

Mike Onzi

Personal Narrative:

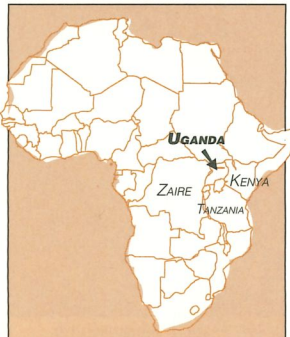
School for Workers forges link with Ugandan labor movement

Mike Onzi, Makerere University, Uganda, interviewed by Gail Gawenda, Continuing Education Extension

Mike Onzi is head of the Labor Studies Center and Adult Education at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. He recently finished six weeks of study with UW-Extension's School for Workers in Madison. He plans to use the School for Workers' model to redesign labor education in Uganda.

Onzi himself was born to a poor peasant-class tobacco farmer. He pursued an education as well as working, and set for himself a career goal in the labor movement to fight against the exploitation of farmers like his father.

Eventually, Onzi studied in Italy and Paris and received a master's degree at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Before joining Makerere University, he was education director for the National Organization of Trade Unions in Uganda.



Uganda

Capital: Kampala

The Africans in Uganda come from some 20 ethnic groups that differ more from one another than do the peoples of Europe.

Uganda became a British protectorate in 1894. Almost 70 years later, in 1962, Uganda won independence from Great Britain.

In 1971, the Ugandan army overthrew the government and set up a military regime, with Major General Idi Amin Dada as president.

In 1978, a border dispute led to fighting between Uganda and Tanzania. In 1979, Tanzanian troops, aided by Ugandans who opposed Amin, defeated Uganda's army and overthrew Amin's government.

Labor education is not a priority in Uganda. The university there has not been involved as it is here. In Wisconsin, the School for Workers has highly trained academics working on practical problems of workers. Because of this focus, they can do a very relevant curriculum, one drawn from the workers' own needs.

When we started the labor studies program at Makerere University, we thought it should be an academic program leading to a degree. But many workers aren't able to leave their jobs to attend the university. I see that the School for Workers, however, has the capacity to go to the workers on the job and give them the education they need. I want to convince Makerere to use this model.

I see education as the key to a better life for Ugandan workers. Illiteracy is a major problem; 45 percent of the people have no schooling at all and only 5 percent go beyond seventh grade. Without education and modern work skills, they are at the mercy of unscrupulous sugar cane growers, as well as the buyers of the bananas, fish, corn, beans, pineapples, and cotton that they produce on their small farms.

Labor education was historically left up to the unions, but relatively few people have been represented by unions, and at times the unions have been banned. Also the unions have been interested only in the more narrow issues of salary and wages, not the broader scope of new technology and health and safety of workers.

Now that Uganda is at peace and has a stable and supportive government, workers must participate, to contribute positively to the country. The worker must be able to understand his society and the industry he works in. He must be motivated to participate and have the skills needed to do that. Labor is not just about salaries, but an important part of the economy.

Our trade union movement is concerned with subsistence farmers too because they produce the food and the cash crops. We want to insure that farm implements and supplies are available to them at fair prices. Also, the produce marketing practices should be fair to the farmers who should be involved in setting those prices. We'd like to see a government trading policy that is consistent.

But the trade union movement cannot be looked at alone. The university should have a more prominent role. Our university produces managers, but our curriculum now has very little about labor. So we have produced managers who don't understand the attitudes of workers or labor laws. So industrial relations suffer. But in Wisconsin, the School for Workers has built good relations with both labor and management.

What the School for Workers has given to Makerere University is unique. American universities have developed a lot of knowledge, but Third World institutions haven't had a way to take advantage of it in the social sciences. I would like university authorities to think seriously about contributing more permanent support to Third World countries, and help with worker training and labor research. I don't want the link to end when I leave.

I have received a lot of good will and a lot of educational material to inspire the revamping of Makerere's labor education department. If our labor department succeeds, surely it will be because of the School for Workers.

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