Workers’ Education in Malawi

By: Wezi Shaba and Paliani Chinguwo

1.0. Introduction
Trade unions in Malawi, just like the world over, provide various services to their membership. These services include: grievance handling (representation), advisory and counseling, collective bargaining process and Workers’ education (WE). Within the trade union movement in Malawi, workers’ WE is understood as learning activities and opportunities that are provided by trade unions primarily targeting the union membership.

The education department at the Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU) plays a pivotal role in coordinating and conducting Workers Education (WE) in Malawi. In most instances, it is the MCTU that technically supports educational programs targeting the affiliates. However, some affiliates also conduct WE activities that are directly funded by their respective cooperative partners other than through MCTU.

1.1. Summary of the study
This research focused on the aims, content and forms of WE activities in Malawi which are provided by MCTU and some of its affiliates. The two key findings of this study are that:

- Trade unions in Malawi have significantly failed to adequately inculcate politically charged social consciousness among their membership that would eventually enable the workers become politically active in the affairs of the nation. Throughout this paper, this is referred to as political consciousness.
- WE in Malawi lack key elements that would inculcate a politically charged awareness among workers’ belonging to common interests and common situations. Throughout this paper, this is referred to as class consciousness.

1.2. Socio-economic and political context
Malawi is a small landlocked country in Southern Africa bordered by Mozambique in the South and the east, Zambia to the west and Tanzania to the east and north. It covers an area of 118, 484 square kilometers, of which approximately 20 percent is water. Malawi was called Nyasaland during the British colonial rule which stretched from 1891-1963. It was part of the federation of Rhodesia (Zambia and Zimbabwe) and Nyasaland (Malawi) from 1953 to 1963.
Malawi attained self-government status and independence in 1963 and on 6th of July 1964 respectively before becoming a republic on 6th of July 1966. Since then, for almost three decades, Malawi was ruled by a dictatorial Malawi Congress Party (MCP) government under the leadership of Dr. Hastings Banda till it transformed back into a multiparty democracy in June 1993.

Malawi has a very fragile economy which heavily depends on rain fed agriculture. Besides it has a weak industrial base. Malawi’s agricultural sector is the mainstay of the economy which provides livelihoods to 80 percent of the population. It accounts for 90 percent of export earnings and about 35 percent of GDP. Malawi’s largest export is tobacco which generates 60 percent of export earnings. Maize remains the staple crop and the most critical crop in terms of domestic consumption and land use (Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, 2005 & Ministry of Labour et al, 2012).

According to the Government of Malawi (GoM), unemployment rate in Malawi has remained impressively low since 2008 (Ministry of Development Planning and Cooperation, 2011). For instance, 2006 and 2007 registered unemployment rates of 6 and 3 percent respectively (ibid, 2010). This entails that according to GoM, at least 95 percent of the population has been employed since 2008. However, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report of 2010 indicates that 80 percent of the people employed in Malawi live on less than USD 1.25 a day. This then implies that a majority of the people in Malawi who are claimed by the government to be employed, do not have decent jobs.

Unfortunately, Malawi does not have functioning labour market information systems in place and no comprehensive labour market surveys have been undertaken over the past three decades (Ministry of Labour et al, 2012). Hence it is not possible to give a reliable and accurate picture of the entire labour market. However, estimates show that the formal economy constitutes less than 15 percent of the workforce whereas over 85 percent of the workforce plies trade in the informal economy (ibid).

In the agricultural sector, it is estimated that women constitute 70 percent of full time farmers, carry out 70 percent of the agricultural work and produce 80 percent of food for home consumption (Ministry of Gender, Child Welfare and Community Services, 2004).

**Table 1: Estimated percentage employment distribution by industry**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th></th>
<th>2008</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total M F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Total M F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Total M F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, forestry and fishing</td>
<td>80 73 87</td>
<td></td>
<td>77 71 84</td>
<td></td>
<td>77 90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>3 4 1 2 1 1 2 0</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 5 1 3 4 1 1 2 0</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 5 1 3 4 1 1 2 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>6 8 3 6 9 4 2 5 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 9 7 6 7 6 8 6 6 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 9 7 6 7 6 8 6 6 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale, retail, marketing/hotel</td>
<td>1 2 0 6 9 4 2 5 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 0 6 9 4 2 5 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 0 6 9 4 2 5 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and community services</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: study by Mwasikakata (2009)

From Table 1, it is evident that as compared to the other industries the participation of women in agriculture, forestry and fishing surpasses that of men. Nevertheless, generally the participation of women in the labour market as a whole remains marginally low.

Since the colonial era, Malawi has relatively been the lowest wage paying country within the Southern Africa Developing Community (SADC) region (Dzimbiri, 2008). This then explains the massive labour migration (mostly males) from Malawi\(^1\) to Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), South Africa, Tanzania and Zaire in the 1950s after the introduction of poll tax (ibid). Further to this, real wages in Malawi have continued to decline since the 1960s (ibid,). To a certain extent, this explains the decent work deficit in Malawi as substantiated by the 2010 UNDP report.

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\(^1\) Then Nyasaland
2.0. **Methodology**

2.1 **Introduction**

This study used in-depth interviews as the primary tool for collecting primary data. The interviews were supplemented by document analysis and observations. Three methods were used in the process so as to increase the validity of the results. Weiss (1994) argues that interviewing gives us access to the observation of others, provides us with a window on the past and also rescues events that would otherwise be lost. This section discusses the processes which were implemented in carrying out this research, external validity and limitations of the study.

