

A School within a School of War: Workers Making, Learning and Teaching about History

Jonathan Grossman
University of Cape Town

Abstract

In June 1988 hotel-workers in Cape Town were amongst many dismissed in the then biggest stay-away against planned anti-union attacks. For months they met daily, organising their struggle for reinstatement: the site of an ongoing collective process of radical worker education for liberation. Workers shared this through a process of documentation and solidarity celebrating their collective agency, reflecting on past, making current, and envisioning future history. A different capitalist market-driven education for competitiveness now dominates postapartheid South Africa. A reflection written in 1994 illuminates the denigration of working class collectivism, successfully resisted by the dismissed workers but even then developing.

In this article I seek to explore issues and processes in the history of worker education in South Africa. I will be doing so by initially focusing on a moment in that history: 1987–1988 at the height of the mass struggle against apartheid spearheaded by a mobilized workers' movement. To explore this moment, I examine the struggle of a group of workers in Cape Town, dismissed for participation in the then largest stay-away of June 1988. Their struggle for reinstatement over six months became a site for ongoing educational activities within the broader struggle. The particular focus is on work under the auspices of the then International Labour Research (now Resources) and Information Group (ILRIG).¹ This was one of the service organizations that emerged out of the resurgence of the trade unions and the workers' movement more broadly in the late 1970s and 1980s.² Focusing on education in the ambit of the trade unions that spearheaded the workers' movement, I explore aspects of the "school within the school of war" to lay out the approach and features of educational activity that happened at that time.³ The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1987 discussed the meaning for workers of what was, in the broader struggle, called "people's education," concluding that education should

discourage individualism, competitiveness and careerism; be directed against racism, sexism, elitism and hierarchy; promote a collective outlook and working class consciousness; be linked as part of the struggle for socialism to production "in a creative, liberating way" as opposed to entrenching exploitation; and build working class leadership of the struggle for a transformed society. Education should be a way of ensuring maximum participation and democracy; it had to serve the needs of workers and their allies and develop an understanding

International Labor and Working-Class History

No. 90, Fall 2016, pp. 133–152

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doi:10.1017/S0147547916000107

among the working class “that their struggle forms part of the world struggle against oppression and exploitation.”⁴

This approach, explicitly grounded on the liberatory role of education as part of the workers’ struggle for socialism, is contrasted with the different approach, prioritizing career development and skills training for competitiveness in the capitalist market, which has clearly become dominant in the postapartheid period: 1994 to date. This is a period that saw the coming to power of a government led by the African National Congress (ANC) through a negotiated settlement with the support of a workers’ movement that was being moved from its heights of mobilization.⁵ I draw on reflections made in 1994 as the new democracy dawned, identifying pressures that were already undermining working-class collectivism, casting into shadow and coming to deny, even as history, visions of struggle and education which foregrounded the role of ordinary working-class collectives.

ILRIG was formed in 1983 as a unit within the sociology department of the University of Cape Town. Its early work centered around the development of series of booklets designed for workers to be used in trade union worker education programs. These booklets focused on aspects of the workers’ struggle internationally. ILRIG incorporated an earlier labor history group whose booklets focused on the workers’ struggle in South Africa.⁶ Energized and emboldened by the development of worker organization, action, and the challenges and the possibilities they presented, ILRIG decided to focus some of its work on “strike support.” This was intended to more consciously site the use of its resources in the contexts of groups of mobilized workers, thereby allowing for their more effective use.

In June 1988, three million workers mobilized the then biggest stay-away in South African history.⁷ The stay-away was directed against attempts by the apartheid regime, backed by major sectors of capital and, in line with international trends, to introduce amendments to labor legislation which would severely curtail the already legally restricted rights of workers. As a result of the stay-away, the regime and capital were forced to modify their approach. In different parts of the country, employers took action against some of the workers who had been participants in the stay-away. In Cape Town, two groups of workers were among those dismissed: catering workers from two hotels and a chain of steak houses and a group of chemical workers.⁸ For six months, they struggled for reinstatement, during which time they met daily in the main hall of Community House, where the ILRIG had its offices, along with COSATU, a number of trade unions, and other “organisations of struggle.”⁹

During those six months, I was able, under the mandate of the dismissed workers, to observe, ask, listen, talk about, and participate in their struggle. Together we produced a short book about the struggle, pulsating with a collective spirit of determination, conviction, enthusiasm, pride, vision, and hope.¹⁰ But it is also a book dealing with frustration, pain, confusion, disappointment, and differences. While the dismissed workers continued their struggle for

reinstatement under harsh conditions of a state of emergency, they were conscious of their role in history. The book was an attempt to record that awareness, to create a document that embodied a memory for the future. The dismissed workers wanted to share their experience, their knowledge, and their spirit:

We are writing this book for our comrades who are with us in COSATU, for all workers everywhere, and for everyone who stands with us in the struggle. We are writing it also for our children. The day will come when they read this book and know how we struggled to make things better for them.

The ILRIG's first educational activities had been workshops structured around its existing publications. The meetings of the dismissed workers opened up and invited new possibilities. The workers were visited by what seemed like every educational NGO in Cape Town. Workers, some of whom had worked alongside each other for twenty years, were introduced to a range of ice-breakers. They became veterans of dividing up into groups, discussing questions (or whatever they chose to discuss), writing on flip charts, and reporting back. They were invited to listen, sing, act, role play, debate, answer, write letters, take photographs. The basis for selection of the participants in each and all of these activities was simple: they were the dismissed workers, meeting in Community House, struggling for reinstatement.

All of this came to be nurtured, crystallized, and reflected upon in a single ongoing process with ILRIG: the process of writing their own story, sharing and conveying their own account of a history, and a part they were playing in the making of that history.

