

New partnerships – New interests: An ethnographic investigation some of the effects of employer involvement in trade union education

Dennis Beach,

Professor of Education, University College Borås, Sweden

Margata Carlén,

Senior Lecturer, University College Borås, Sweden

Abstract

The head gangman in the Swedish building trade is a worker elected organiser in a gang comprising between about 4 and 16 workers and an 'on-site' and trained representative of the trades union. In 2002 the employer association for the building industry in Sweden (BI) and the Swedish Building and Allied Trades Union (SBATU) signed a joint agreement regarding the training of union officers for this function. Officially the aim was to improve the quality of training by including input from the industrial organisation in respect of production planning and economics. As part of the agreement the regional offices of the union were to inform the local industrial organisation about course content and delivery and discuss with them the individual education plans for individual employees from local firms. A second part involved representatives from BI working inside union courses in the training of union functionaries. The present article concerns the second part of the agreement. One course at one regional union site is focused in particular. Ethnography was used. The ethnographic details of the course provide some suggestions regarding the questions of how and in whose or what interests the developments brought about through the new partnership in union education operate.

Introduction

Adult education in Sweden in the 20th century has been dominated by three sorts of provisions (Carlén, 1999), a humanist, a leisure/recreational and a qualificational/vocational geared towards perceived labour market needs, which is currently in ascendancy (also Beach & Carlson, 2004; Fejes, 2006; Köpsén, 2008). A fourth, political-ideological and classically social democratic perspective, with three distinct educational ideologies (Gustavsson, 1996), has also been present specifically in the workers movement and trade union educations. This fourth perspective has in part been concerned with providing ideological and technical skills and knowledge sufficient for union officers to represent workers in production related negotiations with employers. This educational concept is now being reconstructed through the involvement of employers in education design, delivery and evaluation. The present paper focuses on this involvement and considers in whose or what interests it seems to work. This is done in relation to one union education, that of the head-gangman, given in one regional division of the Swedish Building and Allied Trades Union

(SBATU). The article is part of a recently completed ethnographic research project sponsored by the Swedish Research Council Educational Science Committee.

Doing ethnography

Put in a very simple way, ethnographers produce written accounts of cultures or cultural processes from records of events witnessed at first hand when participating in the daily round of life in cultural settings (Sanjek, 1990; Beach, 1997, 2010; Dovemark, 2004; Atkinson, 1990). Ethnographers, or their informants, watch what happens, listen to what is said, ask questions and collect whatever data are available to throw light on the issues they are concerned with (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 2). They then analyse this data and classify and communicate their ideas in written form to readers (Gordon et al, 2003). But this is a deceptively complex process (Walford, 2008). It involves several dimensions of choice making, which then manifestly affect which analytic or theoretical perspectives are appropriate to analyse data from and why, what sites and settings can and should be chosen for the research process at different times, which informants should be spoken with, when and where, and how the outcomes of the research can be represented. This has also been expressed by Kuper (1989; 202). According to him what really happens in ethnography is that the researcher deploys:

various techniques of observation, and returns home with several packages of data. Each... has its own characteristics... The next step focuses the data. This may be done in various ways... around a cultural notion... an extraneous problem... a kind of activity... a set of such activities defined by a common input or output... or upon the constraints on individuals when pursuing particular goals. This list... is not exhaustive (and) is usually justified on 'theoretical grounds'... but the reason for the choice may be that this is what my professor is interested in, or this will shake the grant from the tree, or show people why they must revolt, etc... (But o)nce the focus has been selected, it imposes its own analytic imperatives. What the investigator does with it is largely determined by the content and nature of the data... and the model-building techniques... available for data of this kind.

Kuper's suggestions imply that there is no fully definitive account of what good ethnography is only some held-up ideas about what it requires (Walford, 2008; Beach, 2010). These include the notion that ethnography should be more than just descriptive and should try to include some kind of theoretical account of the field and field relations, that an ethnographer must study human activities and the way people interpret their realities in their

every-day context and must also identify and then synthesise the conditions of the field, the perspectives of the participants and the latent meanings of the context for the grounding, generation and expansion of propositions about what is actually going on in the events and places researched and what this means culturally for the individuals there and the societies and associations they are part of (Beach, 2005, 2010). Foreshadowed problems are accepted to frame the initial research focus, but producing and analysing materials from multiple sources and perspectives is also important in order to prevent over-steering from private ideas and concepts.

The context of the ethnography: union head gangman education

The work of the union head gangman dates back in Sweden to the introduction of common piece work rates in the building trades. However, the role of the head gangman is in some ways a quite complex one. As well as negotiations with management regarding pay, the head gangman has to organise and plan work rosters to effectivise production in the interests of piece work gains. Kronlund (1982) describes this role as organising work on behalf of workers and negotiating pay in line with the best economical interests of a gang.

The head gangman function developed and served workers well when they were employed in so called object-employment and moved as a team from one job and site to another. But in the past two decades this form of labour has changed dramatically. Now building workers tend to be employed more in company employment and large corporations. Because of this change the industrial branch employer organisation (BI) has pressed for changes in relation to the head gangman system and has even attacked the system as outmoded. As one regional union officer has said: ‘now that workers tend to more often stay in the employ of one organisation (with a) reduction in piecework and object-employment... BI has criticised us publicly for resisting change (and they) are trying to use the new education agreement to influence our organisation’ (Josef).