2.2 **Sampling**

The research used purposeful sampling, and mainly targeted interviewees who were perceived to have the necessary information to answer the questions on: the meaning, content and aim of WE and its impact on political consciousness. The Head of Education and Organizing at MCTU was interviewed together with two Trainers of Trainers (TOTs); one from Teachers Union of Malawi (TUM) and the other from Private Schools Employees Union of Malawi (PSEUM); two Organizers from Hotels Food and Catering Services Union and Transport and General Workers Union (one from each); and a total of five rank and file members who had attended some trainings organized by their respective unions from TUM and PSEUM (two from each union) and one from National Organisation of Nurses and Midwives (NONM).

The Head of Education and Organizing from MCTU was interviewed so as to have a holistic approach to WE in Malawi, examine the curriculum and have in depth understanding of the programming of WE activities at the federation level. TOTs were interviewed so as to assess what content they relay to the general membership. Organizers were interviewed because in the course of recruiting new members, some lessons are offered hence to know what is taught to new recruits where as rank and file members were interviewed in order to appreciate the effectiveness of WE activities and their contribution towards political consciousness.

2.3 **Sample size**

Out of a total sample of the 15 earmarked interviewees, only 10 were interviewed and efforts to interview the remaining ones proved futile despite persistent follow up by the researchers. For a qualitative study, this sample is within the accepted range and was able to give rich
material for the study as ‘each respondent provided a great deal of information’ (Weiss, 1994, p. 3).

2.4. Data collection technique

The main technique used for collecting information was the in-depth interview. This was chosen so as to capture as much information as possible from the interviewees. The questionnaire was derived from the interview guide so that the researchers does not divert from the main objective of the study. The in-depth interviews were supplemented by document analysis and observations.

I. Document analysis

The study also analyzed documents which were sourced from the interviewees during the interviews. In the process, pamphlets, brochures and training manuals of both MCTU and some of its affiliates were analyzed which supplemented the information gathered from the interviews. The list of books and pamphlets that were analysed has been included in the bibliography.

II. Observations

During the study period, the researchers were able to attend two training sessions as observers. One of the trainings was the Trainer of Trainers module 2 which was hosted by MCTU for one of its cooperating partners and the target groups were the TOTs who had completed the first module. The other was Leadership training which was organized by TUM for its membership who had been elected into leadership positions at the national level. The observations played an important role for the researchers to have hands on experience on how WE is conducted, observe the interaction between facilitator and participants and also sample the content of WE.

2.5. Data analysis

The interviews were recorded on an audio tape and then transcribed by the researchers. Due to time limitation, only four of the nine recorded interviews were transcribed as recommended by Weiss (1994, pp. 55-56) who writes: if a study’s budget is limited, consideration might be given to listening to a tape once, transcribing only what seems likely to be useful and paraphrasing the rest...or to take notes on what is contained on the tape, never transcribing at all except for quotations to be used in the report’. The transcribed data was studied, key themes (aims, content, methods used and participation in WE activities)
identified, and then analysed using computer software known as Atlas.ti 5.0, one of the programs recommended for analysing qualitative research. This computer program assisted the researcher to align themes to the transcripts and compile them in line with the responses from the interviewees.

2.6. External validity

Greenstein (2004, p. 4) writes that ‘external validity is the extent to which the findings derived from one study can be generalised and assumed valid for other cases and situations’, and adds that ‘the more representative of other sites our research site is, the more confident we can become that its conclusions are externally valid’. Though this research was not carried out in all trade unions in Malawi, the fact that the Head of Education and Organizing at the federation level (the major player of WE activities in the country) was interviewed justifies that the results are a fair representation of all trade unions. However, some caution has to be taken when drawing conclusions as the views expressed from the interviewees may not accurately represent the initiatives undertaken by the entire trade union movement regarding WE in Malawi.

3.0. Background to Trade unionism in Malawi

The history of trade unionism in Malawi goes back as far as 1945 prior to the end of Second World War when the first trade union; Transport and General Workers Union, then called Magalimoto\(^2\) was set up by two truck drivers cum nationalist-politicians (Lawrence Makata and Lali Lubani).

Malawi’s attainment of self government and independence in 1963 and 1964 respectively, was viewed as huge sigh of relief to the trade union movement which had existed under the draconian British colonial government for almost two decades. Paradoxically, from around 1963, the cordial relationship between the ruling Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and the trade unions which had gallantly fought together alongside other forces as a united front in the struggle against colonialism, abruptly turned sour. By the end of 1964, 14 trade unions out of 19 had been de-registered by the MCP government. Thereafter, in 1965, the then ruling party (MCP) called for a compulsory affiliation of the federation of trade unions to the party,\(^2\) In the local language of Chichewa this means “vehicles”
thereby giving the party the mandate to meddle in union affairs, suppress and restrict trade union activities (Dzimbiri, 2008).

The negative socio-economic impacts of the IMF/World Bank sponsored Structural Adjustment Programme (SAPs) which Government of Malawi started to implement from 1980s, coupled with a wind of change that was blowing across Southern Africa in the early 1990s provided a fertile ground for the rejuvenation of vibrant trade unionism in Malawi.

Following a Lenten Pastoral letter by the Catholic Bishops against the one party state regime issued in March 1992, on the 6th of April the same year, a veteran trade unionist in the name of Chakufwa Chihana openly challenged the one party state on its tainted human rights record upon his arrival from exile, abroad. His action attracted an immediate arrest by the agents of the state.

The arrest of Chakufwa Chihana at Chikeka Airport sparked a strike activity against poor working conditions and low wages which started with employees of David White Head & Sons on 5th May 1992. In 1993, the Civil Service too experienced two huge strikes that for a while crippled the country’s health, education, transport and other sectors. High ranking officials from various ministries and government departments in collaboration with senior officials from the Office of the President and Cabinet organised a conference in Blantyre in August 1993 to express the government’s concern over the 1992-1993 strike activity.