In our struggle there are many different jobs. We decided that one job that we must do is tell workers everywhere about our struggle. We were asking for solidarity and support. We also wanted every comrade to share our struggle and to learn the lessons with us, so we can all be stronger next time.

Right at the beginning, we also decided that when our struggle is over, we must have a book so the whole of history can hear from us and share with us.

We decided that this book must be the words of all the dismissed workers. It must be a book speaking with the voice of our general meeting, not just this comrade or that comrade, or one shop-steward or our officials. So we gave our comrade from ILRIG a clear mandate. He knew what he had to do because we told him.¹¹

Reflection is a component of curriculum and central to the approach of many worker education programs and activities, but it's not often that workers get and can take the opportunity systematically and routinely to reflect collectively on their own struggle, their own knowledge and learning, the processes through which they are learning and testing knowledge, and record all of that at the same

time. But this opportunity was there—not just a school of war, but a school within a school of war.

Stories and the Analyst Trying to See, Hear, and Understand

In the process of collectively recording their own history, the program consisted primarily of workers sitting and talking among themselves about how to win reinstatement. The educational goal was the same as the political goal: to express and build support for the workers in their struggle—immediately for reinstatement, more broadly against the LRA and the apartheid regime. The curriculum centered on doing this. It was in the process of doing simply that that the workers started to convey a sense of their own place in history. They systematically broadened and extended the curriculum. With the dismissed workers, there was no issue or question that was off the agenda, and a wide range of issues and questions were brought onto the agenda. Workers searched themselves, each other, texts, history, and other people for ideas and information. They went as wide in space and as far in time as they could go.¹² They interrogated their own thinking and tried together to make sense and deepen understanding of their own experience and situation. It was documented, taken back to them, discussed, considered, and validated in the same room, by the same workers, working with each other, through the same process of critical reflection about themselves and their struggle. Over time, it came to be about their message to history: “so the whole of history can hear from us and share with us.”¹³

The dismissed workers needed to protect their own unity and tenacity in continuing their struggle—both of which were being consistently threatened. They needed support and solidarity from outside their own ranks. In the context of a school of war, the best knowledge was that which could be shared and used most widely. It was that which could build, maintain, and deepen unity and perseverance, draw on and generate the widest most effective possible support and solidarity. The issue was visited and revisited in an ongoing struggle. All of that happens in any strike or collective mobilization. What happened in this school of war, through the agreement to document the process as a workers’ book, was the conscious organized opportunity to reflect, discuss, consider, seek for ideas, and share all of that with an audience made acutely critical exactly because the value of the knowledge lay in its usefulness and appropriateness to themselves and their situation: the validation of knowledge within the search for valid knowledge.

Among the dismissed workers, as in any group, there was an unequal distribution of skills, talents, resources, and capacities. Not everyone could read, write, talk, philosophize, strategize, drive, think tactically, cook, boost morale, amuse, authenticate histories, encourage, clean, use a word processor, and so forth as well as everyone else. The collective was constituted and driven by harnessing these different capacities toward the achievement of shared tasks and goals. The process of doing that rested on the general meeting deciding how to deploy the capacities and resources of individuals. Among the dismissed

workers, as among any other collective, there were also different views. As we have seen, the collective was maintained by encompassing these different views, not suppressing them, whether through denial or intolerance. Despite numerous tensions, pressures, and problems both inside and outside the general meeting, the workers succeeded in building a form of majoritarian democracy and discipline, and an inclusive tolerance that actually worked. Individuals did speak in opposition and in anger—and did follow the decision of the majority. Sometimes individuals did speak and changed the decision of the majority.

In that situation, individuality could be encompassed as a set of capacities that could be deployed and nurtured and respected and helped to flourish within the framework and under the control of the collective. But there were also powerful pressures operating to pull individual workers out of that collectivism. These ranged from straightforward economic need to specific attempts by the employers to appeal to individual workers.

A Story about Comrade J

Comrade J was one of the most vocally militant of the dismissed workers, often elected as a delegate to various forums. During the mediation process, the need to show defiance and resolve to the employers was stressed in the General Meeting. At one point the employers replied that they knew that this defiance was not genuine because the day before mediation had begun, Comrade J had been to them separately and begged them to give her job back.

Comrade J heard what the employers were saying about her. Outside of the general meeting, she explained to me and the shop stewards that her child was in the hospital. The hospital was threatening not to treat her or release her unless the medical fees were paid. In this situation she felt desperate. It was true—she had been to the employers to ask for her job back. The reality, then, was that Comrade J took a hard line in the general meeting in front of the workers and completely abandoned that position and looked for an individual solution outside of the general meeting.

That reality can be explained in different ways. It could be argued that the comrade was simply dishonest, an opportunist, even a liar, or that she was simply expressing competitive individualist “human nature.” On a different level, it could be argued that she was swept along by bravado in the general meeting and led into saying and doing things that did not reflect her “true” self.

There is another explanation, which I believe captures part of the reality of the situation that is obscured by ideological psychologizing. It would neither moralize about Comrade J’s behavior, nor seek to reduce it to another vision of innate human nature. Instead, it would see contradiction in her behavior, as the outcome and reflection of contradiction in the situation. More specifically, it would argue that there were different possibilities in front of her, as there were in front of the other dismissed workers. One possibility was to distance herself from the collective to seek an individual solution to the problems she faced. The other possibility was to take the individual problems she faced into the collective. The fact is that

Comrade J, in her desperation and her anger, tried both of those possibilities. In both situations, she was an individual human being, the same individual human being. None of this should or needs to be denied. It is just that the individual, as part of the collective, had possibilities that she did not have when she was removed from that collective. It was exactly the existence of the collective that made certain options possible in the real history and absence from the collective that denied those possibilities and promoted others.