There have been several national and regional conflicts connected to this issue, but in 2002, BI and SBATU signed a new treaty agreement regarding the education of union representatives that in part stipulated cooperation in relation to head gangman education. Through this new educational concord:

Employer representatives were to be given access to content and planning and could even be given the possibility to participate in the education. Their

participation was made necessary if the participants on the education were to obtain paid leave of absence from their employer to take part in the education... The agreement was in fact economically driven... (Mick, regional union officer)

Paid leave of absence had previously been stipulated as mandatory by national labour market law in Sweden for union related activities. But this situation was changed by the previous conservative coalition government in the mid-nineties as part of their attack on the unions. And it is in effect this change that has led to the new concord.

As stated earlier there are two parts to the new agreement: shared planning and direct involvement respectively. However, the agreement is not fully binding. It is only conditional and this has meant that different regional branches have been able to respond to it differently. This is the case particularly with respect to part two; direct involvement. One region, which we have termed *Hillsborough*, decided to reimburse income losses to participants themselves and elected not to allow branch employer representatives access to head gangman education at all. Some others, such as for instance a region we have called *Hampden*, have had extensive cooperation with employers and the BI involvement in head gangman education has been quite emphatic there. The present article is about this cooperation in Hampden. It concerns the work of Anders, a Human Resource Manager and regional consultant to BI, who acted as a BI representative on courses there. A fieldwork diary extract described things as follows:

Anders so called cooperation on the course was anything but sympathetic to traditional union ideals... From his very first input his efforts were clearly anti-unionist in the traditionalist sense of that term... His view was that... 'unions should get out of the way so agreements can be established between employers and individual workers (as this is) the best means forward into the new millennium'... There was also heavy emphasis... on 'local and individual agreements and direct contracts between employers and workers (rather than) central and collectively bargained agreements as in the past' (Anders). Visible efforts to discredit the traditional union and establish new collegial relations between management and employees within a new union condition are apparent. 'Flexibility is the order of the day' (Anders). This is necessary he said because 'we will need to be more flexible in the new work context... to compete with skilled workers from elsewhere on an increasingly mobile labour market... We need to establish a common framework of values and concepts (for) the development of common understandings about how to effectivise production... We need an organic synthesis with new unionists and must erase the conflict perspective of the traditional union perspective...' (Anders)

There are a number of analytical points to be made here. One of these concerns a discursive construction of ‘an old trade union conservatism’ (Ken, BI), which is developed as a straw doll by Anders and has formed a key moment in his articulation in the course of a concept of ‘the need of change’. Articulating ‘the need for change... and giving direction to this change’ (Anders) sets the frame of Anders engagement in his own terms, through which the values and practices that have developed from the union struggle against capital for fair living wages for union members are marginalised and a new post-Fordist conception of working partnerships and local agreements between employers and individual workers is given precedence. This is highly contradictory and completely outside the agreed upon agenda for employer participation at Hampden according to union officials there, but yet also easily identified in the visual props (power point and overhead images, posters and printed materials) Anders used. These often, as in one of his early overhead slides, placed employer representatives, union officials and workers together as one happy group sharing in deliberations ‘about how to solve common problems in the work process’ (Anders). A new consensus view of union-management-employer relations - what we have called a new-unionist position – is pronounced. In a fieldwork diary text we wrote about this as follows:

In Anders’ images... union representatives stand side by side with... personnel- and site management, and are described as ‘having close personal relations and shared interests with each-other... Conflicts are absent’ (Anders). This wasn’t accepted by all delegates we found out afterwards... but there was however no visible opposition from them during the presentation itself... One course delegate, Pete, said afterwards, ‘I thought we were in conflict with them (employers) over salaries and the like... and then he comes along and tries to brush this over’... But the majority were silent and some even seemed to support the new-unionist ideas... The union is split on this issue between new and traditional ideologies...

Anders’ Power Point presentations on day one of the course took a clear side in respect of this ideological divide. His images show time and again site managers and the head gangman side by side, sharing in a common discourse of workplace planning. And they were accompanied by captions addressing things like ‘*the joint task* of the head gangman and managers or foremen’. A main message is the following: ‘Don’t let the team come with problems unless they *bring solutions* as well’ and ‘*leadership* should be characterised by open *dialogue*’. These messages ‘were directed straight at the head gangman task’ (Anders): ‘You will have to learn how to communicate with management better than your colleagues have

done in the past' Anders said. We wrote about the consequences of this as follows in our fieldnotes:

Any basis for conflict between workers and employers is either absent in Anders verbal presentations or very much re aligned as personality clashes and any possibility to locate different material interests in production between the owners and controllers of production and employees is minimised. Instead companies are turned against each-other as competitors and workers are positioned as fighting for their own interests by fighting for their company against other workers and other companies...

These ideas are very much against traditional union ideology and this was recognised by some delegates, some of whom; although on reflection actually very few; also commented on this in the course. However, when such conflicting ideas emerged Anders tried to shift them, for instance to problems between the values and interests of young workers and those of old trade unionist representatives. As he put it 'the old guard thinks differently to you... You are more aware and have a different attitude... You are more inclined to use your heads...' Anders also manoeuvred talk toward a distinction between the staid conservatism 'of an older generation (and the) vibrancy and freshness of new thinking, where people are not locked into old ways' (Anders). This again shifts content away from things that have 'traditionally been the main kernel of the union course in question... like the struggle over production and conflicts over working conditions and pay' (Mick, regional union officer).