Subsequently the state appealed to employers to form Joint Consultative Committees (JCC) in all workplaces to facilitate amicable resolve of employees’ grievances. Remarkably it is the strike activity of 1992-1993 that eventually compelled the state to start recognising and respecting the freedom of association, the protection of the right for trade unions to organize workers into unions and the right for collective bargaining as enshrined in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions 87 and 98.

Currently, there are thirty registered trade unions in Malawi including two federations namely: Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU) and the quasi-defunct Congress of Malawi Trade Unions (COMATU). Of the twenty eight unions that represent workers in all key sectors of the economy such as communications, transport, agriculture, mining, education, health, commerce and industry; twenty three are affiliated to Malawi Congress of
Trade Unions (MCTU), two are still reported to be affiliated to Congress of Malawi Trade Unions (COMATU) while three are not affiliated to neither of the two federations. The three unions that are not yet affiliated to either of the federations are those that are dubbed ‘staff’ unions; those that have one employer and are mainly closed shop work places where every employee becomes an automatic member of the union upon joining that employer. Such unions usually limit their activities to the confines of their respective workplaces restricted to collective bargaining and grievance handling.

### Table 2: Local affiliation of unions in Malawi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of union</th>
<th>Local affiliation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building Construction and Civil Engineering Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commercial Industrial and Allied Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malawi Union For Informal Sector</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles, Garment, Leather and Security services Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Railways Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarries Mines and Informal Workers Union</td>
<td>COMATU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications Workers Union of Malawi</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel Food Processing and Catering Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malawi Housing Corporation Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plantation and Agriculture Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea Coffee Macadamia and General Workers Union</td>
<td>COMATU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar Plantation and Allied Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco Tenants and Allied Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Malawi Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Union of Malawi</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Media Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport and General Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Schools Employees Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Employees Trade Union of Malawi</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Servants Trade Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlsberg and Southern Bottlers Trade Union</td>
<td>No affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi Staff Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chancellor College Academic Staff Union</td>
<td>No affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobil Oil Malawi Staff Union</td>
<td>No affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shipping and Customs Clearing Agents Trade Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Organization of Nurses and Midwives of Malawi</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemical Energy Mining and Allied Workers Union</td>
<td>MCTU</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MCTU secretariat

### 4.0. Background of Workers’ Education (WE)

A more recent history of Workers Education (WE) in Malawi can be traced back to 1993 when vibrant trade unionism re-emerged after three decades of suppression under the autocratic Malawi Congress Party (MCP) regime. Though no special lessons were conducted aimed at inciting radical political activities, workers and the trade union movement played a pivotal role during the transition period (1992-1994) from a dictatorship to a multi party
democracy. The economic hardships that were resultant from massive retrenchments and wage cuts as dictated by the labour reforms under the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) had compelled the workers to join the political band wagon.

For almost a decade from 1993, MCTU had the following external cooperating partners which were providing technical and financial support in the area of WE aimed at revamping the trade union movement in the wake of transition to multi-party democracy:

- Commonwealth Trade Union Coordinating Council
- Israel Agency for International Development and Cooperation (MASHAV)
- American Federation of Labour

Since the late 1990s, MCTU received various financial assistance from the following external cooperating partners which have had components of WE:

- Lo CTO-Sweden (continues to support)
- Lo-Norway (continues to support)
- Lo FTF-Demark (from 2011),
- International Labour Organisation (continues to support)
- HIVOS (from 2005 to 2010)
- African Labour Educators’ Network (ALEN) pilot programme on Workers’ Action (2009)
- International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)-continues to support
- Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU)-continues to support
- Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES)-from 1995 to 2000
- UNITE the union (UK)-from 2009 to 2011
- Southern African Trade Union Coordinating Council (SATUCC)-continues to support
- Alternatives to Neo-liberalism in Southern Africa (ANSA)-continues to support
- UNICEF (2002)
- Elimination of Child Labour in Tobacco (ECLT)-2012

Besides, there are also local cooperating partners such as National Aids Commission (NAC) and Human Rights Consultative Committee (HRCC) which granted financial support to MCTU on projects on HIV/AIDS mitigation and Conflict resolution respectively. These
projects had components of WE. There are no other players that directly provide WE other than trade unions.

5.0. Overview of Workers’ Education (WE)
Workers’ education (WE) provided by trade unions in Malawi can be further classified as; Shop steward education; Organizers’ education; Trainer of Trainers (ToT) education and Women membership empowerment education. The issues that are covered in these WE programmes include: Collective bargaining; Grievance handling; HIV/ AIDS; Labour laws; Workers’ rights, Gender just to mention a few. It is worth noting that currently in Malawi, there is no clear definition of what content could be taught to which group. All the above listed topics are included in educational programmes for different trade union officials.

5.1. Examples of Worker Education (WE).
The major WE programme being carried out by trade unions in Malawi is Trainer of Trainers (ToT) education. ToT education accounts for at least 80 percent of all programmes being conducted by trade unions in the country. The aim is to produce as many trainers as possible who in turn, would carry out WE on various topics at their respective work places.

Trainer of Trainers programmes are mainly delivered through seminars and workshops. The duration of these trainings vary from three to five days. As most of these trainings are funded by international cooperating partners, their duration and frequency largely depend on the level of funding from these partners. Of late, donor fatigue has negatively affected the delivery of WE activities. A General Secretary, who also act as a ToT for one of the trade unions pointed out that:

‘study circle activities have been declining in the recent past and that since 2010, no study circle activity has been conducted by the union due to lack of resources’ (Pat 2, 2010).

