

The Centre for Activist Education – why, what and how?

Why is the Centre being set up?

The Centre for Activist Education is being established to strengthen the theoretical, strategic, organisational, creative and analytic capabilities of worker, student and community activists struggling against endemic racism, poverty and inequality, in campaigns aimed at realising and defending constitutional rights, in pursuit of a just society in South Africa and internationally.

The initiative to form a Centre for Activist Education is a response to the needs expressed especially by young activists for:

- a clearer understanding of how inequality and poverty arise; why inequality increases in South Africa and globally even while technology advances and wealth becomes easier to produce; how racism combines with the inherited disparities of property and opportunity to perpetuate inequality across generations;
- a better understanding of the struggles of the past, not only in South Africa but internationally, and especially in our continent of Africa; a better sense of how the lessons of these struggles can be applied to activists' tasks today, and how struggles around issues such as education, sanitation, crime and corruption, land deprivation, low wages and unemployment can be linked to the wider struggle for social change;
- a better grasp of major global events such as wars, revolutions, mass migrations, religious fundamentalism, economic crises etc; how to explain their causes and how they impact on the world we live in;
- a platform to learn from previous generations of activists. Some of these activists of the 50s and beyond have written about their experiences, but many have not — yet have valuable knowledge and skills to pass on to young activists today;
- a space for reading, reflection and discussion, not only of theoretical ideas and opinions, but also practical knowledge of how to build an activist organisation, how to campaign, how to build a program, how to use the media, how to engage in public debate, and so on, thereby strengthening the skills and capacities of activists in struggle;
- political and activist education to expand and strengthen community, student, worker and civil society organisations generally, in order to deepen democracy, advance the struggle for justice and equality and strengthen accountability at every level of our society.

What will the Centre do?

The program of the Centre will be developed in detail once core staff have been employed to contribute to its work. A draft plan includes the following for 2016:

- Four residential 'schools' covering theoretical and practical issues, historical and present-day;
- Regular current affairs discussions with invited speakers;
- Regular documentary film showings;
- A year long program of study with monthly (or more frequent) discussions on the history of various approaches to political program and social change – including reform and revolution, different currents of Marxism, anarchism, nationalism, black consciousness and Pan-Africanism, feminism and liberation from sexual and gender-based oppression;
- Assistance with selected reading material by a range of authors, past and present, that are relevant to the study program, including African political thought and traditions;
- Mentorship in photography and film making as tools for activists, and in effective writing and public speaking. An important focus of the Centre in future will be upon documentary film-making, citizen journalism and video advocacy as forms of media making to promote social change.

Four curriculum and materials developers/educators will work as a team together with activists on the ground to bring this program to life. Some of the material they will research and produce themselves, other material will be commissioned from experts in universities, the trade union movement and elsewhere. Mentors will be available to guide the work when required and provide support in developing teaching expertise where necessary. The residential schools will be facilitated in large part by the four curriculum and materials developers/educators.

A multi-media design specialist will be employed to work with the curriculum and materials developers to design innovative multi-media course materials which can be placed on the web and shared with the organisations with which we work.

The operations manager will work with the Director to build an efficient infrastructure to ensure that the work of the centre moves along smoothly. The operations manager will be responsible for all finance and HR functions, and ensure that logistical aspects are well co-ordinated and efficient.

For the Centre to succeed in its mission it will need to develop close collaboration with activist organisations both in the Western Cape (where the Centre is based) and elsewhere. All staff employed at the centre will be expected to forge and sustain our partnership with activist organisations. Activists participating in the work of the Centre will have the opportunity to help develop its program and improve the focus of its educational work.

The Centre will be funded by the Bertha Foundation for a period of 5 years in the first instance. It will have its own Board and will operate independently of the Foundation but will be linked with other organisations in Bertha's global activist network.

The Centre will be located in the old Royal Standard Hotel building in Mowbray, Cape Town, next door to UCT's Forest Hill complex. The building is currently being renovated for the Centre with offices and teaching, resource and media spaces. This renovation is expected to be complete by mid to late March 2016 and we will operate from temporary offices until the refurbishment is complete.

Paula Ensor has been appointed as the Director of the Centre for the first three years, from January 2016. She is currently Professor of Education at the University of Cape Town and has previous experience of activism in the student and workers' movement. She served on the National Council of Equal Education for 6 years.