workers and two security guards) said that, besides reading and writing, workers' education needs to include practical skills such as computer literacy and public speaking. When Kidi, a Johannesburg community health-care worker, was asked to name other skills that workers need, she responded: 'Public speaking is an important skill, to know how to write and be knowledgeable in most of the things. . . . We also need to know how to use computers' (Kidi, interview, Johannesburg, 2 November 2017).

## **Platforms and spaces for workers' education**

Precarious workers who participated in this study were asked about platforms, organisations and spaces that could deliver workers' education to precarious workers. In response, Za pointed to a number of state and non-state actors: 'The Department of Labour, the CCMA, and non-profit organisations have to play a major role in educating us about our rights' (Za, interview, Johannesburg, 20 October 2017).

The CCMA and the Department of Labour's mandates include educating workers about their rights and about labour laws generally (Ramutloa, 2015). However, Ben Nkosi, a 47-year-old community activist, was concerned that the outreach programmes of government had not reached many precarious workers who desperately needed to know about their rights. Nkosi commented, 'There are institutions that were established by the government, like the Department of Labour; they must also do their work. The CCMA mustn't only wait for people to bring cases to it'.

The precarious workers who were interviewed for this research project saw workshops as one of the platforms that could be used to promote workers' education among precarious workers. Dima, a 37-year-old woman who cleans a primary school, commented on the significance of workshops:

I once attended a workers' rights workshop. It was organised by one of the activists. We were taught about our rights (...) I have learnt that I need to stand up for myself by knowing my rights as a worker. (Dima, interview, Johannesburg, 20 October 2017)

However, the difficulty with organising workshops for precarious workers is that, unlike trade unions, such workshops do not have negotiated organisational rights that enable workers or their representatives to participate in workshops. Another challenge is that precarious workers tend to lack access to organisational structures that can organise and finance educational activities like workshops. Perhaps NGOs that support the

organising and education of precarious workers have a role to play, even if they face funding problems of their own (Zuma, 2016).

CWAO's website is designed to act as an educational resource for workers, and for precarious workers in particular. Among many of its educational resources, it has materials that cover the Labour Relations Amendment Act of 2014, short films on the rights of precarious workers and contact details for all the CCMA offices in the country (CWAO, 2016). CWAO also has a *YouTube* channel that includes educational videos on workers' rights such as sick leave, maternity leave and family responsibility leave. A *YouTube* playlist featuring interviews of CWAO staff members, CWAO in television news channels and discussions of workers' rights is accessible on the Internet as part of the *YouTube* package (CWAO, 2015).

Social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp can act as educational tools for precarious workers. Precarious workers with low levels of formal education can benefit from illustrations and the use of African languages in conveying educational messages on workers' issues and rights. However, one of the biggest obstacles that stands in the way of social media and the use of *YouTube* videos is the cost of data. *Research ICT Africa* revealed in 2017 that, compared to the biggest economies of Africa, South Africa's data prices were the highest on the continent. Data would cost USD7.6 per gigabyte (GB) in South Africa, but USD4.9 in Kenya, which is the second-most expensive country in Africa. Egypt had the best access to data, charging only USD1.2 per GB (Staff Writer, 2017).

Radio and television were cited as other possible platforms for workers' education. WWMP produces a weekly radio programme on working-class communities and working people's issues and concerns. There is also a weekly labour show on Cape Town TV, and a national community newspaper called *Elitsha* ('something that is new'). In 2017 and 2018, WWMP organised a number of educational broadcasts on SAFM (a South African national radio station), which targeted the conditions of precarious workers and workers in general (Workers World Media Productions (WWMP), 2017, 2018). WWMP currently runs community outreach programmes called the Labour Advice Media and Education Centres (LAMECs) in Cape Town, Johannesburg and East London. In these, working-class languages like isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans (in the Western Cape) and Sesotho are used to educate precarious workers. Community radio stations play a major role in making sure that educational programmes reach precarious workers in their own languages (WWMP, 2015). The SAFM's podcasts on workers' education are also used as educational tools in these educational sessions.

A further obstacle to precarious workers' participation in educational events is their uncertain work schedule. An employer may summon a worker to come to the workplace at very short notice. Failure to respond when needed can be regarded as being 'unreliable'. In the context of very scarce jobs, precarious workers tend to respond by complying with such requirements. In addition, some precarious workers have more than one job to supplement their income, making it impossible to attend educational events. Nabe had this to say about time constraints faced by community health-care workers: 'Many of these carers would work for a public clinic during the day, and in the evening they work in an old-age home' (Nabe, interview, Cape Town, 28 September 2017, Johannesburg).

In response to the challenges outlined by the interviewees, Saliem Patel, who works as educator for IFWEA, suggested the use of information technologies and study circles: ‘. . . It’s something that the online education can assist with’ (Patel, interview, Cape Town, 29 November 2016). According to Patel, workers working for labour-brokers are deployed from one place to another. Since they are always moving around, it is difficult to pin down their workplace. According to Patel, promoting self-study among precarious workers and using new information technology may help to educate the ever-mobile workers, as they can organise their own education to suit their conditions (Patel, 2017). Patel’s proposal would require support by NGOs and trade unions, so that they can work with community centres and local activists to organise access to Internet and materials for study circles.