Another example of the way Anders manipulated talk and content was by using allegory and substitution. Quite simply he created stories to make his points. In one story he represented labour market negotiations through salary bartering, which was presented in the imagery of the conventional purchasing of goods on a market in a manner that realigned labour market relations with the fundamental ideas of a market economy and set the notion that the building trades and their salaries are best left unregulated by anything but personal self-interest. Our field-notes read:

Anders said 'we should leave it to the customer and the supplier to negotiate prices and salaries... Involving the union only makes things more complicated and expensive. The union is a cost increasing organisation' (Anders)... This idea would of course have been highly unlikely in traditional head gangman courses... Anders normalises everything in terms of 'every man for himself'. As he put it 'we always have to ask which deal is the one that is most worthwhile and the best value for money! It stands to reason... We would all of course think and act like

this... Individuals make choices that maximise returns on investment and the circumstances they face.’

Anders’ infuses a doctrine of corporatism into the course here in a manner which leaves naked self-interest and greedy calculation as the only formal common basis for pay negotiations. This is both a distorting and a marginal position. It downplays or avoids the complexity of the social relations of production and consumption in late-capitalism (see e.g. Gee et al, 1996; McMurtry, 1998 on these), by transforming conventional price setting, law of value and rate of profit and distorting the way men and women actually think and act in concrete circumstances. What Anders supplies is a neo-liberal myth that reduces *organisations* to the level of individuals and *complicated situations* to single dimensions. However, Anders’ presentation also eliminates any eventual conflicts *within* organisations (such as between ‘new’ and traditional trades unionists and between large and small, national and international and collective and employer owned enterprises) and thereby disqualifies the need to discuss what these differences mean and imply for head gangman work. There is no opening for identifying employers and employees as having competing material interests in production and no space for conversations related to issues of the exploitation of the labour force. These issues were ones that were emphasised in traditional union discourse according to informants at Hillsborough. Anders input evades and/or transform this. For instance he constantly emphasises the need for change but does not describe why things need to be changed and in whose interests his suggested changes would materially operate. A diary extract read:

On posters and power-point images we find concepts like ‘pressure to change’, which in the context of a trades union organised course in trades union premises might be related to union demands for parity of returns from production, improved working conditions, union activism in worker interests against exploitation... and so on... but where (in fact) the reverse is implied... The union role in production negotiations that have historically represented a potent instrument of democratic change is ignored and the customer... becomes ‘the (main) agent of change... by placing demands on suppliers that have to be solved by us (employers and workers) joining together to find solutions...’ (Anders).

A reasonable question to ask here is whether anything could be further from the (normal) traditional concept of the head gangman function? At least that is until Anders went one step further, by adding ‘rather than unions coming between... these negotiations... we

think we (workers and management) should deal with things directly (without the union). We can solve such things better on the job with the customers'. He added: 'We all benefit equally from an expedient attitude from the head gangman, who needs to be pragmatic and think in the interests of production... rather than being a problem finder... in respect to the relationship between employers and *their* employees. Our production is different than in factories... We have to be effective and find solutions... It is a demand from the situation... Some administration is necessary... We have to have quality auditing for instance... Who wants damage in the new flat they have just bought? No one... so we introduced the concept of certification... But there are complications... We don't build Volvo cars and things like that, which all look the same...' (Anders). We wrote on this as follows in our fieldwork diary.

Anders is both creating and exploiting a Manichean image of the head gangman as *either* troublesome and bureaucratic – as in his traditionalist conception - *or* cooperative, flexible, modern and pragmatic – which he equates with the new view. But whilst it is surely better to be effective rather than ineffective, neither theoretically nor practically is it the workers who burden costs. Quite the opposite, they provide the basis of added value. It is rather company profit and administration that burden costs. The head gangman's concern from the union perspective of the representation of labour is for ensuring that workers 'get a fair return on their labour in comparison to those who own and run companies' (Dan, delegate). This notion is completely sidelined in Anders' presentation.

Two issues stride forth in Anders' presentations, such as the ones above, both of which have been recognised and commented on by some union officials. One of them, perhaps the most significant and emphasised, is the notion of 'the best possible deal' (Mick, regional union officer) and the second is 'the individual value of hard self-interest' (Josef, regional union officer). And as these officers put it, neither of them are how 'we try to encourage union officers to think, as we are more interested in getting them to set aside their personal and private short term interests for the long term good of the collective they represent' (Mick). In Anders' presentation 'the market... determines prices based on the quality customers are prepared to pay for' (Anders). This is so clearly an objectification of the capitalist law of value and rate of price that it hardly needs commenting on. But again there was evidence of a working-class consciousness in the room. One union officer corrected Anders and said¹:

¹ There was a problem with the expression of this consciousness though, as the expressions we have noticed have tended to come outside of the public sphere of the education in conversations with us and between individuals. In

In contrast to Anders' presentation it is not an individual customer who emphasises the question of quality control, but in fact legal claims against companies for poor and dangerous products, driven by authorities together with consumers... So what we are getting is outright nonsense (that) marginalises the need for union action (and runs) against the traditional aims of the course...