A Story about Mama Lizzie

Mama Lizzie was the oldest of the dismissed workers, with the longest record of employment with the same employer. She was due to go on pension about four months after the stay-away. The fact that she was dismissed, rather than retiring, meant that she lost parts of her pension. For almost six months, I did not hear Mama Lizzie say a single word in the general meeting. She was profoundly ordinary and inconspicuous, just sitting there in silence.

At a particular point in the mediation process, the bosses offered to take back a minority of workers and give small cash payments to others. Generally, the workers were uncertain and divided. Suddenly Mama Lizzie was standing up, signifying that she wanted to speak. After six months of silence, she spoke two sentences: “We said everyone together. I am not going back.” Those two sentences changed the course of the struggle and the lives of 126 dismissed workers. Because of those two sentences, the offer was rejected, the struggle continued, and eventually the workers won much less unfavorable terms.

So what does this mean? It was the same person who sat in silence for six months as spoke the two sentences after six months. Perhaps she had learned and developed over the six months, but basically she had the same personal qualities and the same personal limitations. That individual was able to affect the course of events because of the collective. She became—was made—the best tactical thinker, not simply because of the excellence of her mind, but because that excellence was embraced and appropriated by the collective who gave social life to the idea that it produced.

There is no way that the history of that struggle can be explained without recognizing the role of Mama Lizzie, nor could she have played that role without a collective operating according to workers’ democracy. And there is no way that we could see that if we look through the ideological prism of individualism. It would have focused the eye on the lawyer, the organizer, the special individual worker—the bearers of “advantaged discourse”—not the silent, ordinary, inconspicuous individual part of the collective. The lawyer would have had a special role as lawyer, the organizer as organizer, the special individual worker as special individual—and from Mama Lizzie we would only have heard (not heard) silence. The reality is that, at a decisive moment, the special role was played by Mama Lizzie. The collective followed a particular course because of her. She could become a leader, for perhaps the first and

only time in her life because the collective had given her a place of respect when she was silent and allowed her to speak when she had something to say. At the point that she became special, she was not lifted out of or drawn away from the collective, but most actively and fully absorbed by it.

There is, then, another way of seeing who is the prominent individual and of defining individual prominence. It comes out of a situation of working-class collectivism, which *is* another way of creating the opportunity for an individual to be prominent. It creates the possibility of individual prominence for the ordinary worker, not the rich or the best known or the powerful. It is an individual prominence that is constructed and exists only within the context of the collective. It depends for its existence on the collective, and the individual *as part* of the collective.

The role of the collective in creating the role of the individual must be recognized as a matter of analytical necessity if we want to understand what actually went on in the situation. We need to be able to “hear” the full volume of the two sentences and not lose them in the silence of six months if we are to understand key moments in actual history. But it is more than that. It corresponds with and reflects the fact that the role of the collective must be recognized as a political necessity if ordinary people are ever to have the chance to become historically prominent, special—the acknowledged and respected creators of their own history.

History in Worker Education

In the peculiar situation of the states of emergency, as ILRIG conducted its work, it was sometimes easier to talk about the politics of struggle in and through history. It was as if history was, in the eyes of some in power, just that. But for workers, history was never just history. If they could see themselves in that history, see that history in their current situation, it was given an immediacy and appropriated, being moved through time and space by the active agency of workers collectively searching, learning, thinking, sharing—similar to internationalism.

At one time we had a workshop about Namibia. We found out there was a stay-away there and dismissed workers there also. We wanted to teach them. So we made a letter to send them so that they will know there are workers in South Africa who know about them and support them.¹⁴

Internationalism can be an abstract concept, being rendered elusive and secondary in day-to-day practice even where there is a commitment in principle. But the dismissed workers gasped when they heard the thud of a baton on the head of a striking British miner. It was as if they felt the thud—as if they were there—as if the miner was one of them among them. It was a feature of the workers’ movement at the time, part of its essential character that solidarity with workers in struggle next door to you, round the corner, across a border,

across continents was ordinary. It shaped, strengthened, and enriched the depths of the soul of the workers' movement.

ILRIG had to struggle for resources that were specifically designed to help workers to see themselves in these ways in history. There were resources that celebrated various organizations and/or famous leaders. Some of these were popularized. In terms of content and portrayal of history, there were sources that could lay bare the oppressions and exploitation of everyday life and show respect for the role of workers as agents, foot soldiers in organization and struggle. But it was seldom that workers themselves were the famous people, that ordinary workers were placed at the center of the political universe and that the source spoke with the direct voice of workers.¹⁵ What began to happen with the dismissed workers is that they started to do this themselves. They moved from action in support of organization, admiration for others, action in loyalty to a call made by some leaders to more assertive collective self-organization and greater dependence and confidence in their own processes of doing that.

In discussion, with inputs from lawyers and NGOs, they started to reflect more directly on the importance of the state attacks against the unions, on the unions, on the unions in the broader struggle, on the state, and as their discussions proceeded, on themselves as actors in that historical story. They searched history and international struggles more deeply for the ordinary workers who made them. The content of the history they looked at was enriched by their own involvement in it. They looked with more discerning eyes because they were looking at something that they knew. They knew it because they were part of making it. And they could look at other struggles locally and internationally, in the then contemporary situation and in the historical past, with a certain developing expertise. If the accounts were received and shared as stories, there was a developing component that was analytical. They were increasingly making sense of those stories.

The lines between history, solidarity, organization, and mobilization fall away when history is about solidarity, organization, and mobilization. In the same way, the line between education and history, solidarity, organization, and mobilization falls away when workers are making history, recording that history, sharing that history, reflecting on that history, and using each and all of these to promote solidarity, organization, and mobilization. The possibilities for this are there in any struggle, any moment when workers are making history. They were seized and used by the dismissed workers, as they have been seized and used by workers across time and space. The struggle in South Africa as elsewhere has been moved forward through moments and processes of collective self-organization, involving moments and processes of collective self-education. There were organizers and educators involved in the struggle of the dismissed workers. There were also ordinary workers—a collective of ordinary workers. The organizers and the educators could be identified individually. So could each of the dismissed workers. But their self-organization and self-education resided in, depended on, was nurtured by, and came to be expressed through their collective. Visions of the future were essentially collective.

