

Obituary

Robert Lambert (1945–2019)

Edward Webster, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Rob Lambert, my friend, colleague and comrade, has died; a conversation has ended. Rob had a dream. Can that dream be recovered in today's world of narrow nationalism, xenophobia and uncontrolled global capitalism?

I first met Rob when he visited our home in Essex Grove in Durban in 1973. It was in the wake of the mass strikes of black workers at the height of apartheid. We began a conversation on why previous attempts at building sustainable organisations for black workers in South Africa had been crushed. Rob was already a committed activist who had helped to organise workers through the Young Christian Workers (YCW). He had also helped to form a Funeral Benefit Fund that would become the nucleus of the new unions that were to emerge in Durban in the early 1970s. In fact, he was ahead of his contemporaries in working before the 1973 strikes with progressive trade unionists, such as Harriet Bolton, in Central Court in downtown Durban. For Rob, his commitment to the struggle of workers and the Marxist theory that framed his thinking ran parallel with an equally deep and very private belief in the values of the Catholic Church.

The conversation that we began that day forty-six years ago continued to evolve over the years and never really ended. I said to Rob at the time that maybe he should explore the lessons we could learn from these attempts at worker organisation. Rob had a deep and enduring curiosity about the meaning of life and how we could create a better, more peaceful and just world. He came back to me, nearly ten years later. Rob had been persuaded by Rick Turner, a political science lecturer and mentor to many, to study at Warwick University in England. When we met again, Rob had completed his Masters degree there under the direction of the leading left intellectual of our generation, Martin Legassick. He now wanted to do a PhD on the history of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), the largest of the organisations of black workers that had struggled unsuccessfully for recognition in the 1950s.

I readily agreed and so began a deeper, more structured intellectual relationship and friendship. Much to my delight labour historian Phil Bonner, who shared our commitment to worker organisation, agreed to co-supervise the thesis. Quite early on in his research Rob developed a complex argument about SACTU. On the one hand, he saw their political links with the Congress movement as a major reason for their growth. But on the other hand, he felt if they came too close to these organisations, and to the African National Congress (ANC) in particular, they would lose their independence and working-class agenda. For Rob, it was the workers through their trade unions who should play the leading role in the evolving national liberation struggle. Importantly, Rob was unequivocally opposed to the decision taken by the Congress movement to conduct an armed struggle. He strongly opposed violence in all its forms.

I recall a heated exchange between Rob and a student leader at the time (now a politician in a left party) over Rob's argument to my third-year industrial sociology class in the mid-1980s over violence as an instrument of struggle. Rob argued persuasively that had the leaders of SACTU focused on building workplace organisation rather than forming Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, we would have had a powerful internal workers' movement that would

have presented a substantial challenge to the apartheid state in the 1970s.

Indeed, it was the violence that engulfed South African townships in the mid-1980s that led Rob and his wife Lynne to decide to immigrate to Perth in Australia. Rob was a deep family man and the birth of his twin sons in October 1987 changed his view of the future. I recall a conversation where Rob expressed his strong opposition to his sons having to undertake compulsory military service at the age of eighteen, a requirement at the time for all white boys. But, the decision to leave for Perth was more complex than this. Rob's mother was an Australian. She had met Rob's father, a seaman who was subsequently the harbour master in Durban, during World War 2 on one of his assignments across the Indian Ocean to Perth.

After Rob arrived in Australia in 1988, he began developing contacts with the labour organisations emerging in South East Asia. He visited the Philippines, then Malaysia and Indonesia. He was shocked by their working conditions, the long hours they worked and the harsh responses of management and the state. But he was inspired by the women and men he met and it reminded him of the struggles of black workers in apartheid South Africa. He decided to set up a network of democratic unions in the Indian Ocean. He tried to get support from the International Labour Organization but eventually found a home in the union movement in Western Australia.

The network, which was to become the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR), first met in Perth in 1991. Delegates came from all over Asia – from India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia and Korea – but most importantly for Rob, from the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU), represented by a young Zwelinzima Vavi. The goal of the initiative was to challenge neo-liberal globalisation by building a global Southern labour movement. It was an extraordinarily ambitious and imaginative response to the calls for protectionism against the ultra-cheap labour power of Asia. But for Rob, organised workers in Australia and South Africa, despite substantial differences, had a common interest in helping to build strong democratic unions in Asia.