The union under question is being mainly funded by Lararforbundet, a Swedish Teachers’ Union which has greatly reduced its budgetary support.

Shop stewards trainings also feature high on WE activities in Malawi. Shop stewards being the closest union officials to the rank and file membership play a crucial role in the growth and development of a union at a floor level. They are the ones who first handle work place issues such as grievance handling, representation and negotiations. Being the link between
the work place and top trade union leadership, shop stewards ought to be adequately conversant with trade unionism and relevant issues. Hence their position makes it critical for them to be trained in various aspects. This explains why trade unions in Malawi prioritise trainings for shop stewards.

The other WE activity being carried out by trade unions in Malawi is the study circle. Generally, a study circle can be defined as an arrangement in which a small group of people (10-15) come together and share ideas. Group members come together voluntarily, and conduct short meetings of usually two hours or less. Study circles do not have a teacher/lecturer but rather a moderator, and in most cases they are moderated by ToTs. During the meetings, those with extensive trade union experience share it with others and some topics are discussed from the trade union manuals. As one of the most effective methods of adult education, study circles are utilized when delivering some WE activities by trade unions in Malawi. The advantages of study circles are myriad and they include: a multiplier effect such that when one facilitator is trained, s/he is expected to train more others. Study circles also grant learners a conducive atmosphere as they are not regarded as mere recipients of knowledge as it is the case with the lecture method. Study circles also manage to bring together more people as pointed out by the Head of Education and Organizing at MCTU:

‘Study circles also manage ‘to bring together more people from one workplace’

(Pat 1, 2012).

The other advantage of study circles is that they target members across the board such that they cater for both the leadership and the rank and file.

Another WE activity that was implemented in Malawi in 2009 was African Labour Educators’ Network (ALEN) programme on Workers’ Action. This was a pilot programme that comprised of 9 workplace based sessions on Workers’ activism that were designed to cultivate conscientisation and mobilization of the workers on the critical challenges at the workplace and society at large.

Under this pilot programme, ten trade union educators six of whom were women underwent a trainer of trainers (ToT) training as facilitators of the workplace based sessions. A total of 126 participants (36 percent women) attended the nine workplace based sessions conducted by the 9 trade union educators (one had to pull out).
The workplace based sessions that were conducted raised the levels of conscientization of workers who eventually became aware of their rights and ready to demand them at both workplace and community. For instance, workers at three workplaces went on strike immediately after undergoing training (Schiphorst and Kanyenze, 2010). Further to this, according to the participants, the workplace based sessions under this pilot programme also helped workers link the workplace and community phenomena, and hence empowered them to deal effectively with both management and community leadership (ibid).

5.2. **Other qualification based WE activities**

There are some WE activities that are provided by individual unions targeting their respective membership upon which the participants obtain a qualification/certificate. Two good examples of these include:

I. **Insert training programme**

Teachers’ Union of Malawi (TUM) runs this programme that enables primary school teachers sit for an equivalent of O’ level national examinations (Malawi Schools Certificate of Examination) in order to acquire the qualification or re-sit to obtain better grades that could enable them pursue tertiary education.

II. **Certificate/Diploma programme in Leadership**

This is provided by National Organisation of Nurses in Malawi (NONM). Labour law in Malawi is among the training modules of the programme.

5.3. **Aims of Worker Education (WE)**

WE in Malawi is specifically aimed at the following:

a) **Building a democratic organization.**

Founded on the principles of democracy, trade unions are expected to be composed of informed and enlightened membership so that they can actively participate and make informed decisions. Thus WE plays a crucial role in preparing and equipping the membership so that they confidently execute their democratic mandates in their respective workplaces, trade unions and community. Through WE, some union members have been able to actively participate in the democratic processes that are available at the workplace, trade union and community such as contesting and assuming key leadership positions.
b) Building capacity of union leaders, officials and members.
WE is provided so as to build the capacity of trade union leaders and officials to effectively represent fellow workers and handle grievances at the workplace and union level. It is also through WE that ordinary union members are made aware of their rights as workers.

c) Political and socio-economic awareness
Within the context of neo-liberal globalization, WE is provided in order to cultivate, articulate and disseminate political and socio-economic perspectives and responses of trade unions and the working people at national, sub-regional, regional and global levels.

5.4. Content of Workers Education
Except for the qualification based WE that are provided by NONM and TUM discussed above, most of the WE activities in Malawi are conducted haphazardly and do not have a distinct curricular. Though the content is designed by the unions themselves, often times frequency and duration of such WE activities are determined by the agencies providing the funds. As the Head of Education and Organizing at MCTU observed;

‘Frequency and duration of the trainings do not depend on the results of needs assessment of each target group but the availability of the funds’ (Pat 1, 2012).

Nevertheless, there is a training manual for Shop stewards which was produced in 2005 by MCTU in collaboration with Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU). Used by both MCTU and its affiliates, it contains the following modules:

1. Examining the role and responsibilities of a Shop steward:
This module attempts to give an overview on learning techniques and teaching aids. It also introduces the shop steward as a very important official within the union

2. Trade union and trade union democracy
The module provides an understanding on trade unionism, its purpose, structure and how the role of shop stewards can be strengthened through networking with other organizations.

3. Organising techniques for Shop stewards
In this module, participants are provided with the basic understanding about union organizing at a workplace. Techniques and strategies for effective organizing are illustrated; and also, it highlights on tools, challenges, and benefits of organizing and recruitment.
4. Communication and Meetings
This module highlights on communication as an important tool in managing affairs within the structure of trade unions. It also dwells on how to effectively organize trade union meetings.

5. Grievance handling and Procedure
This module focuses on grievance handling procedures and skills in handling grievances.