### **Precarious workers and the language question**

English is a common language that is not really mastered by all workers because of poor education dating back to apartheid, and because of the diversity of first languages spoken by precarious workers. The question is, what should the education language of precarious workers in the South African context be?

Za recognised that English is not the first language of precarious workers. To make sure that educational messages are conveyed, Za thought African languages ought to be part of educational events. Za also suggested that complex and difficult English words and concepts be explained in simple English without losing their essential nuances. This could be a challenge for facilitators of educational activities, and would definitely require linguistic dexterity: there should either be a workshop leader with mastery of several languages, or more than one facilitator should be employed. Za elaborated, ‘I think English is more suitable because it is the language that everybody understands . . . but then isiZulu and Sesotho will have to be included, especially when it comes to those *demanding words*’.

### **Workers’ education and precarious workers: Some challenges**

Especially in the 1970s and the 1980s, South Africa had a rich tradition of workers’ education, led by black trade unions, which had a significant impact on community organisations. One of the concerns raised by Ighsaan Schroeder, who currently leads the CWAO, was that workers’ education has declined dramatically since the 1990s, and conducting workers’ education among precarious workers is like starting from scratch. Schroeder said, ‘There’s a complete discontinuity between these new workers and the Labour movement. Therefore, the effect of that is these workers know nothing about their rights. There has been a complete break’ (Schroeder, interview, 16 December 2016, Johannesburg).

Perhaps Schroeder’s analysis was confirmed by a workshop organised by the PSC. The author’s observation was that, while the workshop attempted to apply participatory methods, precarious workers struggled to grasp complex legal questions presented by lawyers (Freire, 1970). In fact, workers preferred to focus on dealing with their

immediate problems, such as harassment by supervisors and their managers. Their levels of formal literacy were low, and they had no formal workshop or organisational and workers' education experience (author's fieldnotes, 2016).

However, observation of the national workshop held in Johannesburg in February 2017, referred to earlier, revealed that precarious workers who had participated in limited education activities organised by NGOs, students and academics seem to have developed the confidence to speak against precariousness and the determination to challenge it. Women precarious workers, who have worked closely with Khanya College and CWAO, were particularly confident and contributed a great deal to the debates and discussions, showing that precarious workers who have experienced workers' education and had some organisational experience are able to overcome their lack of confidence (Ryabchuk and Wilderman, 2017; Sibanda, 2017).

## Conclusion

The growth in of precarious work has led to more workers being vulnerable and unorganised (Webster et al., 2017). The increasing fragmentation of the workforce manifests itself in complex employment relations involving more than one employer, nomadic workers who have no permanent workplace, long, unpredictable working hours and workers holding down more than one job. Responding to the educational needs and demands of precarious workers therefore necessitates the restructuring of workers' education (Bezuidenhout and Tshoaedi, 2017). It cannot be 'business as usual' for educators, NGOs that deliver workers' education programmes, scholars working in the field of workers' education and those trade unions that are grappling with the challenges of precarious work.

Two of the indicators and sources of worker vulnerability and precarity are lack of access to union organisation and worker education. It is workers themselves who must define the structure of this access and the content of the learning. The findings of this study suggest that precarious workers want a curriculum of workers' education which will help improve their conditions as precarious workers, women and migrants. The specific issues they want workers' education to cover include workers' rights as protected by various labour laws, practical skills like reading and writing and the use of new technologies to share experiences and build solidarity among precarious workers. Applying methodologies that acknowledge that precarious workers are also sources of knowledge and respect their own lived experience of precariousness, NGOs and educators can use the issues mentioned in the findings to provide participatory educational programmes to precarious workers.

Those involved in research on workers' education should rethink workers' education, together with their understanding of precarity and vulnerability, in a manner that builds the collective and organisational strength of precarious workers, so they can begin to reverse the tide of precariousness. As shown by this study, trade unions like Unia, as well as NGOs and activists, have a major role to play in the planning and the delivery of structured programmes of workers' education for precarious workers, as the latter tend not to be organised, especially in the South African context.

The need to find ways reach out to precarious workers is pressing. Individually, they do not have organisational platforms to access structured workers' education, but this



study has illustrated the successful building and rebuilding of approaches. Flexible, structured programmes could include the provision of resources by NGOs, and the use of radio, social media and other communication networks, such as self-directed reading clubs, to make mass education accessible.

Examination of workers' education under conditions of precariousness is a new area of research in South Africa and in other countries that have strong unions. Further research is needed on the educational needs of precarious workers from a workers' education perspective, and the findings of the study can be compared with their results. Future research will enable practitioners of workers' education, trade unions, scholars, NGOs that support precarious workers and labour scholars to re-imagine workers' education in an age of labour insecurity, which is the real world for many workers, particularly women workers and migrant workers.

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