

## **The Labor Movements ABC: Unions and Working Class Education in Brazil.**

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*“Indeed the interests of the oppressors lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them,” for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to the situation the more easily they can be dominated.”*

Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

In 1996, the Brazilian National Confederation of Metalworkers (CNM/CUT) initiated “*Programa Integrar*”, a radical educational program that seeks to advance working class political influence in society. *Integrar* contests prevailing notions of how and why workers are educated in Brazil. In a broad sense, the program is a response to elite ideological domination within the context of an increasingly privatized educational structure. At the same time the program seeks to expand labor’s participation in deciding the future of education in society. *Integrar* is a counter-hegemonic movement, and as such, part of a larger struggle for the social and political consciousness of the Brazilian working class. The unions’ educational program is a movement that seeks to increase labor’s power in deciding public policy issues of working class interest. For labor educators in the United States greater attention to the Brazilian metalworkers experience in education could prove an important resource for our own critical reexamination of labor education and the urgent need to expand the political capacity of workers and their organizations in American society. Even though the socioeconomic and political conditions are very distinct than those in the US, the strategic political objectives of the program can be a useful model for expanding the role of labor education.

In many cases there is a tendency among unions in the United States to treat organizing, politics and education as distinct activities rather than a continuous process of

learning and action. In other instances there is a predisposition of labor organizations to subjugate education to the union's immediate political interests. Viewing the role of education in this manner works against enhancing working class organization and power, it is self defeating for both the immediate and long-term goals of organized labor. In many ways the treatment of working class education, union training, organizing and politics all reflect the model of fragmented knowledge, replicating the Taylorist model of production that many of us so vehemently critique. Labor educator Ruth Needleman correctly recognizes: "There is more education today than ever before in organized labor. But more education is not just good enough. Education needs to be understood as integral and essential to every aspect of union work, and not just education as a scripture, but an open-ended, experience – based, problem solving education for transformation and social justice." (110)

The metalworkers *Programa Integrar* helps reframe the role of labor education from the simple debate of programmatic variations to the fundamental dispute for working class power. For the union, the education of the working-class in its multiple formats is a strategic issue present in the most crucial of labors political battles and vital for the future for organized labor in Brazil. Education is a process through which workers and their organizations expand their role as citizens and activists, organize, mobilize and subsequently strengthen their ability to influence the political decision-making process. The program expands organized labor's constituency to broad sectors of the working-class, developing class consciousness and the critical mass necessary to advance labors' political and economic claims.

The programs' basic activity provides primary, secondary and professional education for workers young and old, independently of union membership or employment status. A fundamental aspect of the program re-conceptualizes the curriculum content of basic and secondary education, restructuring the way in which workers learn. The core curriculum questions what is knowledge and how critical thinking is developed, reinforcing the correlation between learning and broader social, economic and political transformations under way in Brazil. The primary objective of the program is not simply the transference of information but the development of a participatory citizenry. *Integrar* provides the necessary structure and knowledge through which workers can consolidate their power in society, reinforcing the structures of participatory democracy both locally and nationally. In this way the program is a "pedagogical-political" project, not just an educational activity, where the relationship between political activism and educational objectives are present in all of the programs aspects. The basic principles of *Integrar* are useful to understand the programs fundamental concerns and mission:

- 1- It is the obligation of the state to guarantee a free and quality public education;
- 2- Public resources must be invested in activities that support working-class interests
- 3- Unemployment is the result of the current model of political-economic development and not an individual problem or the lack of qualification;

- 4- Coordinate the articulation between education and action to strengthen the notion of citizenship and the labor movement;
- 5- Articulate the process of professional and basic education;
- 6- Elevate the value of workers acquired knowledge.(Maia, 41)