What is suggested here is actually quite ironic in the context of a so-called collaboration. A group of union officers at Hillsborough commented on this as follows:

Anders obstructs serious considerations of the interests at play (Mick)... and is guilty of a significant misrepresentation of key and relevant issues. Indeed his 'collaboration' with the union is worse than completely false, as he is 'using a position of trust... in order to undermine union interests' (Josef). Les called this 'an act of ideological terrorism (by means of) which Anders' furthers the ideological advantages of the employer organisation in its struggles against collective representation'.

What becomes apparent here is that Anders behaviour is highly contradictory in that whilst he claims to operate from a consensus perspective he is actually 'acting correctly' only if and when his actions are viewed from a conflict perspective like, but also opposed to, that of the traditional unionism he is striving so hard to undermine. Because even though it may criticise Anders interests, the conflict perspective of the traditional union position at least sees the rationality and the relevance of his biased role in a class-struggle, whilst when seen from a consensus perspective the new collaboration is actually being abused and used by Anders to undermine traditional union ideology and propagate BI values and interests. So what Anders is doing is thus not introducing a consensus perspective. It is deliberate sabotage. We have put this as follows in field-notes:

Different foils have been appropriated as part of Anders overall strategy. Some of these, like the use of allegory and substitution divert attention away from actual industrial relations to fictitious constructions and representations that are more in the control of the presenter and are developed 'in tune and time' with the underpinning value set and interests of new-unionism. Anders use of *the customer* is a good example. The use of *the customer* diverts attention, individualises activities and reduces the chance of conflict in the room and through it, instead of

the course itself there was little public talk at all by delegates and the union officers present only spoke out critically when they became really irate. The formal educational context seemed in fact to stifle critical voices.

being seen as ‘an important tool of democracy’ (Les), the union function becomes something that is understood as questionable ‘because it adds to costs (and) is perhaps... in need of being re-thought’ (Mick)... No delegate was aggressive toward the customer in their talk and questions. As one of them put it, ‘we are after all, all customers, and so are our friends and families’ (Doug). In fact, from what we could make out everyone ‘sympathised with the customer, as we all want to both give and get a fair deal in our transactions’ (Dan). Another delegate added ‘how can you see the customer as exploitative and organised in the way companies are? How can you envisage needing a union organisation behind you to deal with her’ (Dave). The effects of this kind of interpellation were significant. As one regional officer put it ‘in this way a union education for the head gangman function is rendered, if not unthinkable, at least unnecessary’ (Josef).

Using the customer as a discursive foil in his presentation allowed Anders to steer clear of some problematic issues like the use by employers of ‘under-paid’ foreign sub-contractors on Swedish soil to help dump collective salary agreements. These things are normally among the aspects taken up by the union whilst ‘the use of the customer is not. It is something I have never done and would never do’ (Mick). Moreover, using the customer ‘is also interesting in a further sense (as) a misrepresentation, not just of the character (small, innocent, threatened) of the negotiating instrument’ (Les) but also ‘in the sense that this consumer should really have been negotiating with another customer’ (Josef). As we put it in field-notes:

If the representation was to ‘approximate the real situation more correctly (what) is far more common in labour market terms of negotiating work and work relations is that companies do business with other companies and organisations... not with individuals’ (Mick). ‘Focussing on an individual customer distorts the conditions of negotiation on the labour market’ (Josef).

The customer analogy was very damaging for the traditional unionist position and is perhaps not what the union had in mind as an outcome of collaboration with BI on the head gangman course. However, several other points Anders raised also shifted the focus in (potentially) subversive ways. For instance, instead of talking about collective bargaining, as one might have expected within the context of collaboration and cooperation in a union course for wage-negotiators, Anders talked about ‘the *costs* to businesses... and ultimately customers... of union educations and the *union intervention* these educations supported’ (Anders). He asked:

How and where are costs budgeted for union education? Where are the costs for empty time for foremen and tradesmen borne up? Where do the costs for MB-time come from? How is the concept of guarantee cost worked out? Who bears the costs for educating the head gangman. (Anders)

Anders has of course his answer ready for all of these questions, and the answer is the same as before. 'It is the customer... Even for me being here it is ultimately the customer who pays'. So union work is again placed clearly on the costs side of production in Anders' rhetoric and adds 'nothing of positive quality to production'. This is hardly the kind of message one would anticipate in a course that is intended to contribute to the education of union representatives. A fieldwork diary extract on effects read:

'You can begin to wonder if we really are the burden he seems to suggest and if we might have a negative rather than positive effect on salaries... That would be a bit ironic' (Dean) (when) 'the traditional understanding is that... if we don't fight for salaries employers will do whatever they can to force them down' (Mick)... It seems that 'a course that is meant to act in union interests has been infiltrated... and used in order to attack and undermine our values... This has been done, ironically, in the name of collaboration and cooperation.' (Les)

The hegemonic notion of individual advancement rather than collective representation shines through Anders' presentations and content and could be questioned in relation to a traditional union interest. It is one of the many ways in which Anders tries to advance the interests of a consensus perspective within the head gangman course against a traditional union interest whilst at the same time claiming 'to work in partnership with the union' (Anders).