This was not simply about a content of organizational commitment or “rank-and-file-ism” injected into educational activities. It was at the heart of the process of education itself.

The best in worker education will surely embody the features and be like the best in the workers’ struggle more broadly. It will be a site where workers create and get the chance to use what they already know, share knowledge with each other, learn things they did not know, reflect, produce, decide: a site that is not just about knowing, but also about making knowledge useful by those who possess it. The process of knowing is enriched when it is made also the process of searching for ways to make knowledge useful, processes that must involve sharing that knowledge among others who can know it and use it. The knowledge becomes more real, less abstract, more a part of lived everyday reality. It is given life, not just categorized as knowledge. The organic capacity of the working class is already and always there.¹⁶ In the best of worker education, that capacity is given space, freed, allowed. It becomes a site of becoming what is possible but routinely and more often rendered impossible. As in the strike, workers together can create the chance to move beyond, to become more of who they can become. And so, as in the best of education, they enable themselves better to imagine. And to strive together toward what they can more easily imagine.

It is possible to know about these things. It is surely about using that knowledge. The question of what is to be done does not come then just from a text. It comes from what workers are confronting, coming to know and do. And so the seemingly impossible is made possible. The vision of the path forward and the future is that of collective struggle. The affirmation of knowledge and your own participation in intellectual life is the embrace and validation of the comrades around you. All of this is happening when individualized workers have to deal with the realities at the barricades of everyday life. But the imposed individualization undermines and restricts it. Breaking through and moving beyond is made easier and more likely when the education is happening in the context of a strike, when the school of war is consciously turned into a school; when the school draws on the immediate shared experience and learning of a school of war.

As time has come to show more starkly, at the heart of this is a struggle around political confidence—of workers in themselves and each other, confidence in their class, in the organic capacity of workers to become what capitalism has stopped them from becoming. From the educator it demands the belief that workers can learn, create, assess, think, dream, imagine, discuss, evaluate, validate—that workers can engage and do engage in individual and collective intellectual life—all aspects of intellectual life. It is a simple belief that is both widely obstructed and repeatedly materially confirmed in a range of activities—educational and other—that involve engagement with workers and gives them the opportunity to engage with each other collectively and reflectively. It came, in that context, to guide much of the educational work of ILRIG, as it has with worker education organizations across time and space. All of this

was the basis of the school within the school of war. If there were specificities that were important to how exactly it happened in the context of South Africa at the end of the 1980s, the basis is repeated, evident, and core to instances of worker education through the history of the workers' struggle within and across borders.

There may be universal agreement that “workers should be educated.” But what of an approach grounded in the belief and expectation that ordinary workers make the seemingly impossible possible? An approach in which ordinary workers, through collective self-education, enable themselves and each other to envision a future fundamentally different from the capitalism of their everyday? A future in which the working class controls the decisions that govern everyday life? It is the historical experience of the struggle for worker education that this is never just left to develop in that way along that path. It is undermined, obstructed, challenged, sometimes outlawed, even from within the workers' movement itself. It has to be like that, because the notion that workers can work together, organize, learn, think, create, and govern as a progressive collective carries a fundamental threat to capitalism, and is not simply or narrowly an issue in education.

As became clearer through the process, this involves a direct challenge to the educator—to support the processes of self-organization and collective self-education, or become complicit in processes that undermine them. And as was also to become clearer, if the dismissed workers could make the seemingly impossible possible, it has been made seemingly impossible again.

*Working-Class Collectivism in the Struggle*¹⁷

A photograph of the dismissed workers as a group would show several obvious differences among the people in the group. Analysis beyond the photograph would reveal additional differences. These included age, skill, formal education, language, income level, and job. Then in what sense was this group of different individuals also a collective—a specifically working-class collective? *To the Last Drop of Our Tears* shows the different features that combine to constitute that working-class collectivism.

First, the workers explained why they joined the stay-away:

The government came with their plan to make a new law to chain our unions in September 1987 ... This Labour law is the enemy of every union and every worker because:

- it makes solidarity action illegal
- it makes it harder to go on a legal strike
- it makes it easier for the bosses to dismiss workers
- it says that bosses can make our unions pay if we go on strike ...

This Bill is an attack against all workers. It is trying to weaken our unions. But our union is the strong weapon to fight against our suffering and exploitation ... That is

why we knew that we must join the struggle with all our comrades against the Labour Bill.¹⁸

The struggle was itself initiated as a defense of the collective rights of workers against a state determined to undermine and attack those collective rights. It was mobilized through a call from two mass organizations of workers.¹⁹ That obvious class unity and strength, among other factors, drew the strength of non-unionized workers. The response took the form of working-class collective action. When the workers were dismissed, they immediately turned as a group to their trade union.²⁰

At the time of the stay away [our boss] saw his chance. He thought he will throw us into the street. Maybe he was thinking that we will come back, one by one, to beg for our jobs. This time he thought he will teach us all a lesson and finish with the union. But our boss made a mistake ... We did not crawl back to him to beg for our jobs. And we did not land in the street. After we were dismissed, our union made a meeting for all the dismissed workers.²¹

They began to meet each day as a group and organize according to basic features of democratic workers' control/ workers' democracy. There was a conscious attempt to be inclusive in all the different aspects of the life of the general meeting. All tasks were rotated, including the chairing, secretarial, catering, and cleaning. Delegates to all forums were elected and mandated. Major decisions were made, often after very lengthy discussion, in and by the general meeting. Issues of gender were specifically placed on the agenda and discussed and there was increasing sensitivity to those issues as the struggle continued.²² The workers, increasingly consciously, began to take the union into their own hands:

