

Global Issues

Hamba kahle, Eddie Webster: Aluta continua!

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On 5 March 2024, the *Global Labour Journal* lost one of its founding editors, the South African sociologist Eddie Webster. He was also one of the early members of the two networks that support the journal, the Global Labour University and RC 44. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that we, as editors, are orphaned by Eddie's passing. We owe him a huge debt as he has worked tirelessly, through his research, teaching, mentoring of young scholars and institutional activism to build a truly global field of labour studies. Many powerful obituaries have paid homage to him; here we want to reflect specifically on his contribution to the global labour studies our journal seeks to expand.

As capitalism has, from one crisis to another, become ever more pervasive and seemingly irresistible, the counter-power of organised labour appears to be waning; some even go so far as to argue that the working class is disappearing. What Eddie's work has shown, time and again, is that the resistance of the exploited does not die because some organisations lose power; however it takes forms that often differ from what members of the latter are used to. Precarious workers, whether they collect and recycle garbage or deliver food in large cities such as Johannesburg, Cairo, or Sao Paulo, often do not have clearly identified employers. Many formal workers thus find it difficult to consider them as peers, and yet, these precarious workers often organise, struggle, and seek to build class organisations. The latter may or may not resemble unions – and they are, much like unions themselves, not devoid of internal tensions.

Looking for common traits across diverse situations, experimenting with analytical instruments that help make sense of a changing, at times concealed, world of work – these were some of Eddie's recurring endeavours that many of us consider foundational. His scientific (and political) originality lies in the explicit decision to take seriously the many less visible workers who toil at the “margins” of society (and of statistical records), but often at the heart of the economy, and to put them at the centre of his analysis. Eddie has consistently sought to promote a global outlook for labour studies, one that would be informed, empirically but also theoretically, by the situation of all those who have to work to survive.

While his work was rooted in Southern Africa, Eddie indeed understood that the scope of labour studies, and activism, had to be global and, crucially, critical: The rise of black trade union struggles in South Africa from the 1970s, which Eddie analysed in seminal contributions, is a case in point. In spite of his unwavering support for the anti-apartheid struggle and the independent trade union movement, he did not hesitate to highlight and explore the latter's failure to respond to the challenges of neoliberal globalisation, and to the rising casualisation of labour. In one of the many important volumes he co-edited, *Crossing the Divide* (Webster et al., 2017), he thus brought together a series of analyses of how to bridge the organising gap between permanent and precarious

workers in Ghana, South Africa and India.

At the GLJ, we pride ourselves, as Eddie did, on encouraging and supporting the publication of high-quality research (rigorous research that does not shy away from asking big questions) from the Global South on labour and labour movements. This by no means entails ignoring or rejecting critical scholarship from the Global North, as is clear from Eddie's enthusiastic engagement with and deployment of the power resources approach, including in this journal (Schmalz et al., 2018). The point is to refine, empirically and theoretically, existing frameworks by drawing on diverse cases and asking a simple yet uncompromising question: do they help us understand, and change, the world? Through his astonishingly rich academic output, Eddie Webster has put Southern African labour studies at the heart of global analyses; we hope to see the day when union renewal strategies will build on the experience of precarious worker militancy.

We are therefore both sad and happy to present, in our Reviews section, two brilliant engagements with Eddie's latest book, *Recasting Workers' Power - Work and Inequality in the Shadow of the Digital Age*, co-written with Lynford Dor, Kally Forest, Fikile Masikane and Carmen Ludwig, and published in late 2023. We had planned a book symposium which would have included Eddie's response to the reviews; he was, as always, excited about engaging in a dialogue. Tragically, his passing brought our plans to an abrupt halt, and leave a profound void in the world of labour studies. In this section, we present the reflections of prominent scholars Michael Burawoy and Alex Mohubetswane Mashilo, who analyse in depth the arguments and contributions of Webster's book and life work. Through their reviews, we not only pay tribute to Webster's legacy but also seek to foster an enriching dialogue about the challenges and possibilities for workers to organise in the digital age. We hope that this initiative will become an annual tradition of the *Global Labour Journal*, where we discuss important books in our field. Inaugurating this section with Eddie Webster's last book is our modest way of honouring his memory, and we are exploring other ideas that we will share with you in the next issues.

References

- Schmalz S., C. Ludwig and E. Webster (2018) The power resources approach: Developments and challenges. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(2): 113–134.
- Webster, E. A.O. Britwum and S.K. Bhowmik (eds.) (2017) *Crossing the Divide: Precarious Work and the Future of Labour*, Durban: UKZN Press