Being a team player

It may seem rather out of place to use the term 'team player' in conjunction with something as subversive as Anders involvement. However, the concept of 'team player' was never the less one of the ones most commonly used in his presentation and therefore must be attended to.. He defined it in the following way:

- Whole hearted commitment and effort toward solving problems – not only identifying problems and scapegoats

- In a winning team everyone tries to help the team win
- Having knowledge and being trained for the job at hand
- Individuals have a responsibility for and security from a winning team

Again these comments are transparently ideological. Not only is the company presented as one happy unit ‘with shared goals’, those who question this are suggested to be:

Out of touch with reality (and) out to find problems not solve them... They are looking to create scapegoats... The metaphor of team player is significant... The internal problems are forgotten at kick off time and the intention is a joint one... for beating the opposition as effectively as possible... (Anders)

Who the opposition is, is not made clear by Anders, but what we think we are meant to see it as is ‘other companies (who) compete with us for contracts and also your jobs...’ (Anders). Again this is a great ideological distortion of the relations of production in capitalist societies and again Anders seems ‘to use this distortion to undermine the value of union activism, union work and union officials’ (Les). As McMurtry has conclusively demonstrated (1998), capitalist corporations and companies are not each others’ enemies, but partners in processes of conversion of other value forms into the economic form of money to be accumulated by owners. Unions can of course be a poison in this practice if their work is unchecked. We put this as follows in a diary text:

It has to be recognised, that if radicalised, unions are real enemies of capitalist production... and as we assume him to be a very clever and educated individual we have to give Anders credit for recognising this and responding to it in line with employer interests... He is highly intelligent and articulate... ‘A guerrilla fighter in the ideological terror organisation of BI’ (Les)... who must make any potential radicalisation of the union within an education such as that of head gangman ‘an as extremely remote a possibility as possible’ (Josef)... The traditional union role and values have to be devalued. This is done through them often being misrepresented and miss-credited... Individualism is promoted and individuals are represented as acting in their own best interests when they act in a constructed illusion of a common interest... by operating whole-heartedly and with appropriate training for the good of the team’ (Anders)... Anders presentation leads first toward a kind of habituation of the field of labour relations in the interests of capital by developing a familiarity, through language in use, of business ideas and business-speak... Naked self-interest, callous cash payment and egotistical calculation over private return become the only formal basis for a

common culture... which is obviously very much against the traditional union emphasis on solidarity and the strength of the collectivity...

The concept of team player presented by Anders should be understood in relation to forms of employment in the building trade and how the new form (company employed) has led to employees less often than before changing employers as they move from job to job. There has been a concentration of the ownership of production and of contract negotiations and distribution. The expansion of companies to corporations through take-overs and merger is important here, as the larger eat up their smaller competitors or convert them to flexible niche organisations that can more comfortably operate within the global conditions of new capitalism (McMurty, 1998; Sennett, 1999; Gee et al, 1996). Anders avoids these issues and any implications they might have for the job of the head gangman. His concept of team player is synonymous with that of company man (Kunda, 1992). A field-note extract addressed his points as follows:

Anders marks up the expansion of the company form of employment as an issue of growth and 'above all development... that is (contributing) to improvements in employment conditions generally' (Anders)... This notion was questioned by a union officer as nonsense, both theoretically 'as markets have never guaranteed good working conditions' and empirically 'as for instance the major regional branch employer has absolutely useless personnel politics'... Anders tried hard to defuse this situation (but was) for once a little ruffled. 'Company employment, low costs and high profits are beneficial to both sides... You earn money and the company earns money... It's a very simple mathematics...' (Anders).

But of course this mathematics is neither simple nor mutually beneficial. As one regional union officer (Josef) put it: 'Company profits far exceed employee bonuses and share-holder payouts (and) payments to company executives and board members... have been identified in the media recently (if reluctantly) as almost obscene... These are things that we would have normally taken up.' But they weren't taken up here. Rather than this, field-notes suggest that Anders indicated a very low profit margin as calculated from the taxable profits declared by companies in the last economic year rather than from the profits made before tax deductible issues such as bonuses to directors and shareholders have been paid out. Anders asked:

Can you guess company profits last year for YAB? One delegate said ‘about 6-7%’... ‘They would have been delighted if it was’ Anders said (not specifying directly who ‘they’ are) and added ‘It was 3% at the most... when everything had been paid up. (So) the union claim that profits are too high... is false... The real situation is rather the reverse. Profits are too low and to keep jobs you’ll have to be prepared to take wage reductions’ (Anders)...

These are interesting messages in a union course for agents who have the function of wage negotiators for a labour collective and ‘were not the way things would have normally been discussed’ (Mick). They also had some effects. When Anders asked, rather ironically, ‘how much do you think you cost’ (without specifying further what ‘you’ was exactly) one of the participants answered, ‘far too much I’m sure you think’. Here workers again become a cost factor not a factor whose labour has been objectified and exploited in the interests of economic profit by their employers. This is not how the course would have normally dealt with things like this, particularly not from a traditional unionist position. A group of regional union officers from Hillsborough put things as follows:

Les: No labourer no profit in fact would be a more correct way of considering the situation... from the traditional perspective of the course...

Josef: Anders has twisted the normal sense of the education (toward) the interests of employers (and) consensus unionism...

Mick: This is ironic given the context, which is a wage negotiation course for union representatives.