When we sat there every day in Community House, we did not leave our struggle in the hands of officials and shop stewards only. It was the struggle of all the dismissed workers. So we started to organize ourselves ... Every com had to do what they can do ... No one could just stand and watch with folded hands.²³

Within the daily general meeting, and in all activities and decisions, there was a conscious commitment in word and action to a tolerance aimed at inclusion:

When we sat in Community House, we were not speaking softly all the time. We built a unity that everyone can learn from. But it did not just come from the sky. We had many discussions going on for a long time. Sometimes, there were some comrades who did not agree. But there was room for them to speak so that everyone could hear their ideas also. And then we could decide. Sometimes comrades were getting too tired and starting to get weak in front of all the problems. But there was room for them to speak also. It does not help if comrades must sit and keep quiet when they see a problem and do not agree with the decision.

Maybe they can see something more clearly. Maybe they are right and we will learn something from them that will help us all. There must be the chance for them to speak also. Otherwise they will sit and keep quiet. But tomorrow, they will not be there anymore ... if there is a problem we must speak honestly and then struggle by all means to solve the problem. It is a lesson that we learnt. We must give every comrade the right to say what he is thinking or what she is thinking.²⁴

The dismissed workers were conscious and proud of their collectivism. They consistently asserted their spirit of solidarity and acknowledged the need for it if their struggle was to move forward. In doing so, they gave a meaning to “community” that drew a clear line between themselves on one side and bosses on another:

No workers can win alone. We need each other. We need support from all our organisations and all our comrades. Only that way can we win. In our struggle, the first strength was our own unity. It is true that we lost a few workers. Maybe three or four left our community. They went back to ... the owner of the hotels to beg for jobs. But the rest of us would not do it. Our struggle did not just fall into the hands of a few. It did not belong to a few officials or a few shop stewards. It was the struggle of all the dismissed workers and belonged to each one of us. We stayed with each other. We were not running back to beg from the bosses.

Three or four workers that is all the bosses could get. With all the threats and the lies and the money, when we were feeling the pain all the time, they could only steal three or four workers from one hundred and twenty six. The rest of us stayed together.²⁵

During the course of their struggle, the workers gave expression to a vision of the future that belonged to them and their children. It was tied to a conscious belief of their own role together in achieving that future. They had a vision of the place in history of both the stay-away and their own role in the struggle against the LRA:

This was the biggest stay-away ever, the time when we made history.²⁶ We are proud of what we did. Some of our comrades are still unemployed, but they know they did the right thing. Even when we were suffering there in Community House, we were proud. One time in Community House, we were discussing the pain that comes in the struggle. One com said: “The worst pain is when I must see my children and know that I cannot give them the things they need.”

Another com answered like this:

That is a terrible pain. But think also about the future. In ten years’ time, what do you think your children will say? Will they say ‘I am cross with you and do not

respect you because ten years ago you could not buy me the things I needed?' No. They will say: "My mother, my father, I am proud of you because at the time of the stay away, you were there. When the dismissed workers fought for their jobs, you were there. In the struggle against the Labour Bill, you were there. In the workers' struggle ... you were there."²⁷

It is a combination of the different factors outlined above that constitute the working-class collectivism in the situation. The collectivism emerged out of situations imposed on workers exactly because they were workers and embodied a set of specifically working-class collective responses. In that, despite all the specific features of the situation, I would argue that it was essentially similar to working-class collectivism that is expressed and potential in all situations of working-class struggle. That collectivism then developed increasingly consciously because it was seen and experienced as something that was necessary and useful specifically for workers, moreover something good and desirable in itself. The collectivism lived objectively, consciously in the eyes of the dismissed workers, and also in the eyes of many observers. It was reflected in the workers' mood, action, conscious reflection, how they presented themselves to others, how they organized themselves and what they said about themselves. Of course, there were other identities and complexities and contradictions operating in the situation. The point is that the working-class collectivism operating in the situation survived and at important moments dominated these pressures and contradictions, not that it existed without them. Basic to the dynamism driving the situation was a hope and conviction that, by being together, organizing together, and acting together, the workers could collectively contribute to changing and improving the situation for all of them—and if not for them, then for their children.

The Development of the Struggle

With time, the mood of determination and defiance faced growing pressure. The workers celebrated support when it came and grew increasingly desperate when it did not.

Sometimes when our spirit was low, the message of support or food came from our comrades outside ... Even if the food was not enough, or the money was not enough, our spirit was stronger ... even words from a comrade can fill the heart and the stomach of workers who are hungry and tired.²⁸

Sometimes, when we got a promise and nothing happened, or there was a good idea and nothing happened, it ate our spirit. We came to this struggle because COSATU and our union called us and we could see that the Labour Bill was the enemy of all workers. But when we were wounded by the bosses because of this struggle, we did not get enough support.²⁹

After very lengthy delays, the case of the dismissed workers was taken to the Industrial Court and then into a process of mediation.³⁰ Although they had agreed to this step, the workers began to reflect a sense that control of their own struggle was beginning to move out of their hands—a key part of working-class collectivism was beginning to be undermined:

It was a hard time. We were going this way and we were going that way. First we thought one thing, then we heard something else. We discussed for a long time. Then we made groups to discuss some more ... And we decided we must have more time also to discuss everything at home.