### **The Origins of *Integrar***

The inception of *Integrar* reflects a broader notion of class and labor militancy adopted by significant sectors of the labor movement in the struggle against the military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. It was conceived to widen the scale and scope of traditional labor education and apprenticeship programs that had been in place for some time; moving the targeted audience from the limited membership roles of the unions to the notion of workers as a class within society. Fernando Lopes, General Secretary of the National Metalworkers Confederation explained: “The experiences of the union movement are not new. In the seventies many training schools were open...These schools were aimed at training militants so that they could be better prepared to carry on organizational work in the plants. There was little public involvement in these activities and with the expansion of the workers movement these activities were relegated to a secondary level. Whatever their ideological position, unions offered skill training to their members in the same way they offered barber shops and dental clinics.” (1) In this sense *Integrar* breaks with traditional models of union education and the structural-ideological constraints that limit working class organization. The program assumes a fundamental importance in a country where illiteracy and social exclusion are major constraints to socioeconomic development.

The conceptualization of *Programa Integrar* emerged as the result of complex political debates initiated during the 3 and 4 conventions the National Confederation of Metalworkers

(CNM/CUT). This discussion focused on how to expand labor's political capacity, influence public policy and working class interests in the political decision-making process. It reflects a broader debate on how to build a working class political alternative to global neo-liberal policies that are driving major transformations in the world of work and society in general.

Four years after its inception *Integrar* has expanded from a basic education program to a comprehensive educational and training institute, training workers, union activists, social movements, cooperatives and popular organizations. Basic instruction is just one of the many activities developed by the metal workers confederation. The institute provides courses for organizing cooperatives, administration, economics, politics and society, linking the daily lives of workers to the larger struggle for socioeconomic justice and equality.

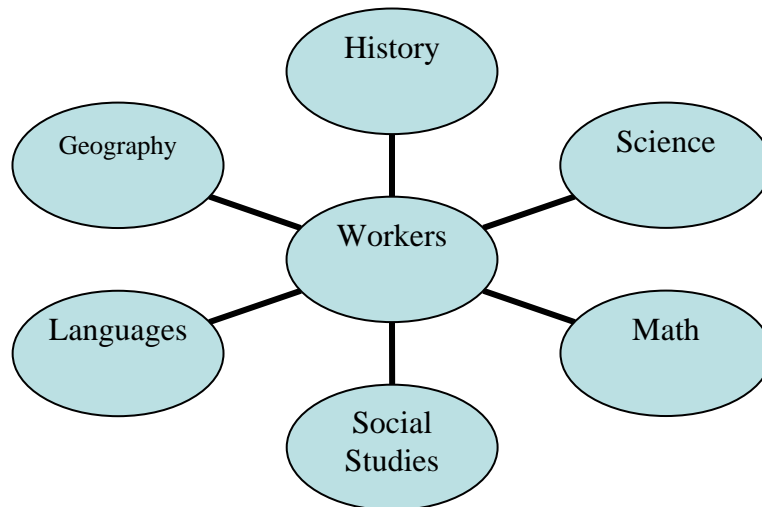
In this process building the educational capacity of the working class is synonymous with building working class organization and political power. Learning is a dialectical process where the education of the working-class is a transformative action for current and future labor militants. In many ways the program is a response to the effects of neo-liberal policies introduced into the educational system.

### **Programmatic Structure and Organization**

The programs organizers defend the concept that working class education is an inclusive and comprehensive body of knowledge. Learning draws on the participants acquired knowledge incorporated into a curriculum that reflects the daily life experiences of the working class. Basic subjects of math, science, languages, geography are introduced and studied as they relate to the participants life experience in an interdisciplinary structure. In this sense, the disciplines are not distinct subjects that are

examined individually; instead students complete modules which draw intermittently on the various disciplines. The concept of an integrated education is not just the method through which knowledge is delivered. The curriculum draws on the major questions that define working class life, such as unemployment, the cost of living, political rights and organization as well as the workers particular life experiences. In this process students are active participants in building a body of knowledge and not just passive recipients of information. Learners quickly realize a clear and useful purpose to the study of math, science, economics, social studies and history and its relation to their demands on society.