Anders pointed out that he was not against workers earning money as long as this was through their labour. This is obvious though given that waged labour is a primary ‘guarantee’ of profit in capitalist production industries, and also obvious is that Anders, as an employer representative, should be against higher pay by negotiation rather than increased wages through increases in productivity. However, although obvious from the perspective of a conflict perspective his position again becomes contradictory from the consensus one he claims to have. If ‘everyone is... working together on the same side’ as Anders claims, discussion over the distribution of surplus value should be the main motor of pay negotiations. Once again Anders fabricates the truth in the ideological interests of a company perspective. However, this time his position is also, when analysed, very confused. He is a pastiche figure and educational enigma who is blind to (and blinding towards) the interests

that control his actions and how these actions then misrepresent history. The concept of hegemony can be used to analyse this further.

Using Gramsci (1971) hegemony is a deceptive form of alliance by means of which a particular class takes leadership over others by guaranteeing benefits to help secure power. This may be what happened to Anders. However, we have also taken inspiration from Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, where hegemony is said to be developed through concepts that operate in a more or less closed system and that are capable of regulating social life in particular ways by making some things seem logical and 'real' whilst others become unthinkable, illogical or unacceptable on the basis of conceptual articulation alone. In this sense hegemony is highly relevant as a concept.

Anders presentation of the idea of head gangman leadership fits with his position of confused and confusing mediator of the dominant ideas of a dominant class. For although leadership is something that has taken an increasingly important part in union education activities in recent years, according to union officers at Hillsborough it usually contains important differences with respect to the concept of leadership in organisations like BI that represent and aim to further capitalist interests and the interests of capitalists. This difference disappeared in Anders presentation, which articulated the BI ideal of a liberal and consensus (career) perspective on leadership 'as an individual(s) job based on individual interests and capabilities: 'a reward for effort, skill and commitment... a qualification' (Anders). This is not leadership in the traditional union sense as expediated in and by the traditional head gangman function. A diary extract read:

Distinctions between ideas/views of leadership on the part of management and the functions and mission of the head gangman are absent... Management is historically an extension of the controlling arm of owners, whilst the head gangman is a democratically elected union representative chosen by workmates to carry out a coordination duty at the workplace. This distinction isn't made part of Anders presentation... For Anders leadership is 'an individual career possibility taken by a career minded individual in his own interests' As he put it, a *good leader... must* have coped with the competitive urge in the sports arena... *must* not always have to show that he is the best... *must* not allow important team players to fall into his shadow... *must* delegate and be aware that you can't do everything yourself ... *must* sow ideas that the team can share and see as its own

These abstractions, or 'musts of leadership' (Anders) have 'barely any relevance to the work of the head gangman (but are rather) a complete misrepresentation of the task at hand' (Mick).

But not the only one! A further misrepresentation was visible in a later image in which Anders described head gangman work as ‘primarily about solving conflicts’. This again ‘has nothing to do with the head gangman function, at least in the sense Anders means... which is a management function’ (Josef).

Another misconception has to do with Anders’ power point pictures concerning the head gangman role as ‘similar to that of coach in a football team’. Anders overhead content is given in italics and contrasted to the union position pointed out by union informants:

- *Putting people together who can form a team.* The head gangman doesn’t pick the team the team picks the head gangman
- *Clarifying for the team what their individual duties are.* The members of the team already understand their respective duties, as steel-fixer, joiner, pipe-fitter, roofer...
- *Resolving conflicts in the team.* The head gangman leaves conflict resolution to those involved in the conflict
- *See to it that the team is well informed.* This is part of the head gangman function even seen from union perspectives

Only one out of four right is *disinformation* against traditional union values and interests, which the redefinition of the head gangman as a resolver of conflicts between capital and labour brings to a head. From the traditional union perspective the head gangman should ‘bear the brunt of the conflict between capital and labour (and) indeed should in fact personify this conflict’ (Josef). Anders contribution is in full opposition to this stance.

Discussion

Tensions within and between education in the trade union- such as presently between traditional and new trade unionism - are historically common place and a sign of good health within the union movement. They signal open-mindedness and ongoing debate, as do tensions between a ‘functional functionary’ and ‘political-ideological’ education. In the former what is given primacy is content concentrating on the pragmatic training of representatives of labour who are to work within the capitalist system to achieve fair rewards from the surplus value of production for working class people. The assumptions (and content and practices) of the political-ideological position are different. They concern the articulation

of an ideological standpoint from which to interpret and act in the world. In the present context it is here that the new tension has been introduced. This tension is between traditional trade unionism (with this representing a conflict perspective) and a new right, post-Fordist discourse of consensus and cooperation that also links to a new trades unionist position in a 'new' neo-liberal discursive form. The current outcomes of this tension we feel may trouble traditional working class interests as competing class interests are deformed and redefined in line with the interests of a dominant class by means of ideological struggle.

Anders and the course are foils in this process that represent new-capitalist interests and initiatives according to our ethnographic data and analyses. Thus, whilst the struggle over union education is a sign of good health and openness to alternative points of view and critical debate, what is more problematic is the way this healthy sign is misappropriated and abused by a BI representative. Anders is doing the bidding of the capitalist class from within a trade union course and is imprisoned by contingency, relativity and ideological prejudice to represent a hegemonic discourse of neo-liberalism that ideologically distorts (and is meant to distort) the interests of the course delegates. This doesn't take place without opposition or struggle, but decisively from within, by digging away at the ideological heart of one of the main combatants in an internal struggle for union hegemony, traditional trade unionism.