6. HIV and AIDS:
Due to high levels of HIV and AIDS incidences on the workplace, also included in the training manual is the topic on HIV and AIDS awareness and prevention. It further highlights the impact of HIV and AIDS on gender and strategies on how workers can respond to HIV and AIDS at the workplace.

7. Gender and Trade union development
The perception about gender issues is broadened in this module; issues related to discrimination are identified and the module further generates strategies to enhance gender balance. It also highlights on how women in trade union structures can strengthen women participation.

8. Health and Safety issues
This module examines the structures that can be utilized to campaign for safe working environment. It further discusses ways on how to address workplace occupational health and safety and environment related issues. Emphasis is on how a workplace can be a safe environment to the workers.

9. Trade union Finances and Administration
The issues of trade union finances and administration are thoroughly discussed in this module. Sound financial administration in a trade union not only contributes to effective service delivery to its members but also improves the unions’ image to the public at large.

In addition to the Shop stewards Training manual discussed above, there is also another Collective Bargaining training manual which is sometimes also used by MCTU and its affiliates. This manual was produced by the Norwegian Federation of Trade Unions (Lo-Norway) in 2005. This manual contains the following modules:

1. Impact of globalization on Collective bargaining
This module covers causes and effects of globalization. It further highlights the impact of globalization on collective bargaining process.

2. Legal and Organizational framework
Matters of legal and organizational framework for collective bargaining are discussed here.
3. **Performance measurement in organizations**

In this module, issues pertaining to the interpretation and use company financial statements are discussed. This is aimed at creating an understanding of the dynamics of decision making at enterprise or institutional level which have a bearing on finances.

4. **Collective bargaining processes and techniques**

This module discusses processes and various techniques of collective bargaining.

5. **Collective bargaining for health, safety and HIV/AIDS at workplace**

Collective bargaining in relation to occupational health and safety (OSH) as well as HIV and AIDS at the workplace are discussed in this module.

6. **Gender and collective bargaining**

This module discusses the gender balance participation in collective bargaining in particular women participation in trade unions.

5.5. **Ad hoc WE activities:**

In addition to the WE content outlined above, there are some trainings that are conducted in response to international trade union campaigns and those implemented on behalf of donors and cooperating partners. Those in the category of global campaigns include elimination of child labour, HIV and AIDS and Gender mainstreaming, Decent Work programs, HIV and AIDS, Economic literacy for trade union leadership, Climate change and Globalisation amongst others. Economic literacy involves taking the leadership through basic economic concepts such as demand, supply, inflation and others that enable them appreciate the national economy as well as equip them with skills for bargaining. These trainings are conducted dependent on the availability of funds by the agents promoting the campaigns. Some cooperating partners also provide funds for WE through projects.

Some unions, such as the Teachers Union of Malawi (TUM) also conduct trainings for the new members who have just been elected to leadership positions within the union. For example, following its Congress on April 14, 2012, TUM held a one day training for those who had been elected to the Union National Executive Committee (UNEC). Content for the one day training included: roles of trade union leaders and terms of reference (ToR) of their respective positions. It is worth pointing out that amongst those elected were some who did not have any previous trade union leadership experience. This is against the backdrop that trade unions in Malawi do not have a clear progressive path in leadership, a situation which has rewarded ‘populist’ trade unionist to attain top leadership positions. Thus trade unions in
Malawi do not have a minimum number of years to be served by someone at a junior position before being elected into top leadership.

5.6. **Methods used in WE**
The mode of deliverance for WE varies depending on the content to be delivered and the target group. A facilitator for the ToTs workshop had this to say;

‘We mainly use lecture method when introducing new concepts usually to new recruits and teaching complicated topics where as we use participatory approach in topics that seem familiar to the participants and when training TOTs’ (Pat 6, 2012).

This assertion was confirmed during the two observations that were attended by one of the researchers on ToT training session and union leadership training. During the TOT session, most activities were being undertaken by the participants. The facilitator’s role was to initiate and moderate the discussions. Most activities were being done in smaller groups by the participants, which required presentations of their discussions to the plenary at the end.

To the contrary, training for leadership was mainly a one way process. The facilitator was the main actor while the participants were passive recipients of information. The researcher did not have the opportunity to observe a study circle in session because none of the unions had an active study circle session during the period under review. Other methods that are used in the delivery of WE in Malawi are jokes, story telling, case studies, singing, group work/group discussions, question and answer, just to mention a few.

5.7. **Participation in Worker Education activities**
Participation in WE activities is mainly by nomination from a particular trade union to which one belongs. Due to low frequency of the trainings conducted by both MCTU and its affiliates, those who have a chance of attending any activity consider themselves privileged. This assertion was confirmed by one of the Organizer’s during the interviews.

‘I felt very honoured when our General Secretary recommended me to attend a meeting. These things come once in a blue moon’ (Pat 5, 2012).

The fact that most unions in Malawi do not have the financial capacity to conduct educational and training activities, most WE activities are influenced by the programmes of a particular donor who usually fund prescribed programmes with clearly stated expected outcomes.
Since attendance to WE activities is limited, members have to be nominated by those in leadership positions at different structures of the union. This has led to a situation whereby some members would do anything possible just to get favours from union leaders who have the mandate to nominate members to attend a WE activity.

Further to this, externally funded WE activities pay a per-diem to those who attend which act as an incentive to members as pointed out by a rank and file member below:

‘The major benefit that I have gained from the trainings are the per-diems…you know, they supplement our meager resources’ (Pat 7, 2012).