SIGTUR grew at a modest but steady rate, expanding over time; its network included unions from Brazil and Argentina. But it was an uphill battle and Rob was deeply disappointed with the way COSATU was incorporated into the state and, to an extent through its investment arm, into capital. He felt their priorities had changed as they came to represent the permanently employed rather than organising the growing number of precarious workers. They were no longer the poor people's movement he had supported in his Durban days. Their leaders were now part of the new South African elite.

Rob's idea of a new labour internationalism was gaining interest in the world of labour studies. In 2000 Rob was approached by the radical journal of geography, *Antipode*, to write an article on the new labour internationalism. This began a period of research collaboration between us that culminated in an award-winning book, *Grounded Globalization: Labour in the Age of Insecurity*. Written with our colleague Andries Bezuidenhout, we spent many hours criss-crossing the Indian Ocean, and later the Pacific, as we "grounded" an understanding of how workers lived their lives, adapted to the discipline of the market, and sometimes vigorously contested it. At the core of the book was a "contextual comparison" between workers in the white goods industry in South Africa, Australia and Korea.

We framed the book in what we termed a Polanyian problematic; essentially this posits a tension between the expansion of the market into all areas of social life and society's "counter-movement" resisting marketisation. Evoking Rick Turner, we entitled the final chapter "The Necessity for Utopian Thinking". It was a plea for "real utopias" based on the emerging democratic alternatives to neo-liberalism.

Rob pursued the idea of an alternative to neo-liberalism with dogged determination. In 2012

he persuaded SIGTUR to establish the Futures Commission, whose goal would be to develop concrete economic, social and political alternatives to neo-liberal globalisation. The point of departure in his contribution to the book that came out of the Futures Commission – *Challenging Corporate Capital: Creating an Alternative to Neo-liberalism* – was David Harvey’s idea of a movement of the dispossessed. In the concluding chapter Rob draws a distinction between the physical violence of dispossession under early capitalism with the psychological violence of neo-liberal dispossession, and the fear and anxiety accompanying financialisation, job loss and the destruction of the earth.

In this chapter Rob expresses his deep disappointment in the “notable decline in [unions’] organic connections and common campaigns with civil society and environmental movements, particularly in South Africa and Brazil”. He ends with a call to rethink the relationship between political parties, social movements and the state:

Social democratic parties [he wrote] assert a strict delineation of boundaries on the role of trade unions and civil society movements. The party decides economic policy. In the current era this has resulted in an unshakeable commitment to neo-liberal restructuring. The trade union role is limited to bargaining on wages and conditions, and there is no scope for civil society movements to play a role. This segregation has muted the unions and given corporations and finance capital a free rein. A different set of relations between party, unions and social movements is needed, in which the basic role of the party is to build the strength of a movement of the dispossessed so that society has the capacity to mobilise to protect its needs (Lambert, 2016: 72).

In pursuing his dream Rob showed moral courage and unshakeable integrity, often in the face of the scepticism of his colleagues. It hurt him but it did not change his commitment. Indeed, he developed an impressive output of scholarly publications and was appointed Winthrop Professor of Employment Relations at the University of Western Australia’s Business School. Rob did more than anyone else I know to develop a Southern approach to labour internationalism. He conceived and developed the imaginative attempt to bring together over a thirty-year period a network of democratic trade unions in the Global South. This inspiring story of women and men who continue to believe in the common fate of humanity and the obligation of the strong to support the weak is captured in Robert O’Brien’s recently published book, *Labour Internationalism in the Global South: The SIGTUR Initiative*.

In paying tribute to Rob, I must also pay tribute to Lynne, who was a tower of strength throughout their married life and especially after he was diagnosed two years ago with Lewy Body Dementia. He bravely faced the dreadful challenges thrown at him by the condition until 2018 when his health declined rapidly. He died in his sleep at his home in Perth on 20 May 2019.

REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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