This is what we see Anders principle way of functioning as being. That is, he cannot be said to be anti-unionist in broad terms, for this would attribute a frozen objectification (a reification) to the category of union, which is clearly against the constant struggle over what being unionist means. It would also be anti-democratic in the sense that it would eliminate from this field of struggle positions that have a right to be heard and argued both for and over. Instead Anders is on one side of the struggle and his contribution has had an effect on the resolution of forces in a way that favours new (consensus) unionism as a trades union form for the future.

What we are saying here is that there is no easy and uniform consensus to any material history within any system of operations or between any one system and any other. There are only passages of opposition and forms of negotiation that pass between and help to codetermine working structures at any given moment. The human agency and material possibilities that underlie and give rise to operations and understandings of them are always at one and the same time complex processes and emergent properties of the total historical context, as cultural life is in fact created in this sense as a consequence of 'collective interaction' (Olssen, 2005, p. 471). This Foucauldian idea corresponds to the notion of 'life as

art' as expressed in Willis (2000) and over-determination according to Althusser (1969). It is also in line with Steele and Taylor's (2005) discussions with respect to the union movement in the UK, which sets the union education context as one that can be conceptualised as representing a spectrum of perspectives, possibilities and outcomes. Contingent factors in this are two national bureaucracies (the employer organisation and the formal trade union) and their localised and specific interests as well as the individual subjects and groups that make up these organisations and their anticipations, hopes and incitements. This is the field in which the new educations are developing new identity possibilities and outcomes.

However, we still feel that the history of economic structures is important to the developments taking place; both empirically and 'abstractly/theoretically'; as although identities are constituted through experiences in social practices through their complex effects and relations, one thing that is clear in the present context is that union *traditionalism* seems to have been put on the defensive. Not the least because it has to fight against the representatives of an opposing class-position outside the union in successive waves of conservative government, in the move to the right of social democratic party ideology and in the biased output of an increasingly right-wing media. It also has to compete against the same values and ideology – even if in diluted form - within the union organisation itself (i.e. the new-trade-unionists).

We could argue that this defensive posture has always been the case since the concessions of the Saltsjöbad agreement in which the collective efforts of the labour movement to wrest political control over production were surrendered in the interests of negotiating a share of the economic surplus from production, which is also an example of the ways in which the ruling class has been able to rule more by consent to their ideas than by overt power and obvious material force. The new post-Fordist consensus context provides a much clearer example of the negative consequences of this rule. Sweden is once again becoming a massively unequal society, in an increasingly unequal global economic context. Industrial production in corporate form and the increasing destruction of working class culture at home contributes to further the devastation of not simply equality but even reasonable conditions of existence and we need to ask: what is education able to do about this? Whatever it is, surely this should be a collective struggle against corporatism not collaboration with it.

A struggle against corporatism is barely visible in the present context. Instead of this collaboration narratives have been developed behind which corporative representatives ridicule collectivism and appeal to a selfish individualistic culture in ways that severely weaken the links between radical education and the working class movement. The

individualistic (selfish) culture permeates the middle classes (people like Anders) more than it does the working class (people like the course delegates). It operates through a trivialising and increasingly privatised (proto- and pro-capitalistic) media, but it is also becoming apparent now, according to our analyses, even in the last bastions of a working class education movement, in trade union education courses, where it has become a socialising force in the ongoing struggle for control over production processes and what is produced (identities, products, survival) through them.

These points link our project to a number of major issues. One of these is what meaning does the employer representative's approach to and in the education we have followed have for the trade union? Another is how far are different trade unionists implicated in the educational reform and what (if anything) have their different rationales been? A third is what did they feel about this reform? These questions are now quite easy to respond to. Anders intervention both favours one side of and exploits a division within the trade union, which new-unionists - on the one hand - and traditionalists - on the other - represent. As has hopefully been clear in the article, Anders work will in this sense support the development of a hybrid form of new (consensus) unionism that distorts, devalues and attacks the values and practices of traditional trade unionism in the interests of capital.

The education concord started as an economically expedient way for the union to continue to educate union members for union functions without loss of income from employers. This was necessary as employers (not isolated ones but employers acting together on a unified front through BI and SAF: the Swedish National Employer Association) were creating and exploiting loopholes in national and European labour market agreements to avoid paying salaried leave of absence to employees attending union training days, which had otherwise been a right protected by labour market laws in Sweden since 1934. The position taken by employers was that since the MBL laws of the seventies and in line with European LM Law, they'd continue to pay leave of absence to employees attending union education only if the unions invited the employee organisations into these courses. Unionists were split. Support was given by new unionists. Resistance was applied by union traditionalists. In between was a pragmatic majority that finally went along with the idea.

