

## **Vuyisile Mini Winter Schools 2019**

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) in partnership with the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU) support worker education as part of its commitment to working class unions and other working-class movements. Since its inception in 2014, NALSU has played a pivotal role in worker education in the Eastern Cape. With a team of core staff, post-graduate students and academics drawn from a range of departments (Sociology, History, and Economics and Economic History) at Rhodes University, NALSU runs a large seminar programme (the Eastern Cape Worker Education Project), which draws in activists, unionists, students and academics from Makhanda, and is research-active, including policy issues. Currently, NALSU's Eastern Cape Worker Education Project has evolved from a broad commitment to worker education to an established winter school series -the Vuyisile Mini Winter Schools, named after Vuyisile Mini, a well-known Eastern Cape trade unionist who was particularly active in Port Elizabeth and who was executed in 1964 for his role in the anti-apartheid armed struggle. With funding from FES, each winter school congregates approximately 50 participants from a range of unions – mainly from East London, Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage – for four days of discussions and debates. The participants are fully-funded, and reside at Rhodes University residences for the duration. This year's (2019) Vuyisile Mini Winter School focused on understanding the structure of the South African state, party-state relations and working-class political agency. A direct consideration of particular state structure and its implication for societal transformation was important for a number of reasons. Primarily, the proliferation of low-wage employment and the persistence of mass unemployment, and a wave of industrial conflict including the deaths of striking miners at the hands of police in 2012, have inspired a description of South Africa's local government sphere as managing local dissent rather than representing the interests of the working class. Moreover, the dominant discourse of "state capture," the split in the COSATU unions over relations with political parties, and South Africa's ongoing development impasses all require a rethink of questions on the possibilities for the exercise of, and potential modalities of, working class political agency and how these questions interact with the debates about economic policy choices.

### **Most of the informal workers' income is nowhere near the tax threshold**

One of the interesting sessions at the 2019 Vuyisile Mini Winter School was one on "Engaging state power from the outside: Informal workers organising for social protection" by Laura Alfes. Laura highlighted that it is often argued that workers in the informal sector are "unorganisable" and that they resist paying tax. Laura refutes such a claim and indicates that most informal workers' income is nowhere near the tax threshold. Trade unionists often point to the difficulties of working in the informal economy according to established trade union practices (meeting attendance, membership fees). Informal workers on the other hand feel that trade unions do not make enough effort to allow informal workers direct representation in tripartite fora. Yet, there are several examples globally of informal workers building coalitions around social service provision. The HomeNet Thailand (HNT) is the case in point. The HNT is an organisation of

informal home-based workers who were involved in the push for the 2007 Universal Coverage (UC) Scheme which allows all Thai citizens free access to health services. The space for the inclusion of civil society in the reform process was provided by a 1997 Thai law which states that any piece of proposed legislation with 50,000 or more signatures supporting it must be debated in Parliament as a “people’s sector law.” This alliance of nine civil society groups, which became known as the Network of People Organisations, was originally made up of groups representing a wide range of interests: informal workers, women, the urban poor, agriculturalists, the elderly, children and youth, indigenous people, the disabled, and people living with HIV/ AIDS

### **Striking a delicate balance between flexibility and security – the role of the state**

There is a tension between one capitalist wanting to pay their workers as little as possible and expecting another capitalist to pay as much as possible. Capitalism itself does not have a way of resolving this contradiction even though neoliberal thinkers would want us to believe that it does. Even neoliberals do recognise that there is a role for the state and the state comes in terms of regulating employment relationships via labour legislation. Labour law is a primary mechanism that the state uses to find a balance between two pressures, i.e., between capitalist who want to pay individual workers as little as possible because wages are seen as a cost versus them wanting other capitalists to pay their workers as much as possible because they see wages as a source of income for them. The latter category of capitalists recognises the centrality of wages in buying goods and services. When they sell things, they want those things to be bought in the market. A key aspect of labour law is that labour law reflects a balance of force within society. The new labour legislation is such that if the employer does not want to negotiate there is nothing to force him to negotiate. The system of voluntarism in the labour legislation is designed to encourage people to negotiate but it is always the bosses who do not want to negotiate. So, the question is, how can this system of voluntarism help us to get to a proper balance between flexibility and security.

### **Informal workers organising for social protection**

Informal workers have highly insecure incomes, and at the same time have little or no access to the social protections – sick leave, unemployment insurance, medical insurance, maternity leave, child care services, occupational health services – which either help to protect against risk or to smooth incomes during times when income security is threatened. Informal workers are the “missing middle” in social protection. In South Africa, for example they cannot access social insurance schemes such as the UIF because they are not in a formal employment. At the same, as able-bodied adults of working age, they do not benefit *directly* from cash grants which are aimed at the vulnerable poor outside of the labour market such as the old age pension and the child support grant. As such, informal workers should be the primary candidates for organising.

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