



Call for Papers

**11th Global Labour University Conference,
South Africa, 2016
“The Just Transition and the Role of Labour: Our Ecological, Social, and
Economic Future”
September 28 to 30, 2016
Johannesburg, South Africa**

The Global Labour University is pleased to announce a call for papers for the 2016 conference on “The Just Transition and the Role of Labour: Our Ecological, Social, and Economic Future” to be held in Johannesburg, South Africa from September 28 to 30, 2016.

The dynamics of the current global economic and political (dis)order have had devastating impacts on the environment and on working people, their families and communities throughout the world. These dynamics have resulted in the informalisation of labour, unemployment, and social inequality at the national and global levels. The “slummification” of cities and commodification of public goods and public services as well as common goods like land, water and public space has intensified. Declining biodiversity, climate change and pollution are evidence of the impact of the crisis on the planet itself. Environmental degradation threatens viable livelihoods and endangers public health. Meanwhile, market imperatives get defining power over daily life, business interests tighten their stranglehold on the state logic, and power is transferred to supranational institutions with limited democratic accountability, simultaneously narrowing electoral choices, and placing increasing restrictions on protest.

Labour, as a key social force of the excluded majority, has a crucial role to play in countering these destructive logics, yet we also find labour playing a more ambiguous role, for example protecting the position of ‘insider’ sectors of the working class, colluding with governing parties or corporations, or participating in corrupt practices. This conference is designed to explore both progressive labour experiences as well as these more ambiguous or contrary activities. To what extent does the politics of labour alter or reinforce the balance of power away from capital and unelected bureaucracies toward labour and broader society? To what extent does labour overcome the multiple relations of power

and oppression, including the economic, political gender, ethnic *and* cultural, and to what extent does labour contribute to and reproduce the power of the few and the subordination of the many? In light of these experiences, do we need to rethink the analytical category 'trade union' and the assumptions that we attached to this? These questions have the following dimensions:

- 1. The workplace:** Labour's attempts to reverse the declining wage share - through mobilisation for higher wages and better working conditions, as can be seen in the recent strike wave in South Africa and other parts of the world. This is especially important as rising inequality has devastating effects on society as more and more people are pushed to margins of production and consumption patterns. For example, this includes issues of distribution of productivity growth, minimum wages and basic income grants as well as policy issues of taxation and redistribution; but also the issue of improving the environmental conditions of work and production. Do labour strategies contribute to social solidarity by raising living standards for the broad mass of workers and the poor, or do they fragment the working class and society by looking after the interests of narrow sectors of members?
- 2. Employment:** Any transition to a low carbon economy will have a major impact on employment. How can this transition be organised without major job losses and how can workers in "brown" industries transition into other forms of quality employment. What are labour strategies to ensure that new jobs are not only greener but also decent? Or are labour strategies confined to progressive sounding policy, while in practice defending brown industries - frequently the strongholds of the most militant unions?
- 3. New forms of power or leverage:** With rising unemployment and increasing numbers of workers pushed into precarious forms of work, traditional sources of power are eroded, but new forms of power are being explored, including by the most marginalised and sectors traditionally not organised by labour movements. Labour's relations with other social forces are crucial here. This also raises questions about who constitutes the working class, with wider understandings of labour increasingly finding salience in innovative movements around the world. On the other hand, in many cases trade unions end up in practice defending the interests of their relatively more secure and highly paid membership, contributing to the reproduction of the disempowerment of the precarious. The development of transnational linkages and networks is also an important dimension to the development of new forms of power and leverage.
- 4. Progressive policies:** Labour's attempts, often in alliance with other groups in civil society, to pressure governments to increase the social wage (public health, education, transport, housing etc), increase employment and change economic (and slowly environmental) policy accordingly. For example, what would be the policy agenda of a labour

led just transition? How should labour be thinking about policy given planetary resource constraints and ecological boundaries? How can labour impact global events like the climate summit? We also encourage papers that look at the conversion of industrial production into alternative forms of production and consumption as well as papers looking at ecological issues. What are the most effective ways to develop inclusive and sustainable societies and policy?

- 5. Political parties, alliances and trade union organisations, and political power:** Labour's attempts to directly alter the balance of state power, either
- a. through alliances with ruling political parties,
 - b. through the reorganisation of trade union organisations and strategies,
 - c. through the development of alternative organisations and alliances with other movements in civil society, or
 - d. through building movements that refuse to participate in the state, but are willing to pressure it for reforms.

This raises questions about the role of labour—as a reforming force, as a legitimating function, hindering more radical challenges to state power, or as a central actor in building an alternative to the destructive logic of capitalist development. The social stresses of 'savage capitalism' are giving rise to new fractures and new social forces in society—populist, racist, divisive, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, patriarchal, etc. To what extent are labour movements combating these forces, and to what extent are these forces fomenting divisions and fragmentation within labour movements, or even capturing them? The nature of political and social alliances and forms of mobilising are vital issues that are being experimented on in various regions of the world (e.g., movements in Latin America, South Korean marginalised workers, etc.). It also raises questions about international approaches to global governance.

- 6. Governing the economy:** Within the neoliberal framework, competitiveness becomes more aggressive and self-destructing through currency manipulation, quantitative easing, wage dumping, trade barriers, devaluation etc. Is there space for economic policy nationally and internationally that avoids the disadvantages of a competitive race to the bottom or a retreat in isolated economic nationalism? Mainstream economists now talk of "secular stagnation" – is the steady state economy, or degrowth, something developed countries may have to seriously consider? What implications will this have for developing countries? How is labour responding to such dilemmas?

- 7. Alternative forms of production, consumption and redistribution:** This raises questions about what are alternative forms of production and consumption. For example, worker cooperatives, microcredit/microfinance projects (including its problems for informal sector workers), socially owned renewable energy, food sovereignty and local agricultural production, movements for the Universal Basic Income

Grant, and solidarity economy alternatives have emerged around the world. This theme draws together these experiences.

8. Combating the decent work deficit in agricultural production

systems: Farmworkers and small-holders face some of the worst working and livelihood conditions. This calls not only for economic up-grading but also for social up-grading, which needs to be addressed in an interdisciplinary way. How does one measure the decent work deficit in agriculture? How can agricultural production modes improved in a sustainable way? How can one address the power constellations at the nodal points of the production systems? How can a decent work agenda be implemented in the management of supply chains? What kind of global trade and investment rules constrain environmental and social sustainability in agriculture?

We welcome submissions for papers on any of these themes. While we encourage submission of papers that broadly fit into the themes, we will also consider papers that do not fit directly into one of the themes as long as it addresses the broad focus of the conference. Please indicate which theme your paper addresses with your abstract submission. The GLU encourages policy orientated research and therefore welcomes submissions that not only analyse the problem, but also offer some policy initiatives and solutions for debate.

Please send a one page abstract (which includes your methodological approach) by January 30, 2016 to Pulane Dithake at GLU.SouthAfrica@wits.ac.za.