Conclusions

Before the new education concord, unions took care of their own education. They even produced most of their own materials. And they even had a workers union

education movement (ABF) that was producing materials and delivering educations outside the unions in everything from Swedish II to general secondary and upper-secondary education (roughly equivalent to GCSE ordinary and advanced courses) in subjects like English, French, German and Spanish, as well as leisure courses in cookery, sailing, navigation and more besides. What is happening at the present time is that the union has started to employ education and training consultants to produce courses and materials and deliver education to the union, which has thus begun to become a new education consumer. These are openings in the armour of the 'benign union' that can be deepened and then exploited as the union becomes increasingly absorbed into the neo-liberal swirl, as a discourse and as a producer and consumer of education discourses and values of the new right. However, there is a more positive scenario. In it the contradictions of an enforced neo-liberalism will be recognised and this will create possibilities for re-wakening labour consciousness and revitalising conflict in the interests of exploited categories of labour on a global scale. In romanticised terms this is an opportunity for the labour movement to recognise its potential in the development of an elevated class consciousness befitting a global (working) class as a subjective class agency. It would at one and the same time be a movement both forward and back in time and back and forth between the concrete and the abstract as the union (once again) takes up the fight to become the *representative of a class movement and defenders of a class interest*.

This would be a positive move we feel. The union has long since ceased to be an attacking movement and is outwardly now almost fully on the defensive. This defensive posture is clearly visible in the education interchanges we have documented (in a local context) but is also more generally one that was created by the original third way social democratic politics in Sweden from the thirties onwards, through the Saltsjöbad agreement. Marxists and neo-Marxist, classical social democrats in the union movement warned about the immanent defensive posture of this agreement at the time. They were marginalised within the union and have remained in its margins (or in alternative movements) since then.

References

- Althusser, L. (1969). *For Marx*. London: Allen Lane.
- Atkinson, P. (1990). *The Ethnographic Imagination: Textual Construction of Reality*. London: Routledge.
- Beach, D. (1997). *Symbolic control and power relay: Learning in higher professional education*. (Göteborg Studies in Educational Sciences 119). Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.

- Beach, D. (2005). From fieldwork to theory and representation in ethnography. In Geoff Troman, Bob Jeffrey & Geoffrey Walford (Eds) *Methodological issues and Practices in Ethnography. Studies in Educational Ethnography* Vol 11. Oxford: JAI Press.
- Beach, D. (2010 accepted for publication). Ethnography in Scandinavian Education Research, *Ethnography and Education*, 5.
- Beach, D. & Carlsson, M. (2004). Adult education by tender: Effects of restructuring on education identities, *European Educational Researcher Journal*, 3, 674 – 690.
- Beach, D. & Dovemark, M. (2005). Creativity as a Cultural Commodity: An Ethnographic Investigation of Struggles over Creativity in Three Swedish Schools. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 4(2). www.jceps.com
- Carlén, M. (1999). Kunskapslyft eller avbytarbänk? Möten med industriarbetare om utbildning för arbete. (Göteborg Studies in Educational Sciences 144). Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.
- Dovemark, M. (2004). Ansvar-flexibilitet-valfrihet. En etnografisk studie (Gothenburg Studies in Educational Sciences 223). Göteborg: ACTA.
- Fejes, A. (2006). *Constructing the Adult Learner – A Governmentality Analysis*. (Linköping Studies in Education and Psychology 106). Linköping: Linköping University.
- Gee, P.J., Hull, G., & Lanksher, C. (1996). *The new work order: Behind the language of the new capitalism*. St Leonards: Allen & Urwin.
- Gordon, T., Lahelma, E. & Beach, D. (2003) Marketisation of democratic education: Ethnographic insights. In: Beach, D. Gordon, T. & Lahelma E. (Eds) *Democratic Education Ethnographic Challenges*. London: Tufnell Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the prison notebooks. London: Heinemann.
- Gustavsson, B. (1996). *Bildning i vår tid: Om bildningens möjligheter och villkor i det moderna samhället*. Stockholm: Wahlström & Widestrand.
- Hammersly, M., & Atkinson, P. (1995, 2nd edition). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. London: Tavistocks Publications.
- Kronlund, J. (1982) *Mannen i mitten. Om lagbassystemet i byggindustrin*. Arbetslivscentrum, Stockholm.
- Kuper, A. (1978/1987). *Anthropologists and Anthropology: The British School 1922 - 1972*. London: Routledge.
- Kunda, G. (1992). *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tec Corporation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Köpsén, S. (2008). (Linköping Studies in Education and Psychology). Linköping Linköping University.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy. Toward a radical democratic politics*. London: Verso.
- McMurtry, J. (1998). *Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System*. Toronto: Kumarian Press.

- Olssen, M. (2005). Foucault and Marxism: rewriting the theory of historical materialism. *Policy Futures in Education*, 2, 454 – 482.
- Sanjek, R. (1990). On ethnographic validity. In Sanjek (ed.) *Fieldnotes - The Makings of Anthropology*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Sennett, R. (1999). När karaktären krackelerar: Personliga konsekvenser av att arbeta i den nya kapitalismen. (The Corrosion of Character) Stockholm: Atlas.
- Steele, T. & Taylor, R. (2005). Marxism and adult education in Britain. *Policy Futures in Education*, 2, 578 – 591.
- Walford, G. 2008. The nature of educational ethnography. In *How to do Ethnography*, ed G. Walford, 1-15. London: Tufnell Press.

Writers' Details

Dennis Beach is Professor of Education at University College Borås, Sweden, and Margata Carlén is a Senior Lecturer at the same University.

Correspondence:

Dennis.Beach@hb.se