The attachment of per-diems to externally funded WE activities has had negative effects on the development of locally funded WE initiatives by the financially handicapped unions. Where participants are sure that no monetary rewards will be obtained at the end of the training program, members shun such activities. This is the reason why study circle education activities have achieved very little in imparting knowledge to workers as they are not accompanied by any monetary rewards. More workers simply do not get back to study circle assignments after their first attendance. Even the facilitators, in the absence of a monetary incentive are not enthusiastic as pointed out during the interviews by a General Secretary who also acts as a facilitator of the ToTs and a study circle moderator.

‘There has been no major impact of study circles because many moderators do not do a lot… ’ (Pat 2, 2012).

This situation is a product of lack of a clear ‘class consciousness’ amongst the majority of those in leadership positions. As such they consider trade unionism as a way of earning a living and not a ‘struggle’ for the attainment of a fair share from capital. This lack of a clear ideology trickles down to the rank and file members who have become more interested in monetary rewards than class and political consciousness. Actually, to the majority what matters most is not the content of WE activity, but rather monetary rewards attached to it.

5.8. Gaps in WE content and its impact

WE activities provided by both MCTU and its affiliates do not adequately articulate issues underlying class consciousness and radical political consciousness. Much of WE being provided by trade unions in Malawi is confined to ‘bread and butter’ workplace issues. It is not surprising therefore that most topics taught during several WE activities are confined to: workers’ rights, trade union democracy, gender in trade unions, occupational health, roles of
a shop steward, grievance handling amongst others. None of the unions have specific WE activities on class and ‘radical’ politics.

During observations on leadership training, emphasis was put on the roles of the leaders and how trade unions operate, without stressing on the collective strength of the working class. In other words, unions in Malawi do not specifically inculcate politically charged social consciousness among their membership that would eventually enable workers become politically active in all affairs of the nation

Further to this, WE is not designed in a way that would inculcate a politically charged awareness of workers’ belonging to common interests and common situations. In a nutshell, conspicuously missing in the curricular of WE in Malawi are topics and specific activities on both political consciousness and class consciousness. Subsequently, since the union structures in Malawi provide room for an ordinary member at the shop floor to assume a top union leadership position, there is a high possibility for a union to be led by a national executive committee comprising of individuals who lack adequate class consciousness and political consciousness (Chinguwo, 2011).

Since early 2000, WE activities provided by MCTU have been decreasing. One contributing factor to this has been the gradual withdrawal of technical and financial support of some cooperating partners of MCTU (ibid).

*Reduction of support from our cooperating partners over the years has had an effect on the quality and quantity of services provided by MCTU to its affiliates* (MCTU Secretary General, as quoted in Chinguwo, 2011).

Further to this, as a cost cutting measure, there has been an increase in the number of non-residential workers’ education activities mostly conducted in the major cities and towns. This has tended to marginalize union members from the remote rural areas to benefit from the workers’ education activities (ibid). As such, it has been the same union members in urban areas who continue to be targeted as far as the non-residential workers’ education activities are concerned. Hence, this has eventually aggravated inequality in terms of individual capacity building between union members in rural and urban areas (ibid).
Chinguwo (2011) reveals that some unions have expressed a concern that MCTU has lately become too pre-occupied with national politics at the expense of core labour issues. This, according to these unions, has negatively affected the quality and quantity of services that MCTU provides to its affiliates as far as workers’ education is concerned.

*It is not proper for MCTU as a federation to drag all of us (affiliates) into national politics. Let those few individuals at MCTU who aspire for positions in political parties abandon the trade union movement with immediate effect and venture into national politics on full time. We should not mix national politics and trade unionism (General Secretary of one of the affiliates, Interview, as quoted in Chinguwo, 2011).*

However, Chinguwo (2011) also argues that some unions hold that it is necessary for MCTU to continue its active involvement in national politics on the grounds that national politics have a critical bearing on labour issues.

*There is a thin line between trade unionism and national politics. Trade unionism itself cannot be separated from the activities of a federation. Were it not for our engagement in national politics, our union would not have made some significant strides which we failed to achieve since inception, (General Secretary, one of the affiliates as quoted in Chiguwo, 2011).*

The differences of opinions on the subject matter of national politics as far as MCTU is concerned signify the polarization of unions with regards to the political divide. To substantiate this, at the MCTU General Council meeting held in February 2009, espousing their rivalry in light of affiliation to party politics, the top union leaders spent a considerable time debating without even agreeing at the end on whether it was necessary to invite the State President as a guest of honour to the forth coming May Day cerebrations (ibid). This polarization of ideas on trade unionism and national politics bears testimony to the disparities in the levels of class and political consciousness of the top union leaders in Malawi.

It is because of lack of class consciousness and political consciousness that some top union leaders contend that trade unionism must be separated from national politics. One who is well conversant with the dynamics of the strike activity of 1992-1993 by workers that immensely
contributed to the demise of the one party state in Malawi, would strongly agree that trade unionism is an integral part of national politics (ibid).

In light of neo-liberal globalisation, sentiments expressed by some union leaders that the scope of trade unionism should be confined to the struggles at the workplace, is a clear manifestation of the low levels of class consciousness and political consciousness among the union leaders who are policy makers at MCTU level (Chinguwo, 2011). This also suggests that to a larger extent, the level of class and political consciousness among the ordinary members in their respective unions may not be any better.

Just like political parties, expediency and appeasement also characterize politics within the trade union movement in Malawi. As such, trade unionists spend much time strategizing on how to tighten the grip on power or unseat the incumbent top union leader (s) instead of focusing attention towards the improvement of the services and growth of the unions at large in the wake of increasing power of the owners of capital (ibid). This problem is aggravated because top union leadership is narrowly associated with power and elections other than critical issues affecting workers such as neo-liberal globalisation. For instance, as far as union congress meetings are concerned, it is the elections that take centre stage and ample attention other than deliberations of policies and adoption of resolutions. Resolutions at union congress meetings are hurriedly passed without in-depth debate while rushing to the voting stage which is erroneously viewed as the most important item on the agenda of a congress meeting (ibid).