### Learning Module



Students use textbooks specifically prepared to attend the methodological, pedagogical and political concerns of the program, so that all modules have a defined yet continuous flow of content. Some of the textbooks used in the modules are, “The Economy and Social Exclusion,” “Transformations of the World of Work and Modern Civilization,” “Social Relations and Work in Brazil,” and “Work, Race and Inequality.” Pedagogical

method is a political exercise of building social consciousness where the production of knowledge must have useful purpose.

## **Methodology**

*Integrar's* methodology draws on the pedagogical theories of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who viewed education as a transformative process essential for social change. Freire, much like the programs organizers argue that the primary task of educators was to develop political and social capacities that allowed people to alter society. Education, in this sense, is an intricate part of a broader political process that influences the way in which people view themselves and their role in society. The process of learning is viewed as a cultural action essential for developing working class social consciousness. The notion of culture reflects the acknowledgement that the contradictions of social forces in society and their competing political projects are an essential aspect of human existence. As Freire argued: "...Cultural action for freedom is characterized by dialogue, and its preeminent purpose is to conscientize (sic) the people, cultural action for domination is opposed to dialogue and serves to domesticate people." (Freire, 1985:85)

As a result education becomes a process for liberation rather than a domesticating process of conformity; critical thinking cannot exist devoid of action. Freire defined education as a process of "political literacy" where both educator and student must remove themselves from their traditional roles, freeing the process of education from its domesticating tendencies. (105) He pointed out: "Education for domestication is an act of transferring "knowledge," whereas education for freedom is an act of knowledge and a process of transforming action that should be exercised on reality." (102) The fundamental objective of "education for freedom" is the transformation of people from

the objects of history to the subjects of history. This radical transformative process does not exist in a world different than the one in which we live nor can there be a neutral approach to the object of study. Freire correctly argued that the process of education does not occur void of societal influences and constraints, nor do students and educators exist in isolation from the prevailing socioeconomic structure.(103) The methodology and program content of *Integrar* are designed to link learning to a practice of discourse and action, with a curriculum that attends to immediate and long-term class interests. The methodology applied in the learning process is not the dictation of information; “Knowledge” the program organizers define, “ is not just a descriptive transfer of information and data, it [the learning process] is dynamic, embodied in the context in which people live and work in society; the relation between individual and collective action in the broader social context.” (Mascellani, 18) In this sense, the core disciplines that comprise the programs curriculum are examined through the lens of class relations, “preparing the student to take constructive action in an increasingly complex society.” (Mascellani, 18)

Action is an important aspect of the learning process, that is, real learning is demonstrated by the participant’s capacity to translate their intellectual understanding into concrete action. Moreover, a particularly important aspect of the programs methodological structure defines that the communication and debate of ideas at the center of the learning process is not limited to speech and writing. Knowledge can be ascertained through various mediums, art, music, dance, cinema; even physical education is considered forms of communication. For example the instruction of communication

skills is introduced in various disciplines and is not just the privilege of the language instructor. (Mascellani, 21)

At the onset of the course participants are asked to investigate a specific problem or question. This is an essential part in the transformation of the student's role from passive participant to active member of the learning process. Knowledge is acquired through participation, the result of active investigative problem solving. Methodology, in this sense, is not just a detailed structure that defines and organizes the learning process but the method through which the programs strategic objectives are achieved. The programmatic goals for the students are their active participation and organization in a democratic society. (21)

The programs disciplines are divided into pedagogical units through which the learning process develops. The learning process is divided into methodological phases developed concomitantly over the course of the modules presentation:

- a) Initial Class: The beginning of the course starts by presenting the students with the specific problems or questions that guide the learning process and subsequent debate. This discussion focuses on the course of study or investigation that will lead to an intermittent process of research and problem solving.
- b) Directed Study: Students are responsible for identifying where information may be acquired, their research design and the division of the class into work groups. These groups function intermittently as study nucleuses and as a collective within the broader class.