The next day we met and we continued with our discussion. Many comrades got up to speak. They spoke about our unity. They reminded us: ... Our spirit is not dead. We will not let it die.³¹

After two very limited offers from the employers had been rejected by the workers, the employers then agreed to technically reinstate all the workers but insisted on retrenchment of about half of them on economic grounds at the same time. The effect of this was reinstatement with some back pay for half and relatively large retrenchment packages for the other half:

Suddenly there was nothing for us to do except wait. Our struggle was not coming from Community House anymore. It was coming from the office of the lawyers. We could see the lawyers thought it was time to stop our struggle, even if they did not say so. By this time, we were tired. It was hard to keep our unity. Some of our comrades were getting confused and too tired. So when this last offer from the bosses came back to our general meeting from mediation, we took it ... We were not taking it and saying thank you. We did not sit all this time in Community House and forget what we were fighting for. Our demand was for full reinstatement and back pay for everyone. But without more support from outside, we could not see the way to continue the struggle to win that demand ... We did not get all our rights, but we did not let the bosses have a victory. In the end, each comrade got something. And we knew that every job and every cent came because of the way we organized and fought our struggle together.³²

The workers were very clear about the memory of their struggle that they wanted carried into history. It was a memory that fully reflected the spirit of working-class collectivism that had sustained their struggle:

In our struggle, we had to go in front of the court of the bosses. We did not get justice from them. We had to fight against a law coming from the parliament of Botha and the bosses.³³ That law was attacking us. Now we have told you the truth about our struggle. We are standing in front of you. We are asking you: Did we do the right thing?

To the whole world and the whole of history we are giving our own answers ... We know that in the parliament of the workers, the law will be there to protect and

help workers. We know that we did the right thing ... The seeds we planted will grow. Our children will inherit the fruits of our struggle.³⁴

*Remembering and Forgetting Working-Class Collectivism: A Reflection from the “Dawn of Democracy” in 1994*³⁵

To the Last Drop of our Tears embodies the vision and memory of what was very recent history at the time it was researched and written. It was written in part to carry that memory into the future “even for a hundred years.” We are now in that future. With images of mass celebration of South Africa’s freedom in our minds, it might seem that history has moved in a direction that affirms working-class collectivism. Without many, many specific struggles involving many, many ordinary workers like the dismissed workers, those celebrations would never have been possible. Is history going to remember that? Is the working-class collectivism of the past as embodied in the struggle of the dismissed workers going to be an active element of hope for the future? Are a million Mama Lizzies whose names are not famous going to be valued and respected as makers of their own history because they were part of working-class collectivism, because “when we made history, we were there”? Despite the celebration and what there is to celebrate, despite the objective pressures for working-class collectivism which are essential to capitalism, I would argue that the context in which workers remember and forget and analysts try to document and understand is fundamentally ideologically and politically hostile to working-class collectivism.

The specific experience of working-class collectivism that the dismissed workers built ran counter to many pressures serving to undermine working-class collectivism. I have spoken with many of them several times since the general meeting disbanded. A structure has gone and history has moved on, but in terms of undermining aspects of working-class collectivism, it is more than that. The dynamism and hope embodied and experienced in what they once did has dimmed also. A once proud, confident, and defiant collective has become a disorganized set of individuals. That is not surprising. It mirrors broader social processes that undermine working-class collectivism in practice, partly through asserting, celebrating, and apparently rewarding only competitive individualism. An imposed ideology of competitive individualism is experientially reinforced in daily working-class life.

The workers who were part of the Dismissed Workers’ Collective are experiencing the daily disintegrating effects of a capitalist economic crisis. They have been living through a process of transition that, whatever else characterized it, involved decisions about the future of society and their lives being taken at levels and through processes increasingly remote. Actual historical developments in front of the eyes of workers show their own leaders endorsing rich, powerful, and prominent individuals as the key actors in making history—and workers “escaping” the conditions of working-class life only as individuals who rise above that life. As far as collective organization is concerned, it is

increasingly recognized that bureaucratic tendencies and practices have significantly increased both in the unions and the ANC over the last few years. There is an increasingly powerfully asserted opposition to collective mass action coming from newly elected government leaders and unionists, so that a political belief in the value of aspects of working-class collectivism is consistently undermined.

Although there are contradictory pressures, all of this serves to undermine a sense among workers of their own collective role and the role of their collective action in making their own history. The simplest way of “explaining” historical forces and processes that undermine working-class collectivism is to presume that it was never there. Analytically, the first casualty of this approach is a clear vision of a history that was changed and possibilities in history that were real but did not and have not been developed. Politically in lived experience, the casualty is the pride and confidence of ordinary people in what they once did and once achieved and once became, despite all the difficulties. Memory of all of that has dimmed over time. But it is not the passage of time that is central in determining what will be remembered and what will be forgotten. It is the context of remembering that dims or illuminates memories of particular parts of history.

There is a vision of history being constructed that defines the sharing of working-class collectivism out of history in favor of a history of resistance to apartheid shared between labor and capital. The notion is being popularized through the mass media, even when it runs counter to the experience of millions of workers because a large measure of control of the means of recording history and constructing the picture of what will be “remembered” is directly or indirectly in the hands of capital. That vision is in turn being embodied in a developing conventional wisdom that projects that cooperation into the future. It is a vision of the future in which individualism and competition are rendered natural and inevitable exactly parallel to a vision of the past in which working-class collectivism is rendered romanticist, “unreal.” Devaluing, distorting, and denying working-class collectivism in history that has passed is part of the political process of removing it as a possibility in the history to come.

The responsibility for developing this kind of memory and conventional wisdom does not belong to employers and their propagandists alone. The documented history of the dismissed workers and the nondocumented history of many, many workers like them show a developed form of collective democracy and tolerance within the framework of collective decisions as a major part of their struggle. But from inside the organizations of the working class there has been developed conventional wisdoms asserting that there was no tradition of tolerance and no culture of democracy inside the working class.