Further to this, trade unionists are elected into top union leadership largely on the basis of the politics of blocs or camps without taking into consideration of neither policy issues and direction to which an aspirant intends to take the union nor past experience of the aspirant in trade unionism (ibid). To a certain extent, this is the consequence of the low levels of class consciousness and political consciousness as result of lack or inadequacy of political and class awareness as far as the workers’ education curricular is concerned.

6. Participants Perception of Shop Stewards Training

Though answers from workers who had participated in any of the WE activities exhibited different levels in the understanding of trade union issues, they did seem to agree on certain concepts associated with the movement.
6.1. Understanding of the term ‘Worker’

Most (98%) of those interviewed consider themselves as workers. They described themselves as workers because they claim to survive by selling their labour power. This is what one of the interviewees had to say;

‘I receive wages at the end of the month, therefore, I am a worker’ (Pat 3, 2013).

It seems the lessons learnt from the Shop stewards training workshops appealed to them to realize that they do not own the means of production and that owners of the ‘companies and industries’ in which they work make profits by exploiting them. Lessons for Shop stewards are very intense, as it is this group of unionists that is always in close contact with the rank and file on the one hand, and employer representatives on the other. Shop stewards are also key element in the day to day running of union affairs at the shop floor.

6.2. Trade union membership

All the respondents considered themselves as trade unionists. The reasons ranged from the fact that they pay monthly subscriptions to holding an elected position within the trade union hierarchy. Some of them were even very active at the shop floor. They all described trade unions as organizations that fight for workers’ rights at a workplace.

‘For salaries to be raised at a workplace, it is because of our union. For us to start receiving ‘over time allowance’, it is because of the union. Nothing can improve at work without a union!’ (Pat 4, 2013).

Thus the ultimate goal of trade unionism according to the respondents is to improve working conditions at a workplace. Trade unions must ensure that employers adhere to the dictates of the labour laws. When employers violate workers’ rights, trade unions must react. Trade unions must claim the rights of workers! In this era of neo-globalisation which is characterized by a race to the bottom for labour gains, trade unions must step up to the occasion.

6.3. Effectiveness of Shop Stewards Trainings

From the most recent trainings which they attended, interviewees mentioned the following being some of the modules that were very beneficial to them: grievance handling procedures, labour laws and workers’ rights, which are included in the Shop stewards manuals.

It was revealed during the interviews that after attaining training in grievance handling procedures, there has been some industrial peace at a workplace of one of the interviewed
participant. The information that was gained in grievance handling by this participant was shared with fellow employees who put it into use at the workplace.

‘The training made me aware that when we fail to settle a dispute with our employer, we can seek redress at the Industrial Relations Court’ (Pat 3, 2013).

Knowledge of the country’s labour laws was also described as a great achievement from trade union educational activities. Before receiving trade union trainings, some interviewees were not aware that forming and joining a trade union is provided for by the statutes, and thought that it is just a benevolent gesture of the employer. Actually, some employers would keep on reminding workers that the former may ban a union at their premises if it is not ‘cooperative’.

‘Our employer kept on threatening the leadership that the union could be banned anytime. These threats were often unleashed when the union clashed with the employer’ (Pat 6, 2013).

Some of the statutes the interviewee quoted above referred to were the Labour Relations Act (LRA) and the Employment Act of 2000. On the one hand, the LRA provides for freedom of association at work, formation of trade unions as well as recognition of the same at the workplace by employers. On the other hand, the Employment Act aims at guiding employment relationship between the individual employee and the employer. The Act establishes, reinforces and regulates minimum standards of employment. Amongst others, the Employment Act provides for the minimum level of benefits and conditions which the employer must give to the employee, which includes a paid sick leave, paid maternity leave and payment of severance pay amongst others.

Thus, being aware of the existence of the statutes highlighted above empowered some workers, who in turn started to claim their rights. Workers became aware that holding a lawful strike action is their right! Workers are no longer afraid to engage management on issues they feel violate their rights.

For others, being aware that workers do have rights at work has led to some abuses. Instead of following proper channels for grievance handling, some workers are resorting to industrial actions that are often times, unlawful. This is what one of the interviewees had to say;

‘Some comrades have become agitators of illegal sit-ins after attending union trainings. It seems they are not fully aware that all available options have to be exhausted before an industrial action could be staged’ (Pat 4, 2013).
Further investigation to the claim above revealed that an increase in wild cat strikes was not necessarily due to ‘heightened’ political consciousness, but rather, a result of ‘misinterpretation/misunderstanding of workers rights. Emphasis was being placed on claiming ones’ right while giving a total blind eye to the accompanying responsibilities. Populists unionists would mobilize a strike with a ulterior motive; mostly being an implicit campaign for the oncoming union elections. Just to create an impression that the incumbent is not doing enough for the workers!.

Above all, workers who did attend some trade union education activities indicated that they have learnt the significance of solidarity amongst workers and the collective strength associated with it. One had to confess that it was after attending a union training that he fully appreciates that ‘in unity at work, there is strength’.

6.4. Use of WE knowledge in society at large

Through trade union educational activities, some participants were able to identify gaps that do exist in society due to lack of political consciousness. Many people are perceived to be ignorant of their rights as such they are not able to claim them. This has resulted in politicians in the country taking people for a ride. Examples were mentioned whereby politicians promise a lot of things during the campaign period which they do not fulfill once voted into office. Due to lack of political consciousness, many people are not courageous enough to hold these politicians accountable. Instead, they just wait for another election period to vote them out of power.