- c) Group work: Each group then presents its research, comparing information and a collective discussion is initiated which defines the parameters for developing a permanent dialogue. Throughout the semester this debate will guide the learning process as well as class relations.
- d) Contextualization: The learning process utilizes various mediums in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the problem. Besides reading and reviewing data an important part of the investigative process is the learner's direct contact and examination of the problem.
- e) Class room discussions: Discussions in the class are developed to help guide and organize the students' investigative process and reinforce areas where eventual weaknesses may appear.
- f) Synthesis: Students participate in the development of successive syntheses of the information. Students compile the results of their investigations as well as the concrete solutions stated in the objective of their study. An important part of the synthesis is the self-critical examination of the learning process – which is distinct from the evaluation process at the conclusion of the module.
- g) Evaluation: The evaluation of the learning process occurs through a permanent collective dialogue of reviewing the learning process. It is both a collective and self-critical analysis of the work developed over

the course of the module, making necessary adjustments while the course is still in progress.

By adopting this methodological structure the program develops an underlying understanding among its participants that learning and education are permanent aspects of life. The acquisition of knowledge occurs in many forms and moments using multiple mediums and whose results are measured in both intellectual and practical ways.

### **Evaluation**

Another critical aspect of the programs educational structure is the use of pedagogical evaluations as a permanent aspect of the learning process. Continuous evaluations are an important part of building a body of knowledge for both students and educators.

Evaluations allow all those involved in the process to continuously measure the effectiveness, recognize problems and make changes to modules already in progress.

Consequently, much like the programs methodological structure, the systemic and continuous evaluation process is an intricate aspect of the learning process that allows educators and students alike to reach the defined goals.

*Integrar's* evaluation process is based on the comparative examination of the learning process through the lens of the programs objectives. It is a critical and self-critical process between students and educators measuring individual and collective participation in the program. (Mascellani, 1999: 24-25) In this process student success is measured by reaching the objectives set out in the initial class. Both individual intellectual development as well as the general capacities of students collectively is parameters used to determine success. As Mascellani argues: "...To guarantee this, the evaluation should cover all the dimensions of the curriculum. The knowledge of each discipline, student

capacity and pedagogical dynamics of each area of study are examined through the concrete experience of the student, they are all important aspects of the evaluation process.” (1999:25) One indication of the programs success is the high rate of student retention compared to the extremely low retention rates of traditional public education institutions.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Literacy, Education and Social Inclusion***

*Integrar* was organized as a response to long years of economic recession, high levels of unemployment and historically high illiteracy rates among the working class population. These conditions placed severe constraints on the battle for union organization and working class political power. Global neoliberal transformations of the Brazilian economy set in place at the onset of the 1990’s introduced rapid technological changes in the workplace along with large scale poverty. This process led to the marginalization of significant sectors of the working class from the political and socioeconomic process. Marginalization, in this context, is the social exclusion of considerable sectors of the working class and their subsequent alienation. In this process workers are not only constrained politically, but subsequently the development working class political consciousness is curtailed as well. Examining the effects of global neoliberalism in the world of work, Marlene Goldenstein argued: “The flexible and precarious nature of work destroys social rights and does not create alternatives... there is a shift in how poverty is conceived from the public and political sphere to the non-political, where poverty is

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<sup>1</sup> According to a 1996 study by IBGE (Brazilian Institute for Geographical Studies), in the State of Sao Paulo only 25 percent of students enrolled in basic education concluded their studies and only 10 percent concluded high school. ( CUT – Avaliacao, p. 20)

viewed as a fact to be resolved through purely technical measures or through private philanthropy.” (18)

For the metalworkers union the education and literacy of workers could not simply replicate existing norms and parameters that prepared workers for the global workplace, to do so would legitimize the process of marginalization. Education and the programs pedagogical methods are viewed as a singular process that raises the social and political consciousness of workers while preparing them to advance their claims in politics and society.