There is a massive set of ideological pressures for workers to “forget” their own experience of building democracy and tolerance and to “remember” that they learned about these things in voter education workshops and the somewhat strange experience of standing in silence as rows of individuals, waiting to make their individual crosses alone and in secret. Similarly, workers are under immense contextual pressure that encourages them to see the role of individuals and organizations in freeing them while the vision of their own role in freeing

and unbanning individual leaders and organizations is made dimmer. In the same way, on the issue of the June 1988 stay-away, the contextual climate illuminates lawyers, leaders, and employers changing the Labour Law and leaves vision of the stay-away as, at most, a shadowed backdrop. Their own experience of building a living and tolerant democracy as an active, historically relevant working-class collective which was absolutely central to changing the labor law is fading into the backdrop and being shaded out of existence.

A vision of the past that is ideologically denuded of the working-class collectivism in that past limits options for the future. It defines what once happened and once was real out of existence. As forgetting is contextually imposed on the memory and experience of working-class collectivism, workers are being stripped of part of the hope and confidence in what they can do together as a working-class collective. The absence that is thereby defined into existence is made to appear both natural and inevitable. What remains are memories that, in a context of competitive individualism, grow increasingly distant and dim and, to the extent that they survive, are apparently romanticist. They are locked up in those who lived the experiences. They themselves are subjected to pressures that impose forgetting. And in time, there are new generations who lack the experience that generated and still partly protects the memory.

In South African history, we have already seen memories being dimmed and then illuminated, taken away, and then recovered. At the root of this political change was the rise of mass action that, among other things, served to change the context of remembering. Oral history was central to the process of recording once contextually denied, and then contextually revitalized and reinvigorated memories of past resistance. In the future, as in the past, political action itself will bring the changes through which memories of working-class collectivism will again be contextually illuminated.

But what about research now? We all face questions of what will be researched, whose voice we will hear and present, what we will try to illuminate, who we will try to share knowledge with, how we understand what is there to be seen and heard, how we think voices and visions should be authenticated—the different stages of the research process. Very often, those of us who are involved in academic life are under very powerful pressures to automatically accept imposed answers infested with an ideologized individualist perspective and ideologized notions of expertise, authentication, and true knowledge. All of these undermine our vision and hearing of working-class collectivism. There are, of course, many different paths that can and should be followed to develop a comprehensive understanding of working-class history and the place of the working-class in history. I think that research into working-class struggles will be better research, more accurately reflecting the situation, if it

- systematically seeks to explore the dynamism of working-class collectivism;
- tries to document the voice of working-class collectives in a participatory way;

- is designed to be accessible to workers and respects the fact that workers may want their views to be shared with other workers, and
- involves working-class collectives as active participants in authentication of accounts of their own history.

In the current context there is an avalanche of individualizing pressures that act to suppress and bury memory of the dynamism and hope of the collectivism that workers have created and experienced historically. An active attempt to document remembering together in order to share a memory of collectivism is a small part of what is necessary to compensate for that.

Historical documentation is one small part of the process that is involved in preparing memories and remembering. It can also be one small part in the process of distorting memories and forgetting. But it is a very large part of the activity and work of the historical analyst. People who cannot read or write and who have not been allowed to know that they can be in charge of their own history rely on others who have access to the means of recording history to do it with them and for them. I cannot see the way of being with and for a collective without a sense of collectivism in history, and knowledge of and a determination to resist the ideologically individualizing forces that interfere with hearing and seeing and understanding that collectivism. That is a sober and measured way of putting it. There is a more emotional but, to me, equally valid way of putting it. Unless we have eyes and ears consciously turned toward collectivism, we become accomplices in denying its existence and accessories after the fact in stealing the authenticity of memories of that collectivism. And with that theft goes some of the hope of an alternative that is better than the competitive aggressive individualism of capitalism that is tearing the world apart.

But there is a much more exciting way of seeing the same thing. Collectivism has allowed ordinary workers to make history that, without them and otherwise, would have been impossible. Collectivism allows a million Mama Lizzies to lead a million different struggles and make themselves part of their own history and determine its course. Capturing, documenting, and recording working-class collectivism is capturing a process through which so much suppressed human creativity and progressive energy and dynamism and sharing can and has been unleashed. This process has made a horrible past better. I would argue that for the millions of workers who have been involved in it, it has been the best part of that horrible past. It has been a process creating the best parts of the present. In that memory of the working-class collectivism, which was real and could be made real by a million Mama Lizzies, is an active element of hope for the better future to be made by millions more Mama Lizzies.

NOTES

1. There was and is active debate and sometimes different views among people who were and are involved in ILRIG around issues raised in this article. The views expressed were and are

my own. ILRIG describes itself currently: “ILRIG is an NGO providing education, publications and research for the labour and social movements in South and Southern Africa. The main focus of our work is globalization. Our work on globalization is informed by the view that globalization is not a heightened form of international integration but an attempt to restructure class relations so as to restore capitalist profitability. Globalization is neither neutral nor inevitable. There is an alternative!” <http://www.ilrig.org/2014/index.php/about-us/what-is-ilrig> (accessed July 20, 2015).

2. I worked with ILRIG during the 1987–1992 period.

3. The understanding of strikes as schools of war is drawn from Lenin and became widely used in worker education and the workers’ movement more generally in the 1980s. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *On Strikes* (Moscow, 1975).

4. L. Cooper, S. Andrews, J. Grossman, and S. Vally, “Schools of Labour and Labour’s Schools: Worker Education under Apartheid,” in *The History of Education Under 1948–1994: The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened*, ed. P. Kallaway (Cape Town, 2002), 111–33.

5. The transition in South Africa and the processes of demobilization involved are elaborated in J. Grossman and T. Ngwane, “Looking Back, Moving Forward,” in *Searching for South Africa*, ed. S. Essof and D. Moshenberg (Pretoria, 2011), 160–98.