‘What is done in our society is that we give them (politicians) too much respect! We take them as bosses and not our representatives. Even if they don’t deliver, we just look at them’ (Pat 2, 2013).

Apparentl, the claim above is substantiated by the absence of public protests in the country where quality of service delivery leaves a lot to be desired. For example, power blackouts is the order of the day even though electricity tariffs keep on rising; inflation rate is very high (over 30% for over a year), corruption amongst politicians is rife and youth unemployment rate is high, just to mention, but a few. Lack of mass protests for quality service delivery and popular uprisings to hold politicians accountable in a country rocked with such unfavourable living conditions is a clear indication of low levels of consciousness.

The union education activities seem to have empowered at least 90% of those who had participated in them. It is mostly after attending such activities that unions have been
rejuvenated at most shop floors. Where more members had a chance of attending union educational activities, such workplaces have active union membership. Thus such vibrant unions have succeeded in making some gains from employers such as demanding payment for overtime hours including working on public holidays. Unfortunately, organizing and mobilizing skills that are gained from WE activities and utilized at workplaces are rarely transferred to the community so as to be utilized in demanding better service delivery.

6.5. Involvement in other social justice activities by unionists

In Malawi, it seems most trade unionists are not actively involved in other social justice movements in addition to unionism. This could partly be due to the fact that active social movements are few in the country and that their impact is rarely felt. Of course, some trade unionists, especially those from top leadership often resort to mainstream politics after the expiry of their term of office. Nevertheless, none of the interviewed participants was involved in either political activities or social justice movements at the time. The common reason for their lack of involvement in general activism was mentioned to be the ineffectiveness of the existing political parties and social movements. These groupings were being perceived as just a ‘waste of time’.

Lack of visible involvement in other social justice movements does not imply that trade unionists do not take part in debating issues that are prevailing in the country at a particular given period. For instance, the prevailing political and economic atmosphere in Malawi during the period under review makes it imperative for the citizenry including trade unionists to engage in debates and discussions that could improve the country’s state of affairs. Most people are generally not satisfied with how the current politicians are managing the country. Inspite of changes of office bearers at the helm, not much seem to change for the better for ordinary Malawians. This state of affairs has dragged everyone to be discussing politics including at workplaces.

‘At our workplace, we usually talk about the prevailing political situation. Who can avoid politics with what we are going through? Politicians just use us!’ (Pat 7, 2013)

Out of the interviewed participants, only one mentioned to have been involved in a campaign that tackled general issues affecting the larger society. His involvement in the ‘Stop Child Labour Campaign’ was through his participation in the MCTU’s campaign that was funded by external donors. He represented his union (an MCTU affiliate) as a contact person for child labour activities taking place in his district. Other than this, none of the participants
claimed to have been actively involved in any other social justice related campaign. Thus trade unionists interviewed seem to be convinced that their role is confined at the workplace and that social justice initiatives in society at large is considered to be a responsibility of the politicians.

7. Conclusion
From the analysis of training manuals, union reports, observations during workshops and responses from the interviewees, it can be concluded that lessons designed to raise political and class consciousness are not emphasized. The training manual that are used for Shop stewards training and the activity programmes for WE do not contain material aimed at raising workers political and class consciousness. Nothing is contained on Marxism, Leninism or other radical ideas that propagate transformation to a socialist society which is desired by the working class across the world. There is no mention of past worker revolutions that could inspire the current generation of workers, let alone the proletariat revolution.

Generally, the curriculum of workers’ education for trade unions in Malawi is confined to workplace issues. The curricular for workers’ education in most unions is not adequately extended to cover social-economic issues which have a bearing on the dynamics of the workplace. In other words, class and political consciousness is not an integral part of the curricular of workers’ education in Malawi. However, the only component of WE that had adequately focused on class and political consciousness was a pilot programme that was implemented in 2009 by MCTU with technical and financial support from African Labour Educators’ Network (ALEN). Workers that underwent workplace based sessions on workers’ activism under the ALEN pilot programme, could easily identify workplace and community challenges and proactively sought to find solutions. This was possible because the pilot programme considerably focused on the cultivation of class and political consciousness which is not the case with current WE activities being offered.

Nevertheless, in the absence of radical and politically charged WE as discussed in this paper, it was the worsening social and economic conditions emanating from the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) that triggered the 1992-1993 uprising of workers in the wake of transition from a dictatorial one party state to a multi-party democracy. At that point, workers level of political consciousness was very high, just as was the case in the 1950s and early 1960s when trade unions in Malawi joined forces with political parties in
fighting colonialism. Regrettably, in a democratic Malawi, workers have opted for a different path; separating workers struggles from those of the society at large. The level of political consciousness of the current crop of workers is generally very low.

8. Recommendations

This paper proposes the following recommendations:

- Class consciousness and political consciousness which are lacking among some union leaders and ordinary union members at large should be incorporated in the curriculum of workers’ education. An ordinary union member should be conscientised that the struggles at the workplaces and the society at large are indivisible.

- The scope of trade unionism in Malawi should be broadened further to encompass the struggles of the society at large which include class politics and national politics.

- Trade union veterans who actively participated in the struggle against colonialism and autocratic one party regime should be effectively engaged by the unions to serve as a source of inspiration to young and upcoming union leaders. For instance, these could be invited to union fora to share their profound knowledge and experiences as freedom fighters and veteran unionists.
References


Notes
Interviews
Pat 1- Pat 7 refers to codes assigned to interviewees. Their names have not been listed due to the issue of confidentiality.