An important aspect of the programs basic conceptualization is that the struggle against marginalization and the demand for social inclusion reflect integral aspects of a dialectical process essential for expanding working class power. Education is not just charitable work for the underprivileged. For the metal workers union education has become the backdrop for the deep ideological conflict emerging in contemporary society between market and non-market views of socioeconomic development. The notion of marginalization draws on Paulo Freire’s concept of culture and power, where the marginalization of disadvantaged sectors of society is viewed as the result of social, economic and political elite domination. Freire argued:

**“Admitting the existence of men “outside of” or “marginal to” structural reality, we may legitimately ask: who is the author of this movement from the center of the structure to its margin? Do so-called marginal men, among them the illiterates, make the decision to move out of the periphery of society? ...Alienated men, they cannot overcome their dependency by “incorporation” into the very structure responsible for their dependency. There is no other road to humanization – theirs as well as everyone else’s – other than the authentic transformation of the dehumanizing structure.” (48)**

Marginalization, in this context, is not just an economic casualty of global economic restructuring it is the results of social and political alienation inherit to capitalist development. The process of incorporating the victims of socioeconomic and political marginalization into the political process is critical because the logic of neoliberal globalization leads disenfranchised sectors of the working-class to adopt the logic of capital. As a result workers fail to recognize those responsible for large scale poverty and subsequently place the burden on those who are in fact its victims. In this process workers internalize their long-term unemployment as a personal failure rather than view it as a systemic effect of elite domination.

Similarly, social inclusion is not the reintroduction of marginalized sectors of society into the very structure which led to their marginalization. The re-entry of workers into the productive process is an important moment in the political process where alternative socioeconomic models of organization are developed. In this sense social inclusion is a response to neoliberal marginalization, achieved by expanding the power of those currently relegated to the fringes of the prevailing social structure. Consequently this process strengthens popular organizations among which unions figure prominently. Saulo Velasco, an instructor for *Integrar* noted that: “The learner, during the process perceives that he is not responsible for his situation. Discovering that the system of elite domination is the cause for the problems experienced in Brazil is as if someone lifted the curtain. It becomes clear that the exploitation of workers, hunger, unemployment and misery are not natural, they are social problems, the results of capitalism.” (Querubin, 83) As a result, education and socioeconomic political alternatives develop concomitantly and interface in multiple spheres of social engagement.

## **Economic Solidarity and Social Consciousness**

Along with basic education another essential aspect of *Programa Integrar* is the development of “economic solidarity” projects. These projects organize and instruct workers in economic activity where the ultimate goal is to generate income. Economic solidarity projects provide the structure and support for alternative forms of income. Likewise economic solidarity is the centerpiece where notions of social solidarity based on the organization and mobilization of once marginalized sectors of the working class emerge. Organized through the Agency for Solidarity Development (ADS), an auxiliary organization of the Central Workers Council (CUT), the union views the politics of economic solidarity as one of their critical tasks. The project perceives the education of workers or building the labor movement as essential components of the struggle for a sustainable economic development. ADS argues that their primary mission is to, “Promote the development of, strengthen, and organize worker-owned economic activities... [And that] the re-entry of unemployed and marginalized sectors of society must be accompanied by their integration into the trade union movement, contributing in this way to reinforce class organization.” (ADS – CUT/Brasil).

The concept of economic solidarity provides political alternatives and income to unemployed workers that contest prevailing notions of market-driven social development. One of the areas where the notion of economic solidarity is applied is the formation of workers cooperatives by supporting the take over of bankrupt companies. ADS and *Integrar* provide the necessary instruction for workers to develop new economic activities. The project helps reorganize production and build collective administrative forms of social organization under global capitalism. In this way the union transforms the

way power relations are structured at the point of production and the relationship between the workplace and their surrounding communities.