6. ILRIG describes its earlier work in this way: “In its early years ILRIG became known for the publication of popular worker history materials, particularly booklet histories of workers in Botswana, Brazil, Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya, and Bolivia. In more recent years ILRIG’s overall focus has shifted to the process of globalisation, with a number of projects linked to contributing to a working-class critique of the free market and the exploration of alternatives to TNC dominance. ILRIG’s constituency has also changed in recent years with its orientation now jointly towards the emerging social movements and the trade unions, with a view to facilitating greater unity between these two initiatives within the working class.” <http://www.ilrig.org/2014/index.php/about-us/what-is-ilrig> (accessed July 20, 2015).

7. A stay-away is similar to a general strike. In South Africa it was developed as a form of mass action in which workers stayed away from work, remaining and often mobilizing in the black group areas in which they were forced to live by apartheid legislation. On the stay-away of June 1988, see K. von Holdt, “June 1988: Three-Day Stay-Away against New Labour 1988 Labour Bill,” *South African Labour Bulletin* 13 (1988): 51–65; Labour Monitoring Group, “Stayaway Survey, June 6–8,” *South African Labour Bulletin* 13 (1988): 66–71.

8. I worked with both groups of workers. This article is primarily concerned with the hotel workers.

9. Community House, which survived bombing by the apartheid regime in 1986, was declared a heritage site in 2012. A plaque inside the hall outlines the context and struggle of the dismissed workers and reads, “They made this hall their place and organized not just their own struggle but support and solidarity with many others.” As the dismissed workers put it at the time, “One day in our struggle we were singing. ... Sometimes comrades from other organisations ... came and joined us. They told us: ‘We can hear you all over our building. The spirit of the dismissed workers is everywhere in Community House. Everyone is feeling stronger because of the dismissed workers.’” Dismissed Workers Collective of Vineyard, Townhouse and Spurs, *To the Last Drop of Our Tears*. (Cape Town, 1989), 15.

10. The language most used in the general meeting was Xhosa, which I cannot speak. I relied on translation and the fact that almost all of the workers were fluent in English. I have tried to keep the vocabulary, grammar, and orality of the workers’ spoken English in the book. For a discussion of the research process and associated issues, see J. Grossman, “Even for a Hundred Years,” paper presented to the 1989 History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand. For a discussion of the dismissed workers, changes after their struggle ended, and associated issues, see J. Grossman, “Research as Engagement: Political Issues in Research with the Rank and File”, in *Research as Engagement*, ed. K. Forrester and C. Thorne (London, 1993).

11. *To the Last Drop* 60.

12. J. Grossman, “Workers and Knowledge,” *First International Conference on Researching Work and Learning* (Leeds, 1999), 207–17.

13. *To the Last Drop*, 60.

14. *Ibid.*, 12.

15. A much valued exception was M. Makhoba, *The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers* (Johannesburg, 1984). See also J. Barret et al., *Vukhani Makhosikazi* (Nottingham, 1982); Gordon S., *A Talent for Tomorrow* (Johannesburg, 1985); H. Perold, *Working Women* (Johannesburg, 1985); L. Callinicos, *Working Life* (Johannesburg, 1987), 66–71; Lacom-Sached, *Freedom from Below: The Struggle for Trade Unions in South Africa* (Durban, n.d.).

16. Gramsci A. “Once again on the organic capacities of the working class,” in *Selections from Political Writings* eds. Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978).

17. See J. Grossman, “Individualism and Collectivism,” paper presented to the 1994 International Oral History Conference, Columbia, 1994.

18. *To the Last Drop*, 4.

19. Namely, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU).

20. For more details about the union, see J. Grossman, “Even for a Hundred Years.”

21. *To the Last Drop*, 7.

22. I am pointing to progress in these areas, not the creation of perfect democracy in one struggle.

23. *To the Last Drop*, 8.

24. *Ibid.*, 18.

25. *Ibid.*, 21.

26. *Ibid.*, 5.

27. *Ibid.*, 58.

28. *Ibid.*, 33.

29. *Ibid.*, 27.

30. The workers were caught between having to rely on lawyers and wanting some form of control over them. It was not fundamentally different from their relationship to a researcher. The instruction from the general meeting to the lawyers was “no tricks and no lies.” See *To the Last Drop*, 38 and elsewhere. It was ironic that legal advice was that the draft of the book did not contravene state of emergency regulations, but did slander the lawyers and the employers. We nonetheless proceeded with publication, without any changes.

31. *To the Last Drop*, 38–44.

32. *Ibid.*, 48.

33. P. W. Botha was then the president of South Africa.

34. *To the Last Drop*, 58.

35. The assessment that follows was written in 1994. The situation, events, and processes it refers to are those that were obtained at that time, and the observations it contains were made at that time. It was presented to the International Oral History Conference, Columbia University, New York, in October 1994. I would be happy to send any interested reader a copy. I have chosen to leave it as it was written in 1994 without change. I do so for two main reasons: firstly, I believe the issues and challenges identified are, if anything, more pressing in the current situation; secondly, with notable exceptions, including ILRIG as it currently is, workers’ education in the “new South Africa,” has largely become very different from the school within the school. It is about skills development, geared toward productivity and competitiveness at a time of extended rolling capitalist crises. This is not something that has just happened out of nowhere. Its roots were being laid in the collaboration, accommodations, and choices made even before the ANC came to power. In 1994, in the context of dawn of the “new democracy,” there was an emerging tendency casting into shadow and denigrating the role of workers as collectives in making the history that was then being celebrated. That tendency has developed and come to dominate as the ANC has moved from standing at the fore of a broader liberation movement to government in the capitalist state, implementing policies framed by neoliberalism. The denigration and trivialization of working-class collectivism pointed to in what follows below has become part of now mainstream workers’ education itself.