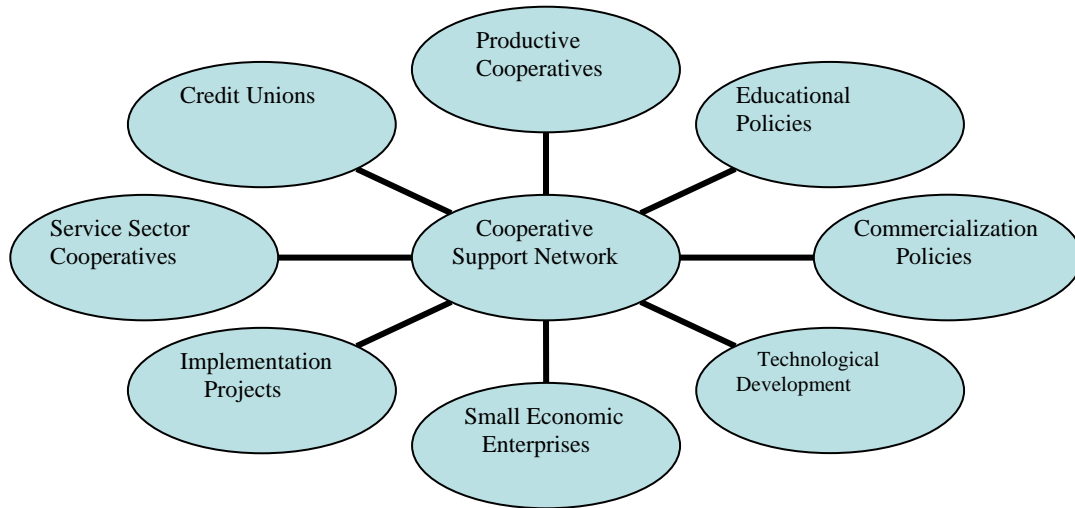
A good example of this process was the work developed by *Integrar* and ADS with the CooperZago Radiator Company in the city of Porto Alegre. One day without prior notice the company closed and the owner was preparing to remove the machinery, leaving behind a huge debt, a significant part of which was owed to workers in back wages and benefits. The metal workers union mobilized the company's workers, who, with the support of workers from surrounding plants blocked the owners attempts at removing the company's resources and occupied the plant. After winning the judicial battle to take control of production, together with ADS and *Integrar*, the workers transformed the company into a cooperative. With the support of *Integrar* workers were trained to administer the daily operations and reorganize the productive process and resume activity. Currently the company provides radiators for many large auto and agriculture machinery manufacturers. ADS and *Integrar* continue to provide training and support as the newly formed company struggles to consolidate its operations. In the newly organized cooperatives workers are trained to assume all aspects of the enterprise. The logic behind the labor-led educational and economic programs argues that, it is not sufficient to propose an alternative political project without providing workers with the tools for its implementation.

*Integrar* organizers recognize that: "The term "economic solidarity" is still a concept in development that draws on the socioeconomic experience of various social movements. It is not just an economic proposal to create work and income; "it is a process that seeks to reinforce the notions of social solidarity, born in the popular movement it points to a

future of ethical, socially just, economically viable and ecologically sustainable development.” (*Integrar* Bulletin) The concept of economic solidarity views building social consciousness as essential to the development of alternative economic activities.

Worker owned economic activities developed by ADS are part of a cooperative support network. The support network organizes and instructs workers about the responsibilities related to sustainable economic development while reinforcing notions of social consciousness and solidarity. Recognizing that the logic of the market works to constrain worker owned enterprises, ADS networks help provide access to credit, support for the commercialization of products, access to technology and professional training for alternative economic activities. The cooperative networks are organized by region and affinity of economic activity. The support system is not only a means of sustaining local economic development, but helps further the practice of social solidarity and the democratic participation in the process of economic development. For ADS, the metalworkers, and *Integrar*, economic activity is an essential part of the public sphere. An essential aspect of the cooperative support networks is that they are regulated by a “high level of societal control over the elaboration and implementation of policies that affect different sectors of society and support local economic development.” (ADS/CUT, 2004) This is no easy task in a country with historically high illiteracy rates among the working class population.

## Structure of ADS



Bulletin ADS/Cut – 2004

Eradicating illiteracy in Brazil is a monumental undertaking to say the least. It is a pervasive social problem that reflects years of elite domination and a fragmented public education system that provides limited access to schools and universities. Even taking into consideration the current government's attention to the problem, Brazilian authorities recognize the insidious existence of large scale illiteracy. "The rate of illiteracy in 2003 was 11.6%" a government study reports, "which is a reduction of 32%, from the 1992 illiteracy rate of 17.2%. Even so, this rate represents a large number of people, approximately 14.6 million Brazilians." (Brasil Alfabetizado, 01) Moreover, illiteracy among the Brazilian population is clearly delineated by region, class, race and gender. For example, in 2003 the illiteracy rate in the northeastern region of the country was 3.4 percent higher than the industrialized region of the southeast. (Brasil Alfabetizado, 01) *Integrar's* primary focus toward the unemployed adult population is a response to the

country's expansive illiteracy rates and the impositions of global neoliberalism in the economy all of which accelerated the urgency of working class education.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Unions, Politics and Public Policy: The Struggle for Hegemony***

The political resolutions approved in the metalworkers' convention during the early 1990s argued that the fundamental conflict in Brazilian society was the contradiction between two competing political projects. On one side the political agenda of "capital and large corporations" and in the opposite camp working class political interests, allied with small and mid-sized entrepreneurs. (Maia, 31) *Integrar* coordinator Marco Aurelio Spall Maia pointed out:

**“[their analysis acknowledges] a dispute for the hegemony of society and as a result of this dispute the need for unions to expand working class political interests. To achieve these goals the union’s activity should focus on two major courses of action, both of which are distinct and complimentary components of the larger struggle to transform society. First, expand the unions’ effective involvement in the general political struggles of public policy issues, such as agrarian reform, employment, industrial policies, economic reform, social security, and education, healthcare, housing, professional training among others should be placed at the forefront of the unions concerns. It was within this logic that Integrar began.” (31)**

The strategic objectives of *Integrar* reflect a broader transformation in the day-to-day work developed by unions. State and local metalworkers unions expanded their participation into the broadest political battles throughout the country. Unions support popular social movements which furthers the practice of mutual solidarity among different sectors of the working class. For example, in some regions local metalworker

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<sup>2</sup> The governments' survey indicates that the illiteracy rate among the population between 50 and 64 years was almost 7 times greater than among young people (age 15-24) and that by race illiteracy was almost 2.5 percent greater among blacks than whites, indicating that 2/3 of the illiterate population is black. (Brasil Alfabetizado, 03)

unions help sustain popular movements such as peasant land occupations and community housing cooperatives. In this sense the daily activities of the union combine daily shop floor activism with the struggles of other sectors of the working class as part of a larger process that seeks to build an alternative working class political project.

For the CNM/CUT the role of education in the struggle for hegemony is axiomatic to the broader political process. The struggle for working-class hegemony of Brazilian society required re-thinking traditional notions of education, particularly labor education, union leadership training as well as professional development courses. On one hand education is the means of building socio-political consciousness necessary for organization and mobilization. All aspects of learning are an intricate part of an alternative political project that contests the neo-liberal political alternatives being imposed on the working class. On the other hand, education, both for unions as well as for workers in general, is a comprehensive part of labors demands for greater political power. For *Integrar* the defense of working class interests in defining the structure of public education structure is an immediate as well as long-term strategic goal. As Maia points out:

**“Both educational programs for unemployed workers and the unions’ leadership training programs are indicators that we have surpassed traditional notions of working-class education...education is a continuous process that draws simultaneously on basic knowledge as well as the day-to-day experience of the union as a process that helps define the unions strategic planning and political practices... [in contrast] to the asymmetrical practice of union education with no self-critical analysis, no continuity of content or evaluation of the process.” (41)**

The program’s organizers argue that the process of building working class political power is developed by consolidating a symmetrical relationship between

education, union organization and political action; they are all components of a singular process with multiple focal points.

*Integrar* as an alternative for working-class education is not viewed as a substitute to the public education system. The program is an alternative model to the current market driven neo-liberal educational model that is rapidly being introduced. It is a means through which organized labor can intervene in defining the public policy for education while simultaneously advancing broader class political interests. As one of the program's participants stated: "It is not sufficient to know what rights we have, you have to know how to fight to ensure your rights." (Querubin, 87)

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